

**MEANING IN REPAIR: THE ABSTRACT NOUN *YISI*  
'MEANING/INTENTION' IN THE MANAGEMENT OF  
INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN MANDARIN CONVERSATION\***

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite the number of publications concerning the use of abstract nouns in English, this topic is rarely addressed in the literature on languages like Chinese. By examining the abstract noun *yisi* 'meaning/intention' in Mandarin conversation, the present study is intended to contribute to this line of research. Drawing on data from two corpora of spoken Taiwan Mandarin and taking an Interactional Linguistics approach, this article aims to show that *yisi* tends to occur in particular lexico-grammatical patterns and that the function of most of these *yisi*-based constructions lies in organizing repair and intersubjectivity in conversation. It is also argued that the use of *yisi* in spoken Mandarin is shaped by the interplay between the syntactic features, semantic properties, and pragmatic implications of both the noun and the associated constructions. The findings thus not only shed light on the research of repair and abstract nouns, but also advance our understanding of the mutual influence between language structure and social interaction.

Key words: repair; abstract noun; *yisi*; intersubjectivity; Interactional Linguistics

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The present article sets out to examine the use of the abstract noun *yisi* ‘meaning/intention’ in Mandarin conversation. Based on the approach of Interactional Linguistics, it aims to argue that most of the constructions in which *yisi* is recurrently deployed are pertinent to the management of repair and thus intersubjectivity in interaction (cf. Schegloff 1992) and that the lexico-grammatical patterns co-occurring with this abstract noun shape its exact role in the organization of conversational repair.

### 1.1 Abstract Nouns

Linguists of English have been exploring the use of abstract nouns in context for more than two decades (e.g. Flowerdew 2003; Hoey 1994; Mahlberg 2005; Schmid 2000). The earliest scholars focus mostly on the textual function of abstract nouns in written discourse. For example, Hoey (1994) scrutinizes the patterns of the noun *reason* in English text and notes that this abstract noun is an example of “lexical signaling” and can serve as a signpost in discourse. Echoing Hoey’s (1994) analysis, yet considering a larger set of English abstract nouns, Francis (1994) points out that these nouns allow the writer to label and encapsulate stretches of text so as to achieve cohesion. More recently, Flowerdew (2003) uses the term “signaling nouns” to refer to abstract nouns whose meaning can be specified only when put in context and suggests that they help establish the link between different clauses in written text.

Another line of research on abstract nouns emphasizes their evaluative function. Biber et al. (1999), in their grammar of spoken and written English, characterize abstract nouns like *fact*, *fear*, and *possibility* as “stance nouns” that express the personal attitudes of language user. Mahlberg (2005), adopting a corpus-driven method to investigate the notion of “general nouns” in Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) terms, also reports that many abstract nouns, or “world nouns” in her taxonomy, can be used in particular linguistic patterns to support the function of evaluation. Nouns like *thing*, for example, can serve as a

carrier for evaluative adjectives or as an evaluative category that can “serve as a prototype to establish a standard of evaluation,” as in the example of ...*the thing to do is to ensure that...* (Mahlberg 2005:154).

On the other hand, Schmid (2000), by coining the term “shell nouns,” foregrounds the cognitive functions of abstract nouns in English. Distinct from other researchers of this topic, he defines shell nouns not only in terms of the abstractness of their meaning, but also in terms of the constructions in which they can be used. In other words, for an abstract noun to be a shell noun, it has to be used in a construction that allows it to refer to a propositional message in the context in which it occurs. According to Schmid (2000), these “shell-noun constructions” include primarily four patterns: N-cl (shell noun + postnominal clause), N-be-cl (shell noun + copula + complementing clause), *th*-N (referring item + shell noun), and *th-be*-N (referring item as subject + copula + shell noun)<sup>1</sup>. Having investigated 670 instances of shell nouns in a large corpus, he concludes that shell nouns serve three cognitive functions: conceptual partitioning, reifying and hypostatizing, and integrating<sup>2</sup>. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Schmid (2000:22) uses the following examples to illustrate the four shell-noun constructions in English. He suggests that when employed in these constructions, the abstract noun can be linked to a propositional message in the adjacent context. (The boldfaced word is the shell noun and the underlined part is the shell-noun construction and the clause to which the abstract noun refers.)

(i) N-cl: *Mr Bush said Iraq's leaders had to face **the fact** that the rest of the world was against them.*

(ii) N-be-cl: ***The advantage** is that there is a huge audience that can hear other things you may have to say.*

(iii) *th*-N: *(**Mr Ash** was in the clearest possible terms labelling my clients as anti-semitic.) I hope it is unnecessary to say that this accusation is also completely unjustified.*

(iv) *th-be*-N: *(I won the freshmen's cross-country. – Mm.) That was a great achievement wasn't it?*

<sup>2</sup> According to Schmid (2000), *conceptual partitioning* refers to the ability of the shell noun to help chunk the supposedly continuous events or abstract information to which the noun refers into bounded cognitive entities. Meanwhile, the shell noun, because of its cognitive property as a noun, can *reify* and *hypostatize* the partitioned concept, making it a more concrete and manageable “thing”. Finally, since the abstract noun is linked to and thus co-activated with the propositional concept that it helps partition and reify, the use of shell nouns also *integrates* the complex information indicated in the abstract noun and the clause into a compact unit.

the need for these cognitive functions that motivates speakers or writers to utilize these abstract nouns.

Based on Schmid's (2000) insight, later studies further suggest that shell nouns and shell-noun constructions are also resources for use in attaining pragmatic and interactional ends. For example, Schmid (2001) focuses on the N-*be*-cl construction and contends that abstract nouns, when used in this construction, can serve as a trigger of both semantic and pragmatic presuppositions and construct a bluff in discourse. Also, examining the N-*be*-cl pattern, albeit in spoken interaction, Günthner (2011) demonstrates that phrases like *die Sache ist* and *das Ding ist* 'the thing is' in German are employed as projector constructions that frame and foreshadow an upcoming utterance or action.

Despite the amount of research dedicated to the topic of abstract nouns, several related issues have not yet been sufficiently addressed. First, previous studies of abstract noun have been mainly restricted to Indo-European languages, predominantly English. Little is known about how abstract nouns are used in languages like Chinese and how language-specific features may influence the distribution and function of abstract nouns and their co-occurring patterns (cf. Biq 2004)<sup>3</sup>. Second, despite sporadic efforts made to explore the role of abstract nouns in talk-in-interaction (e.g. Günthner 2011), previous analyses have been built mostly on written data (e.g. Flowerdew 2003; Francis 1994; Hoey 1994; Schmid 2000). Moreover, the connection between the meaning of an abstract noun and the general socio-interactional functions it can serve across constructions is rarely discussed. Finally, although researchers have proposed various purposes that abstract-noun-based patterns can help achieve, few have examined the difference between them and other functionally comparable expressions, let alone explored

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<sup>3</sup> Rather than focusing on abstract nouns, Biq (2004), following Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework, examines the use of three general nouns, *ren* 'person,' *dongxi* 'stuff' and *shi(qing)* 'thing,' in Mandarin conversation. She concludes that these nouns, while subsumed under the same general category, differ in how specific their reference can be, how often they are used with other linguistic devices to form formulaic expressions, and what pragmatic functions the expressions can serve. As a result, she suggests that more Chinese general nouns be studied to supplement her study (Biq 2004:60).

the effect that the structural features of a noun may exert on the interactional function(s) of the entire construction.

## 1.2 The Present Study

In light of these gaps, the current study, by means of an Interactional Linguistics approach (Ochs et al. 1996; Selting and Couper-Kuhlen 2001), sets out to investigate the use of an abstract noun *yisi* ‘meaning/intention’ in Mandarin spoken discourse. More specifically, following previous researchers such as Schmid (2000) and Mahlberg (2005), this article examines not only the abstract noun, but also the lexico-grammatical patterns with which it is recurrently deployed, and the socio-interactional functions that the noun and patterns work together to achieve.

The noun *yisi* is selected as the focus of the present research for three reasons. First, *yisi* is one of the most frequently used unspecific abstract nouns in Mandarin Chinese<sup>4</sup>. Second, prior studies have shown that *yisi* can be used with other linguistic devices to form prefabricated expressions that serve particular pragmatic/discourse functions (Hsieh 2010, 2011; Huang 2013). Finally, and most importantly, although *yisi* has semantic equivalents in English including *meaning* and *intention*, research on their function is scant (cf. Schmid 2000). In comparison, the verb *mean* in English and its related expressions have attracted considerable attention from functional linguists and conversational analysts (e.g. Benjamin 2012; Fox Tree and Schrock 2002; Schegloff 1992; Schiffrin 1987), while no common verb equivalents for *mean* are available in Mandarin Chinese. Because of this complementary

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<sup>4</sup> To the author’s knowledge, no published research has ranked unspecific abstract nouns in Mandarin Chinese, as Schmid (2000) does in English. However, according to the data retrieved from the Word List with Accumulated Word Frequency in the Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus of Modern Chinese (<http://elearning.ling.sinica.edu.tw/CWordfreq.html>), *yisi* ranks 1054<sup>th</sup> among the 93826 words (both function and content words) (top 1%) included in the corpus, with regard to its frequency. Other words with the same frequency and thus the same ranking include *danxin* ‘worry,’ *manman* ‘slowly,’ *biaoxian* ‘perform’ and *jiu* ‘nine’. This result suggests that *yisi* is a fairly common word and one of the core lexical items in Mandarin Chinese (the Sinica Chinese Core Vocabulary includes 1121 words).

distribution, the investigation of the use of *yisi* in Chinese conversation is expected to shed light on this cross-linguistic difference.

To address the research gaps identified earlier, the present study intends to answer the following research questions based on naturally occurring spoken discourse in Taiwan Mandarin.

- RQ 1: Is *yisi* recurrently deployed with particular lexico-grammatical patterns? If so, what are those patterns?
- RQ 2: What interactional functions does each of these *yisi* constructions serve and is there any commonality?
- RQ 3: Do the structural features of *yisi* as a noun and the forms of the *yisi* constructions influence their socio-interactional functions, especially in comparison with the *mean* constructions in English? If so, how?

In what follows, drawing on data retrieved from two of the largest corpora of spoken Mandarin in Taiwan, it will be argued that most *yisi*-based constructions are formulated to facilitate the speaker's management of repair and intersubjectivity in interaction and that this interactional function is linked to the meaning of this abstract noun *yisi* and to the lexico-grammatical patterns where *yisi* is recurrently deployed.

### 1.3 Structure of the Paper

The rest of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the past research on *yisi* in Chinese and *mean* in English. Section 3 introduces the databases that the current study relies on, the number of occurrences of *yisi* found in the databases, and the framework and concepts used to analyze the data. Section 4 presents the most common lexico-grammatical patterns in which *yisi* is recurrently deployed and pinpoints the similarities and differences between *yisi* and the abstract nouns examined in previous studies. Section 5 explicates how each *yisi* construction helps achieve the function of repair and how the structural features and socio-interactional functions of the *yisi* constructions are mutually shaped. Finally, section 6 recapitulates the

findings, identifies the significant points of the current study, and indicates some directions for future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Schmid (2000) has conducted a comprehensive corpus-based study of English abstract nouns, *meaning* was not included in his research and only some information concerning the use of *intention* and *intent* is provided, except for the observation that *intention* is often followed by the infinitive *to* (Schmid 2000:216). Nor can any published study about these two nouns be found. As a result, in this section, I will, instead, review the literature on the use of *yisi* in Chinese and on the verb *mean* in English. As will be shown below, in comparison to the considerable body of research on *mean*-based expressions, the number of studies on *yisi* is lacking, and this topic thus deserves more attention.

### 2.1 *Yisi* in Chinese

To the author's knowledge, Hsieh (2010) is the first study that investigates the use of *yisi* in Mandarin Chinese. Drawing on the data from the Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus of Modern Chinese, he observes that *yisi* tends to occur in particular linguistic constructions and claims that these *yisi*-based expressions have been undergoing a process of grammaticalization and are emerging as devices that express subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Traugott and Dasher 2002). Meanwhile, Hsieh (2011), based on spoken data only, suggests that *yisi* is used by conversation participants to co-construct stances and negotiate intended meanings. Finally, focusing on the fragment *wode yisi shi* in Mandarin conversation, Huang (2013) notes that this phrase can serve as a projector construction that signals more is to come in the following.

In comparison to the enormous literature on *mean*-related expressions in English, as will be reviewed in the next section, the amount of research on *yisi* is disproportionately scant. Within the limited number of related studies, attention is mostly paid either to the

grammaticalization of the *yisi*-expressions or to the pragmatic function(s) that individual *yisi* constructions can serve. None of the studies relate the use of *yisi* to the organization of repair and few touch upon the role of the co-occurring patterns in shaping the exact function of the abstract noun in talk-in-interaction.

## 2.2 Mean in English

In stark contrast, formulaic expressions that involve the verb *mean* have attracted much more attention from English linguists (e.g. Benjamin 2012; Brinton 2007; Fox Tree and Schrock 2002; Imo 2005; Laury and Okamoto 2011; Schiffrin 1987). As reviewed in Fox Tree and Schrock (2002) and Brinton (2007), a great number of functions have been proposed for *I mean* in the literature. Some regard *I mean* as a discourse marker that can signal the speaker's hesitation, planning (Stenström 1995) or difficulty in forming an utterance (Imo 2005), introduce more specific instances or a summary (Gerhardt and Stinson 1994; Imo 2005), or manage turn-taking in conversation (Erman 1986).

Still some argue that *I mean* has modal meanings and can indicate the speaker's attitudes. It has been characterized as a softener that mitigates the force of an utterance (Crystal and Davy 1975), a cajoler that helps build rapport and solidarity between speakers (Schiffrin 1987), a politeness marker that saves the speaker's face (Brown and Levinson 1987), a stance marker that indexes the speaker's evaluation (Gerhardt and Stinson 1994) and epistemic positioning (Scheibman 2001), or an interpersonal device that signals changes of perspective in conversation (Imo 2005).

More recently, most researchers that have investigated the use of *I mean* seem to point to its function in marking broadly defined repair in conversation (Fox Tree and Schrock 2002; Imo 2005; Laury and Okamoto 2011; Schegloff 1992; Schiffrin 1987). For example, Schiffrin (1987) and Fox Tree and Schrock (2002) argue that the basic meaning of *I mean*, in comparison with other discourse markers like *you know*, is to "forewarn adjustments". Similarly, comparing the use of *I mean* in English and *teyuuka* in Japanese, Laury and Okamoto (2011) conclude that both pragmatic parentheticals are used to link back to a previous



utterance and characterize it as “inadequate” or “in need of modification,” despite slight distributional and functional differences. On the other hand, Schegloff (1992), more specifically, refers to *I mean* as a self-repair marker in the repair proper. Likewise, Imo (2005) also lists repair as one of the textual functions that *I mean* serves in conversation. Studying the use of *I-mean*-prefaced utterances in complaining sequences, Maynard (2013) further argues that *I mean* as a repair preface in the context of complaining allows the speaker to defend a complaint and manage alignment in such an interaction.

Meanwhile, the use of *you mean* in talk-in-interaction has also been under scrutiny. According to Benjamin (2012), *you mean* can be employed to form an understanding check and to identify the trouble source in previous turns. By formatting an understanding check with *you mean*, the current speaker can prompt the prior speaker to make a repair in the next turn. The phrase *you mean* should thus be considered a practice that helps carry out other-initiated repair. Benjamin (2012) further contends that the understanding check that *you mean* marks is “noncontiguous” with the trouble source utterance. That is, the *you-mean* understanding check is usually separated from the trouble source by the utterances of either the trouble source speaker or the *you-mean* speaker, which is uncommonly seen and less preferred in conversation (Benjamin 2012).

In sum, as reviewed above, most previous studies on *mean* constructions in English seem to point to their role in signaling or initiating repair. However, there still appear to be some limitations to this understanding of the use of the related constructions. First, instead of making generalizations about the verb, past literature only analyzes the use of prefabricated subject-verb fragments like *I mean* and *you mean*. Little if any discussion is devoted to the deployment of *mean* in other contexts. Moreover, studies that consider the repair function of the *mean* constructions mostly center on the projection of self-repair or the initiation of other-repair. Rarely do they explore how *mean* constructions can be utilized to organize repair in other ways. Finally, while fragments like *I mean* and *you mean* seem to be able to indicate repair in the case of various linguistic units and interactional problems, this may not be the case for the use of *yisi* in spoken Mandarin or for similar comparable

expressions in other languages. In considering the above points, while the focus of the present study is on *yisi* constructions in spoken Mandarin rather than on *mean* constructions in English, a close look at instances of *yisi* in Mandarin is expected to illuminate the similarities and differences between comparable expressions across languages.

### 3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The following section outlines the corpora used in the present study and the methods for selecting and analyzing the data of *yisi* in spoken discourse.

#### 3.1 Data Sources

To investigate the use of *yisi* in Mandarin conversation, data from two corpora of spoken Chinese, the NTU Corpus of Spoken Chinese and the NCCU Corpus of Spoken Chinese (Chui and Lai 2008), were extracted for use. The data from the NTU corpus consisted of 15 hour-long recordings of face-to-face conversations, radio talk shows, and telephone dialogues, while those from the NCCU corpus were comprised of five hour-long spoken data of daily conversations and interviews. The recordings were transcribed or re-transcribed<sup>5</sup> in Chinese based on the transcription system developed by Du Bois et al. (1993) and then transferred into pinyin for presentation in this paper.

#### 3.2 Data Selection

The noun *yisi* was the key search word, and from the two corpora, in total, 124 instances of *yisi* were collected. As shown in Table 1 below, of the 124 instances of *yisi* found in the corpora, 46 (37.10%) were used in an idiomatic expression like *buhaoyisi* ‘sorry; embarrassed’ and *yousiyi* ‘interesting’. These idiomatic uses of *yisi*, although functional in discourse and worth further investigation, will not be discussed in the

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<sup>5</sup> The data from the NCCU corpus was slightly changed and re-transcribed according to Du Bois et al.’s (1993) system.

present study. This is due to the semantic opacity of the abstract noun in, and the full lexicalization of, these expressions (cf. Fillmore et al. 1988). In other words, only the 78 instances of non-idiomatic use of *yisi* are under scrutiny.

Table 1. Distribution of idiomatic and non-idiomatic uses of *yisi*

Category	Number of tokens	Percentage
Idiomatic	46	37.10
Non-idiomatic	78	62.90
Total	124	100

### 3.3 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, these 78 tokens of *yisi* are grouped in terms of the constructions in which the abstract noun occurs. The results will be displayed in section 4. Next, the instances of *yisi* along with the lexico-grammatical patterns with which the abstract noun co-occurs are analyzed under the framework of Interactional Linguistics (Ochs et al. 1996; Selting and Couper-Kuhlen 2001). Rather than deeming grammar to be an autonomous module or self-contained system, researchers adopting the approach of Interactional Linguistics underscore the mutual influence between language and interaction. That is, they believe that lexis and grammar are symbolic tools used to form social interaction and that interactional factors may in turn shape the form of linguistic structures (Fox 2007; Hakulinen and Selting 2005). Moreover, deeply influenced by Conversation Analysis, interactional linguists pay great attention to both how the speaker constructs the turn in which a linguistic feature is employed and how the interlocutor publicly reacts to that turn (cf. Liddicoat 2011).

In particular, the phenomenon of repair, which has been studied by several conversation analysts and interactional linguists (Chui 1996; Fox, Maschler and Uhmman 2010; Schegloff 1992; Schegloff et al. 1977), will be crucial in application to the present study. According to Schegloff et al. (1977:361), repair is the action or actions that conversationalists take to address troubles or “problems in speaking, hearing and understanding”. The authors also note that anything can be treated as a

“repairable” and that the “problem” being repaired does not have to be an actual error or mistake in the conversation. Schegloff et al. (1977) further point out that, repair can be divided into four major types—self-initiated self-repair, self-initiated other-repair, other-initiated self-repair, and other-initiated other-repair—based on who initiates and completes the repair.

Despite the number of studies investigating the patterns and organization of repairs in Mandarin conversation, most previous researchers have tended to focus on self-repair and problems related to the production of utterances (e.g. Chui 1996; Tseng 2006). Few consider how metalinguistic or meta-pragmatic devices are utilized to mark and organize different types of repair in spoken Mandarin. However, as Wu (2006) demonstrates, language-specific resources, such as the final particle *a*, can be deployed with a partial repeat to form a distinctive device for initiating a particular type of other-repair. In light of this, the present study also attempts to contribute to this line of research.

#### 4. CONSTRUCTIONS OF *YISI* IN CONVERSATION

This section will present the lexico-grammatical patterns in which *yisi* is recurrently used in spoken discourse. It will be shown that despite being a common noun, *yisi* is in fact found in a rather restricted set of contexts. Moreover, instead of functioning as the argument of a verb with a specific content meaning, this abstract noun tends to occur in idiomatic expressions or with components like the copula *shi* and the question word *shenme* ‘what’ to form a prefabricated, functional chunk.

As indicated in Table 2 below, despite other possibilities, *yisi* tends to be deployed primarily in four constructions: [(someone *de*) *yisi shi*] (noun + copula + clause, NCC) ‘what someone/something means’, [*shenme yisi*] (what + noun, *shenme*-N) ‘what does it mean,’ [(subject) *shi X-de yisi*] (subject + copula + modifier + N, SCMN) ‘the meaning of X’, and [(subject) *shi zhe/nage yisi*] (demonstrative-noun, SCDN). For the rest of the occurrences, *yisi* is used in various individual patterns, such as when it occurs as the object of a cognitive verb like *dong* ‘understand’ or the object of a possession verb like *you* ‘have’.

Table 2. Structural distribution of *yisi* in non-idiomatic use

	Number of tokens	Percentage
NCC	31	39.74
<i>shenme</i> -N	25	32.05
SCMN	7	8.97
SCDN	7	8.97
Others	8	10.26
Total	78	100

#### 4.1 The NCC Construction

The most frequent pattern among the four is the NCC or [*yisi shi*] construction, which alone accounts for 39.74% of the total of the 31 instances of this pattern in the data. The construction consists of the noun *yisi*, the copular verb *shi* and a following utterance. The noun phrase can be a bare noun as in (1) or a token of *yisi* modified by a personal possessive pronoun as in (2) to (4) or by a common noun as in (5). As displayed in Table 3, 48.39% of the [*yisi shi*] instances (N=31) are preceded by a first-person singular possessive pronoun. The second most frequent category is constituted by instances of *yisi* with no modifier and it accounts for 22.58% of the occurrences. Finally, tokens of *yisi* modified by the third person singular possessive pronoun comprise the third largest group of data (19.35%).

(1) *yisi* with no modifier

282 A: → .*yisi jiu shi shuo*,  
 meaning just COP say

283 ..*women Shang dage de zhe-zhong ganqing*  
 1PL PN big.brother GEN this-kind relationship  
*qingcao shangmian ne*,  
 sentiment top FP

284 ..*shi feichang feichang chonggao de*.\  
 COP very very lofty NOM

‘A: This means that Mr. Shang is a very faithful and virtuous person when in a relationship.’

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(2) *yisi* with a first person possessive pronoun

666 L: → *..wode yisi jiu shi shuo, \_*  
1SG.GEN meaning just COP say

667 *..(H) jiu yinggai, \_*  
just should

668 *...yinggai yao= tamen jiu shi=, \_*  
should want 3PL just COP

669 *..jiudihefa, \*  
Be.made.legal.right.on.the.spot

‘L: I mean, they should be made legal right on the spot.’

(3) *yisi* with a second person possessive pronoun

315 D: → *na ni yisi jiu shi shuo, \_*  
that 2SG meaning just COP say

316 *..ta xianzai yijing hoN, \*  
3SG now already FP

317 *...shi..manyang dao tou-shang, \*  
COP spread to head-top

318 *..ta tou-shang tiantian zai tong, \*  
3SG head-top everyday ASP hurt

‘D: So you mean, the pain is now spreading to his head and he is suffering from headaches every day?’

(4) *yisi* with a third person possessive pronoun

1161 S: → *...ta de yisi, \_*  
3SG GEN meaning

1162 *..jiu shi yao guai de, \*  
just COP want obedient NOM

1163 *..ni zhidao ma?!*  
2SG know Q

‘S: He means that he wants someone obedient, you know.’

(5) *yisi* with a non-personal pronoun modifier

115 F1: → *..jiu de yisi shi?/*  
old GEN meaning COP

116 F2: (0) *jiu shi tade na-ge jiexidu.\*  
just COP 3SG.GEN that-CL resolution

'F1: What do you mean by old?

F2: (I mean) the resolution (is not good enough).'

Table 3. Distribution of the [*yisi shi*] construction regarding the modifier by type of modifier

	Number of tokens	Percentage
Zero	7	22.58
1SG	15	48.39
2SG	2	6.45
3SG	6	19.35
Non-person	1	3.23
Total	31	100

Meanwhile, the copular verb in this pattern can be unmodified as in (5) or, more predominantly, modified by an adverbial *jiu* and/or a complementizer *shuo* 'say' as in (1) to (3). The utterance that follows the noun-copula phrase tends to occur in clauses as in (1) to (3) or can be verb phrases (as in (4)) or noun phrases (as in (5)). More interestingly, while the pattern can be formulated by the same speaker, the noun-copula fragment and the following utterance can be produced by different conversationalists as illustrated in (5). In this instance, the noun-copula phrase is used by the first speaker with an unfinished intonation to elicit clarification from the co-participant. The second speaker then formulates his turn to co-construct the pattern and elaborates on the meaning of the term *jiu* 'old'.

Another interesting finding observed in the corpus data is that the noun-copula fragment seems to be able to precede a cognitive verb *xiangshuo* 'think,' a phenomenon also reported by Hsieh and Su (2019) in their investigation of the use of *xiangshuo* in Taiwan Mandarin conversation.

As can be seen in the two following instances, *xiangshuo* is produced in the same prosodic unit of *yisi*. In other words, instead of being a part of the complement clause, *xiangshuo* is more closely tied to the noun-copula phrase. This use is noteworthy in that *yisi* is an impersonal, abstract noun, as opposed to the personal/animate noun which is presupposed by the use of a mental verb like *xiangshuo*. Drawing on the results of the present study and those presented in Hsieh and Su (2019), this pattern is restricted to the combination of *yisi* and *xiangshuo* and seems to emerge at least in the Mandarin spoken in Taiwan.

(6) [*yisi shi*] with *xiangshuo*

508 L: → *wo yisi shi xiangshuo la,*  
1SG meaning COP think FP

509 *..xiangshuo,*  
think

510 *...(tsk) dalu zhe-ge jushi,*  
mainland this-CL situation

511 *..dui-bu-dui?!*  
right-NEG-right

512 *..dao shihou ni zai guo ji nian,*  
to time 2SG again pass a.few year

513 *..gaobuhao zheng-ge dou kua le.*  
maybe entire-CL all break.down FP

‘L: I mean, I am thinking about the situation in mainland China, you know. Probably a few years from now, the entire economy will break down.’

(7) [*yisi shi*] with *xiangshuo*

389 D: → *..na ta laopo de yisi jiu xiangshuo,*  
that 3SG wife GEN meaning just think

390 *..ni kan,*  
2SG see

391 *..yijing manyan dao tou-shang,*  
already spread to head-top

392 *..tou ye zai tong,*  
head also ASP hurt



‘D: His wife was thinking that, look, (the pain) has spread to his head and his head hurts so much.’

The N-copula-clause construction in which *yisi* is recurrently deployed is parallel to the N-*be*-cl construction in English (Schmid 2000, 2001) and German (Günthner 2011). The instance of *yisi* shows that abstract nouns seem to occur in comparable patterns across languages. However, it is worth mentioning that *yisi* is distinct from other abstract nouns in English and Chinese in this construction in its tendency to be modified by a personal possessive pronoun (77.47%; N=31). In other words, the use of *yisi* usually involves a speaking or reasoning subject, mostly the current speaker, which is regarded as an index a sign of subjectivity in previous research (Scheibman 2002).

#### 4.2 The *Shenme*-N Construction

The second pattern in which *yisi* is most frequently used is the *shenme*-N construction. While it can be employed as a part of a complete clause with a demonstrative as the subject (as in (8)), the combination of the question word *shenme* ‘what’ and the abstract noun *yisi* is more often used alone (as in (9)) or juxtaposed with a repeated phrase from the prior turn (as in (10)).

- (8) *shenme yisi* in a clause  
 18 B:...(3.4) *ni bijiao you zhigan ba.*\  
                   2SG more have quality FP  
 19 A:...(0.9) @  
 20 [<@ *qing jieshi yixia* @>],\_  
                   please explain a.bit  
 21 B:[@]  
 22 A:→..*zhe shi shenme yisi?*\  
                   this COP what meaning  
 ‘B: You are of better quality  
 A: (laugh) Please explain.  
 B: (laugh)  
 A: What does this mean?’

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(9) *shenme yisi* standing alone

52 F: ...*xiao nuhai zhongyu zhang*<@ da le @>.\  
 little girl finally grow.up FP

53 J: ...*zhende a*.\  
 really FP

54 → ..<H *shenme yisi* a H>.\  
 what meaning FP

'F: My little girl has finally grown up.  
 J: Really? What do you mean?'

(10) *shenme yisi* with a partial repeat of the prior turn

354 B: ..*wo conglai bu-jieshi*.\  
 1SG ever NEG-explain

355 A: → ...*shenme yisi conglai bu-jieshi*.\  
 what meaning ever NEG-explain

'B: I never explained.  
 A: What do you mean, you never explained?'

Different from the noun-copula-clause construction discussed earlier, this pattern is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the literature of abstract nouns in English. Nevertheless, the co-occurrence of *yisi* with the question word *shenme* seems to be a trait of general nouns in Chinese. For example, Biq (2004), examining the most frequently used general nouns in Chinese, namely, *ren* 'person,' *dongxi* 'stuff,' and *shi(qing)* 'thing,' observes that *shenme* is one of the linguistic devices that frequently collocates with these three nouns. Interestingly, while this is not listed as a shell-noun construction in Schmid (2000), this pattern also links the abstract noun to a propositional message, although the information is constructed by another speaker (cf. Schmid 2000).

### 4.3 Other Constructions

The rest of the *yisi* tokens can be used as the complement in a specification clause as in line 324 of (11), or as the object of the possession verb *you* as in (12) or of cognitive verbs that tend to denote understanding like *dong* 'understand' as in (13). The recurrent modifying

element of the noun can be a personal possessive pronoun as in (13), an adjectival as in (12), a demonstrative as in line 328 of (11), or a complement of *yisi* that conveys the meaning of the target utterance as in line 324 of (11)<sup>6</sup>.

(11) *yisi* as a complement in a specification clause

322 M: ...*ta shuo zhe libai meibanfa a.*  
3SG say this week NEG.method FP

323 ...*ni kan.*  
2SG see

324 F: → ...*na jiu xia libai de yisi a.*  
that just next week ASSC meaning FP

325 ...*ni zhenme name <MRC ben MRC>na.*  
2SG how.come so dumb FP

326 ...*zhenshide.*  
really

327 M: ... (1.28) *wo wo wo--*  
1SG 1SG 1SG

328 ...*wo yiwei bushi zhe-ge yisi.*  
1SG mistakenly.think NEG.COP this-CL meaning

'M: She said she couldn't make it this week. See.

F: That means next week. How can you be so dumb?! Oh(,) my goodness.

M: I didn't know that was what she meant.'

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<sup>6</sup> In Mandarin Chinese, speakers can use the complement-*de-yisi* phrase to indicate that the topic or the subject at issue means X. In other words, the *de yisi* pattern, in fact, can retrospectively mark the semantic relation between the complement and the subject/topic (cf. Hsieh 2010).

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(12) *yisi* as the object of a possessive verb

23 F: ...ni shi tu=zi.\

2SG COP rabbit

24 M: ...shenme *yisi*,-

what meaning

25 F: ...haN?/

INT

26 → ...tuzi bushi hai you lingwai yi-ge <@ *yisi* ma @>.\_

rabbit NEG.COP still have another one-CL meaning Q

'F: You're a rabbit.

M: What do you mean?

F: What? Doesn't rabbit have another meaning?'

(13) *yisi* as the object of a cognitive verb

294 B: ...jiu shi,\

just COP

295 ..ze.\

INT

296 ...qing-shi-duoyun-ou-zhenyu.\

partly.cloudy.with.occasional.rain

297 A: ...ou=,\

INT

298 → ..wo dong nide *yisi*.\

1SG understand 2SG.GEN meaning

'B: I mean, well, you are like changeable weather.

A: Oh, I see what you mean.'

As can be seen from the examples presented in this section, the abstract noun *yisi* is seen to occur in particular linguistic contexts. Akin to many other abstract nouns, *yisi* is often used in constructions that connect it to a piece of propositional information in the discourse (cf. Schmid 2000). While it is most frequently employed in the noun-copula-clause construction, a tendency that is also observed in the abstract nouns of other languages like English (Schmid 2000, 2001) and German (Günthner 2011), *yisi* is also commonly found in patterns more specific to Mandarin Chinese, like the *shenme*-noun construction (Biq

2004). In addition, *yisi* also frequently co-occurs with (first person) possessive pronouns and copular and cognitive verbs, which are signs of subjectivity in language (Scheibman 2002). Although the number instances of *yisi* available for the present analysis is not large, these two tendencies are consistently observed across the two corpora referenced in this research.

## 5. THE USE OF *YISI* CONSTRUCTIONS IN REPAIR

Drawing on the results presented above, the present section aims to explicate how *yisi* is deployed in these patterns to manage the organization of repair in conversation. It will be shown that these *yisi*-constructions, although differing in form and function, are mostly related to the handling of (potential) trouble, specifically in the understanding and/or appropriateness of an utterance or action. Moreover, in contrast to expressions related to the verb *mean* in English, which can mark or initiate repair for a wide variety of utterances ranging from words and clauses to turns and larger discourse (Benjamin 2012; Fox Tree and Schrock 2002; Imo 2005), *yisi*-constructions are used to preface, elicit, or negotiate repair mostly for interactional problems concerning understanding and appropriateness of a clause or units more extended than a clause. This difference is partly due to the structural traits of both *yisi* as an abstract noun and of the constructions in which it is employed.

### 5.1 Self-repair Preface

One of the repair-related functions that *yisi* constructions can serve is to preface self-repair, which can be initiated by the original speaker or the interlocutor. The *yisi* construction that most recurrently serves this function is the [*yisi shi*] fragment, especially the first-person *wode yisi shi* and the unmodified *yisi shi*. When the construction projects an other-initiated self-repair, *yisi* is usually modified by a first person possessive pronoun; on the other hand, when it introduces a self-initiated self-repair, the abstract noun is often unmodified.

## 5.1.1 Other-initiated self-repair

As indicated in Table 3, most instances of the [*yisi shi*] pattern are preceded by the first person singular possessive pronoun *wode*. The *wode yisi shi* phrase '(lit.) my meaning is' is analyzed by Huang (2013) as a projector construction, which foreshadows an upcoming piece of discourse and directs the interlocutor's attention to what is to come. Yet Huang only characterizes the fragment as such without providing a more detailed analysis of the phrase or the projected content. This construction can be considered to be the Chinese counterpart of *I mean* (cf. Fox Tree and Schrock 2002; Imo 2005; Schegloff 1992), because this expression can also be used to preface a repair solution. Note, however, that *wode yisi shi* is distinguishable from *I mean* in that the former is used to preface the solution to a problem at the clause or discourse level only, while the latter can also mark the repair of trouble in the choice of words and phrases (cf. Fox Tree and Schrock, 2002; Imo 2005).

Consider (14) below. Prior to this extract, D, a physician who was invited to talk on a radio show, notes that each child has his or her own pace of development and suggests that M, a call-in listener whose son is displaying problems in pronunciation, that she is not comparing her son to his older sister, who apparently had acquired spoken Mandarin at an earlier age. In response to D's advice, M denies in line 88 that she is comparing her children and formulates an explanation in lines 89 to 92, noting that because of her daughter's example, she is expecting her son to undergo the same process. Notice that M produces an utterance prefaced by *wode yisi shi* 'what I mean is' in line 92, emphasizing that she is just expecting a similar pattern of development instead of making a comparison between her two children. This utterance can be regarded as either an elaboration of the utterances presented in lines 88 to 90, or as a part of her clarification of her stance. Either way, the *wode yisi shi* phrase is formatted to project a repair solution for a problem that is larger than a clause.

(14) *wode yisi shi* in self-repair

88 M:..wo bushi gen ta bijiao.\  
1SG NEG.COP with 3SG compare

89 ..yinwei wo shi xiangshuo =, \_  
because 1SG COP think

90 ..ta= you zhe-ge qianli, \_  
3SG have this-CL example

91 ..wo--  
1SG

92 →..wode yisi shi zai qidai.\  
1SG.GEN meaning COP ASP expect

93 @@@.

94 D:...(0.8) dui dui dui.\  
right right right

‘M: I am not comparing him to her. But I am thinking because of her experience, I am expecting (him to be the same).

D: Right.’

As also shown in the above example, the repair that *wode yisi shi* marks is carried out by the same speaker who produces the repairable utterance, but is initiated by the co-participant. In this example, D’s advice appears to prompt M to repair her own prior turns. Extract (15) below also demonstrates such a tendency. Prior to this excerpt, L, a radio hostess, commented on the problem of underage scooter riders in Taiwan. She produced a four-character idiom *jiudizhengfa* ‘executed on the spot’ as a solution for the problem. After her interlocutor, P, displayed his surprise, L repairs her faux pas first by negating her utterance in line 665 and then formats the phrase *wode yisi jiu shi shuo* ‘what I mean is’ in line 666 to project a correction of the term. Notice that L does not repair the problem by simply producing the correct idiom *jiudihefa* ‘be made legal on the spot’; rather, she reformulates the entire utterance in lines 667 to 670, and which presents what she in fact intended to say.

Nevertheless, even though L has made such a repair, P still seems to reject her suggestion and defend the current policy, which is evidenced in his use of the negation marker *meiyou* in line 671 and the modal phrase *dangran haishi yao* ‘(we) of course still have to’ in line 672. Faced with P’s resistance, L first responds with an agreement marker, *dui a*, in line 674 as a concessive move and then repairs her utterance again with the

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preface *wode yisi shi* ‘I mean’ in line 676 to elaborate on and account for her stance on this issue. As clearly shown in (15), the *yisi* construction can be deployed to repair a more local problem such as a faux pas or a more global issue such as an incorrect interpretation or insufficient understanding. In both cases, the construction introduces a clause or a more extended turn to repair the trouble in the conversation.

(15) *wode yisi shi* in other-initiated self-repair

- 665 L:.. *bushi rang tamen jiudizhengfa,*\  
NEG.COP let 3PL executed.on.the.spot
- 666 →..*wode yisi jiu shi shuo,*\_\  
1SG.GEN meaning just COP say
- 667 ..(H) *jiu yinggai,*\_\  
just should
- 668 ...*yinggai yao= tamen jiu shi=,*\_\  
should want 3PL just COP
- 669 ..*jiudihefa,*\  
be.made.legal.on.the.spot
- 670 ..*zheyangzi.*\  
this.appearance
- 671 P:..*meiyou jiudihe--*  
NEG.have be.made.legal.on.the.spot
- 672 ..*dangran haishi yao jingguo kaoshi a,*\_\  
of.course still want through test FP
- 673 ..[*bishi lukao.*]\  
pen.and.paper.test road.test
- 674 L: [*dui a,*\_\  
right FP
- 675 ..<A *xianzai zheyang,*\  
now this.appearance
- 676 →..*wode yisi shi A>] shuo,*\_\  
1SG.GEN meaning COP say
- 677 ..*jiran yijing you zheme duo shiliu sui,*\  
since already have this many sixteen year.old
- 678 ..*dou= yijing wuzhaojiashi le,*\  
all already driving.without.license FP



679 P: *..heNh.*\

right

680 L: *..suoyi jiu.*\

so just

681 *..yinggai yao rang tamen hefahua.*\

should want let 3PL be.made.legal

‘L: Not execute them right on the spot. I mean they should be made legal right on the spot.

P: They can’t be be made legal right on the spot. Of course, they have to pass the driver’s license tests.

L: Yeah, just like right now. I mean, since there have been so many 16-year-olds driving scooters without a license.

P: Right.

L: They should be made legal instead.’

### 5.1.2 Self-initiated self-repair

When the [yisi + shi] construction is not modified by a possessive pronoun, the repair is often initiated and completed by the same speaker. For example, in (16), A and B are discussing whether it would matter to B’s boyfriend if she hangs out with her own friends in a bar. To advance her argument, A formats a conditional clause in line 125 *yaoshi Henry zheyangzi* ‘what if Henry did so’. However, rather than finishing the sentence with the apodosis clause indicating the consequence immediately after the protasis, A produces an instance of a bare [yisi + shi] construction in line 126 to frame the following utterance as a more detailed paraphrase of that conditional clause as a way of repair.

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(16) *yisi shi* in self-initiated self-repair

125 A: ...*yaoshi Henry zheyangzi.*\

if PN this.appearance

126 → ...*yisi jiu shi shuo.*\

meaning just COP say

127 ...*ruguo ni shi zai na-ge shiyanshi.*\

if 2SG COP LOC that-CL laboratory

128 ...*ranhou.*\

then

129 ...*ni yao gen tamen qu nali nali zheyangzi.*\

2SG want with 3PL go where where this.appearance

130 ...*ni shuo Henry hui-bu-hui hen gaoxing.*\

2SG say PN will-NEG-will very happy

‘A: What if Henry acted like that? That is, if you were at that lab and wanted to hang out with them somewhere, don’t you think Henry would be unhappy (about it)?’

Although at first glance, the utterance prefaced by the [*yisi + shi*] construction may be regarded as an elaboration of the pro-form *zheyangzi* ‘this way; do so,’ the speaker in fact utilizes another conditional marker *ruguo* ‘if’ in line 127 as a substitute for *yaoshi* ‘(what) if’ in line 125. Similar to previous examples, the [*yisi + shi*] preface is employed to signal a clause- or discourse-level repair, despite the fact that in (16), the construction is used to cope with potential problems in the understanding of the meaning of the speaker within the speaker’s own turn.

The following is another example in which the unmodified [*yisi + shi*] construction is used to project a self-initiated self-repair. Prior to (17), A and B were talking about a quarrel between their dormitory janitor and one of the students who lived in the dorm because the former threw away the latter’s books which he had left in his dorm room during the summer break. Recounting the story, A quotes the janitor’s words in lines 621 and 622, *ah buran zenme ban, ah buran xianzai zenme ban* ‘Or what do you want to do? How are you going to deal with this now?’ to act out the situation. She then produces the bare NCC construction *yisi jiushishuo* ‘it means’ in line 623 to introduce a restatement of questions in Taiwan Southern Min (TSM) *bo li si be annoa la* ‘Or what do you want to do?’.

Note that the words that this TSM utterance is intended to rephrase are neither semantically unclear nor pragmatically inappropriate in the context. Rather, the switch to TSM may be to specify the pragmatic implicature and to strengthen the face-threatening force of the quote from the janitor, because the Mandarin utterance in lines 621 and 622 can be treated as a sincere question, while the TSM restatement is more conventionalized as a confrontational act. In so doing, A uses the *yisi* construction to initiate a self-repair and present a solution for a potential problem in the understanding of the intended pragmatic meaning of the utterances, although no actual errors are made (cf. Schegloff et al. 1977).

(17) *yisi* in self-initiated self-repair

- 619 A: ...*ah keshi na gongyou ayi jiu shi yizhi,*  
 INT but that janitor aunt just COP constantly
- 620 <Q *a--*  
 INT
- 621 ..*ah buran zenme ban.*\  
 INT otherwise how do
- 622 ..*ah buran xianzai zenme ban Q>.*\  
 INT otherwise now how do
- 623 → (0) *yisi jiu shi shuo,*  
 meaning just COP say
- 624 ..<T *bo li si be annoa la T*>.\  
 NEG 2SG COP want what FP
- 625 ...*jiu shi wo pei ni--*  
 just COP 1SG compensate 2SG
- 626 ..*wo pei gei ni yi-ben--*  
 1SG compensate give 2SG one-CL
- 627 ..*wushi kuai hai sanshi kuai wo pei gei ni*  
 fifty dollar or thirty dollar 1SG compensate give 2SG  
*zheyangzi.*\  
 this.way
- 628 B: ..*keshi na ye bushi ayi de cuo a.*\  
 but that also NEG.COP aunt GEN wrong FP

‘A: But the janitor kept saying “Or what do you want to do? How are you going to deal with this now?” That is, “Or what do you wanna do?” “I will pay for the books. How much does each of them cost? Thirty dollars? Fifty dollars? I’ll pay for them!”

B: But that was not her fault!’

## 5.2 Other-repair Initiator

In addition to prefacing self-repair, *yisi* can also serve as an other-repair initiator such as when it is used in the question fragment *shenme yisi*<sup>7</sup> ‘what (does it/do you) mean?’. By means of this question-word question, the conversationalist can indicate the trouble source, most likely an understanding or appropriateness problem in the prior speaker’s intended (pragmatic) meaning, to elicit an account or restatement from the co-participant, and thus repair the trouble. As alluded to in the previous section, speakers can format the *shenme yisi* turn to point out the trouble source with different degrees of specificity.

In the first pattern, *shenme yisi* is used with a repeated phrase or utterance taken from the prior speaker’s turn. By using this pattern, conversationalists can specifically point out the part with which they have trouble and prompt the interlocutor to repair or account for it. For example, prior to (18) below, A, a radio host, and B, a hotel room designer, have been discussing the strategies used by some hotel owners for allocating rooms. B mentions that some hotels would allocate inferior rooms to less important guests, which upsets A, who then accuses these such hotels of discrimination and indicates that a complaint could be made about such behavior. In defense of the hotels, B first produces a negative particle *meiyou* ‘no’ (line 33) and then puts forth a rhetorical question, *na zhege buhao de zenme ban ne* ‘how can you deal with (the problem of) the inferior rooms?’ (line 35), to imply that the use of this strategy is a necessary evil. In response to B’s turn, A formats a token of *shenme yisi* followed by a repeated part of B’s question *bu hao de zenme ban* ‘how to deal with the inferior rooms,’ identifying the trouble source

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<sup>7</sup> Only in very few instances is *shenme yisi* used to inquire about the definition of a term in conversation. This mostly happens in conversations whose topics involve knowledge of technology or foreign languages.

that needs repair. B thus rephrases the question into a statement, claiming that the inferior rooms still have to be occupied to meet the business requirements of the hotel.

(18) *shenme yisi* with a partial repeat

33 B: ..*meiyou a.*  
NEG.have FP

34 ..*na ni--*  
that 2SG

35 ..*na zhe-ge buhao de zenme ban ne?*  
that this-CL NEG.good NOM how do FP

36 A: →(0.8) *sheme yisi buhao de zenme ban?*  
what meaning NEG.good NOM how do

37 B: (0) *buhao de fangjian ta haishi yao mai chuqu a.*  
NEG-good ASSC room 3SG still want sell out FP

'B: 'No. Then how are you going to deal with the inferior rooms?

A: What do you mean by dealing with the inferior rooms?

B: (I mean) the owner still has to be able to fill the inferior rooms.

Another way to use *shenme yisi* to initiate repair is by adding a demonstrative and a copula prior to the question, as exemplified in (19) below. In comparison to the previous example, this pattern identifies the trouble source in a less specific way. Prior to (19) A asked B if he thinks A and a non-present girl look alike. After a 3.4 second pause, B responds to A's question with an assessment, *ni bijiao you zhigan ba* 'you are of better quality' (line 18). Note, however, that the word *zhigan* 'quality; texture' is usually used to characterize a product instead of a person. Partly due to such a mismatch, A first laughs at the comment (line 19) and then requests B to explain what he means. Different from the previous example, in this extract, the speaker uses a demonstrative *zhe* rather than a repeated part from the prior turn to refer to the repairable. In response to A, B repairs his turn by providing a definition of *zhigan* in lines 23 to 25, clarifying what he intends to mean by the use of the adjective. Still unclear about B's intention, A produces another question *ta meiyou zhigan ma* 'Doesn't she also have quality?' to request more

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clarification. B then reveals how he thinks of the girl in question (lines 27-30). As illustrated in this example, although the demonstrative does not spell out the exact trouble source, *shenme yisi* still allows the speaker to identify the problem and elicit repair from the interlocutor.

(19) *shenme yisi* with a demonstrative

18 B:...(3.4) *ni bijiao you zhigan ba.*\  
2SG more have quality FP

19 A:...(0.9) @

20 [*<@ qing jieshi yixia @>*],\_  
please explain a.bit

21 B: [ @ ]

22 A:→..*zhe shi shenme yisi?*\  
this COP what meaning

23 B:..*jiu shi yi-ge na-zhong,*\_  
just COP one-CL that-CL

24 ..*pinzhi de ganjue a,*\_  
quality ASSC feeling FP

25 ..*zhigan.*\  
quality

26. A:...(0.9) *ta meiyou zhigan ma?*\  
3SG NEG.have quality Q

27. B:..*keshi ta,*\_  
but 3SG

28. ..*ta shi na-zhong,*\_  
3SG COP that-CL

29. ..*shuyu nianqing de,*\  
belong young NOM

30. ..*ranhou bijiao kuang,*\_  
then more wild

'B: You are of better quality

A: (laugh) Please explain.

B: (laugh)

A: What does this mean?

B: That is, you appear to be of better quality.

A: Isn't she also someone with good quality?

B: But she is younger and wilder.'

Finally, *shenme yisi* alone can constitute a turn by itself. By using the question this way, the conversationalist prompts the prior speaker to carry out a repair without specifying the source of the trouble. In the extract below, A asks B in lines 82 and 83 whether it would make any difference if she writes her thesis in English or Chinese. Having trouble understanding what exactly A is asking, B puts forth a token of *shenme yisi* instead of an answer in response (line 84). A repairs her question by using the paraphrase marker *jiushishuo* ‘that is to say’ (line 85) (Biq 2001) and a noun phrase *nage shuliang* ‘the number (of words)’ to identify the aspect with which she is concerned. After understanding A’s intention, B is then able to provide an answer to her question (lines 89-90).

(20) *shenme yisi* as a stand-alone turn

- 82 A: ..*ei yong ruguo.. ruguo yong zhongwen= xie,*  
 INT use if if use Chinese write
- 83 ..*gen yong yingwen xie hui-bu-hui you chabie a?*  
 with use English write will.NEG.will have difference FP
- 84 B: →...*shenme yisi?*  
 what meaning
- 85 A: ..*jiu shi shuo,*  
 just COP say
- 86 ..*na-ge [shuliang],*  
 that-CL amount
- 87 B: [ *zi shu a* ].\  
 word number FP
- 88 A: ..*dui =.*  
 right
- 89 B: ...*dui wo lai jiang,*  
 to 1SG come say
- 90 ..*wo juede yingwen bijiao nan xie dao name duo zi.*  
 1SG feel English more difficult write to that many word

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- ‘A: Will it make any difference if the thesis is written in Chinese or in English?  
B: What do you mean?  
A: I mean, the amount.  
B: The amount of words?  
A: Yeah.  
B: For me, I think it is more difficult to write a thesis of such a length in English.’

A number of patterns in the use of *shenme yisi* can also be observed in the above examples. First, although this question can, in theory, be formatted to initiate next-turn other-repair for any utterance or action put forth in the prior turn, *shenme yisi* tends to be used, as shown in many of the above examples, in response to a question (e.g. (18) and (20)) or assessment (e.g. (9), (12), and (19)). Second, while both *you mean* in English and *shenme yisi* in Mandarin are used to initiate other-repair, the latter does not require the mention of a personal subject. The speaker can thus hold the prior speaker accountable for making any necessary adjustments without explicitly attributing the problem to the interlocutor, which may be less threatening to the addressee’s face<sup>8</sup> (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987). Finally, unlike *you mean*, which has to be produced with a candidate understanding,<sup>9</sup> *shenme yisi* usually occurs without any

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that although not found in the current dataset, the second-person singular pronoun *ni* can in fact be used with the *shenme yisi* question, as in *ni shi* (‘be’) *shenme yisi* or *ni zhe* (‘this’) *shenme yisi*, which literally means *what do you mean (by this)*, but mostly should be translated instead as *why would you say that* or *what’s your problem*, depending on the context. Either use can sound rather provocative and may thus be face-threatening to the addressee.

<sup>9</sup> Below is a typical example of how *you mean* is used as a repair initiator and understanding check, provided by Benjamin (2012:93). As the extract shows, Palzi, the speaker who produces *you mean* in line 5, is asked about the job offers that she has gotten. By formulating her turn with *you mean* and a candidate understanding (*in America*) about the inquiry, Palzi is able to effect the repair and specify the question asked by the prior speaker, Ann.

01 Ann: *what about you have you gotten any job (0.3) offers*  
02       *or anything going [on]*  
03 Pal:                   *[o]h god*



such element. As a result, the recipient of the *you mean* question often responds with an affirmative or negative marker to confirm or disconfirm the understanding, while the recipient of the *shenme yisi* question has to make a repair entirely on his or her own. This shows a clear distinction in how these two expressions are employed to initiate other-repair and about the kind of next-return response that can be mobilized in each.

### 5.3 Negotiating and Managing Repair

The use of *yisi* in constructions other than those discussed above can often help organize conversational repair as well, albeit in a less conventionalized way. For example, in (21) below, M complains to F that although he had invited one of their friends to the movies, she said she was not available that week. In response, F launches a turn with the SCMN construction *na jiu xia libai de yisi* (line 324) to display her interpretation of their friend's intended meaning and thus repair M's turn. This other-repair is then followed by a negative assessment of M *ni zhenme name ben na* 'how can you be so stupid' (line 325) to bluntly characterize M's understanding as false and foolish. Corrected and confronted by F, M repairs his turn by using the cognitive verb *yiwei* (line 328) to indicate that he might have misunderstood what the friend was implying. Note that in the same turn, M also uses the noun *yisi* to refer to the interpretation disclosed by F (line 328). This abstract noun thus seems to serve as an object<sup>10</sup> with which the conversationalists can negotiate the repair made and position their epistemic stance in talk-in-interaction (cf. Du Bois 2007).

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04 (0.3)

05 Pal: → *you mean in Ameri[ca]*

06 Ann: [ye]ah in New York

<sup>10</sup> In his stance model, Du Bois (2007) argues that stance-taking not only pertains to the speaking subject's evaluation and positioning, but also requires another subject that can be aligned with or disaligned from and a "stance object" to which both subjects can direct their attention and evaluation.

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(21) *yisi* in self- and other-repair

322 M: ...*ta shuo zhe libai meibanfa a.*  
3SG say this week NEG.method FP

323 ...*ni kan.*  
2SG see

324 F: → ...*na jiu xia libai de yisi a.*  
that just next week ASSC meaning FP

325 ..*ni zhenme name <MRC ben MRC> na.*  
2SG how.come that dumb FP

326 ..*zhenshide.*  
really

327 M: ... (1.28) *wo wo wo --*  
1SG 1SG 1SG

328 → ..*wo yiwei bushi zhe-ge yisi.*  
1SG mistakenly.think NEG.COP this-CL meaning

'M: She said she couldn't make it this week. See.

F: That means next week. How can you be so dumb?! Oh, my goodness.

M: I didn't know that was what she meant.'

Example (22) below is another case where *yisi* is employed to negotiate repair. In line 23, F calls M a rabbit, a slang term that can refer to a gay man in Mandarin Chinese. Appearing to be unable to understand the assessment, M produces the question *shenme yisi* to elicit repair from his co-participant. Faced with such a repair-initiator, F first formats a reactive token *haN* to indicate that M's question and incomprehension are unexpected (Hsieh and Su 2014). She then puts forth a question *tuzi bushi hai you lingwai yi-ge yisi ma* 'doesn't rabbit have another meaning' to imply that it is the idiomatic meaning of *tuzi* 'rabbit' that is at issue here. F's question is formatted not only to specify and thus repair her assessment but also to presuppose a common ground between them and prompt M to cooperate. Nevertheless, rather than showing understanding, as F may expect, M produces another token of *shenme yisi* to request F to make further clarification (line 27) and even uses the imperative *shuo* 'say' (line 28) to strengthen the force. Instead of revealing the intended meaning of *tuzi*, F uses the SCMN construction

*jiushi tuzi de yisi* ‘it’s the meaning of rabbit’ to assert the message that she wants to convey. F’s resistance to being explicit about her use of terms may be partly because referring to a man as gay publicly may be face-threatening in Taiwan, especially if he appears to be heterosexual or does not identify his sexual orientation in public. As can be seen in this extract again, the abstract noun *yisi* is used in different constructions to negotiate the repair made in conversation and to manage the mutual understanding between the conversationalists.

(22) *yisi* in the negotiation of repair and meaning

23 F: ...*ni shi tu=zi.*\

2SG COP rabbit

24 M: ...*shenme yisi,*\_

what meaning

25 F: ...*haN?!*

INT

26 → ...*tuzi bushi hai you lingwai yi-ge <@ yisi ma@>.*\

rabbit NEG.COP still have another one-CL meaning Q

27 M: ...*shenme yisi,*\_

what meaning

28 ...*shuo.*\_

say

29 F: → ...*jiu shi tuzi de yisi a.*\

just COP rabbit ASSC meaning FP

‘F: You’re a rabbit.

M: What do you mean?

F: What? Doesn’t rabbit have another meaning?

M: What do you mean? Tell me!

F: Just the meaning of rabbit as you know it!’

Finally, in some instances, *yisi* can be used to show understanding and indicate the acceptance and boundary of repair. Prior to (23), A and B have been discussing A’s relationship with her boyfriend, Wu. B commented that A’s personality may be too extreme for boys to take. In line 287 of (23) below, B even claims that if his girlfriend were like A, he would definitely be lost. Although A seems to align with B by using

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the acknowledgement token *dui a* ‘right’ in line 292, she then formats a *why* question in the next line to elicit more explanation from B. To elaborate on his assessment, B puts forth an idiomatic metaphorical expression *qing-shi-duoyun-ou-zhenyu* ‘(lit.) partly cloudy with occasional rain’ to indicate that A is too moody and unpredictable. Receiving this comment, A produces a change-of-state token *ou* (line 297) and a clause *wo dong nide yisi* ‘I understand what you mean’ (line 298) to indicate her understanding of B’s intended meaning. Note that the *yisi* utterance in line 298 not only reveals the speaker’s epistemic stance, but also indicates her acceptance of the repair as legitimate and thus indexes the boundary of the repair initiated by the *why* question.

(23) *yisi* in marking understanding and accepting repair

- 287 B:..wo shi juede,\  
1SG COP feel  
288 ...ruguo zheyangzi,\  
if this.way  
289 ..wo yiding--  
1SG definitely  
290 ...shi wo dehua,\  
COP 1SG if  
291 ..wo yiding hui wandan.\  
1SG definitely will lost  
292 A:..dui a,\_  
right FP  
293 ..weishenme me?\  
why FP  
294 B:..jiu shi,\  
just COP  
295 ..ze.\  
INT  
296 ...qing-shi-duoyun-ou-zhenyu.\  
partly.cloudy.with.occasional.rain  
297 A:..ou=,\  
INT  
298 →..wo dong nide yisi.\  
1SG understand 2SG.GEN meaning

- 'B: I think, if so (that you were my girlfriend), I would definitely be lost.  
A: Yeah, but why?  
B: I mean, well, you are like changeable weather.  
A: Oh, I see what you mean.'

As illustrated in the foregoing instances, the organization of repair concerns not only who initiates and completes the repair, but also how the repair is received, understood, and negotiated by the conversation participants. This is a topic not often addressed in the literature. Despite its lower frequency, the occurrence of *yisi* in the constructions discussed in this section provides evidence in support of these aspects of repair organization. The findings further corroborate the present article's argument that the use of the abstract noun *yisi* in spoken Mandarin is largely connected with conversational repair and that the lexico-grammatical patterns with which the noun is deployed shape the exact repair function that the construction as a whole is able to serve.

## 6. DISCUSSION

Building on the findings presented above, this section discusses the relations between *yisi*, repair, and the management of intersubjectivity; compares the patterns of *yisi* in Chinese and *mean* in English; and explicates the implications of this study for the research of abstract nouns in general.

### 6.1 *Yisi*, Repair, and Intersubjectivity

Although previous studies on *yisi* have identified its recurrent use in prefabricated expressions and its function in the organization of discourse and interaction (Hsieh 2010, 2011; Huang 2013), they fail to pinpoint the connection between the abstract noun and the repair action or to detail the role of each *yisi* construction in the organization of repair. They also barely discuss how the co-occurring linguistic patterns shape the exact function of the noun in spoken interaction.

As has been demonstrated in section 5, the use of *yisi* is usually intended to facilitate the management of repair by the speaker. The abstract noun, when used in particular constructions, such as the NCC fragment or the question-word interrogative, is instrumental in projecting and initiating self- or other-repair. When deployed with other linguistic devices, such as demonstratives or cognitive verbs, it helps manage the negotiations and boundaries of repairs, a function that has not yet received much attention in the literature of repair organization in conversation. The instances and discussions presented in section 5 suggest clearly that while in general, *yisi* is closely linked to the function of repair, the way in which the abstract noun is involved in the process of repair is largely shaped by the construction in which it is employed.

Moreover, rather than being used to repair conversationalists' trouble in producing or hearing a linguistic unit, *yisi* constructions are mostly, if not always, utilized to tackle (potential) problems in understanding or appropriateness, even when no obvious or actual mistakes are made in the foregoing discourse. Therefore, these constructions are also linked to the management of intersubjectivity (Schegloff 1992; Verhagen 2005) in a number of ways.

First, to be aware of the potential problem in understanding or to notice others' initiation of repair, the speaker needs to take into account the assumed state of the knowledge of the co-participant when using an *yisi* construction to organize repair. In other words, using an *yisi* construction requires speakers to consider both their and the interlocutor's viewpoint and thinking (cf. Verhagen 2005).

Second, as shown in the discussion above, most of the instances of repair that *yisi* constructions enable are not semantically difficult or unclear. Instead, the repair is mostly linked to the speaker's intended meaning, especially in the case of *shenme yisi*. This implies that the speaker understands and recognizes that the utterances not only work at the semantic level, but also are produced with a specific intention. The use of *yisi* foregrounds such an intention and allows the speakers to negotiate it publicly. Thus, *yisi* constructions, by making manifest the joint attention to such intentionality, also involve the management of intersubjectivity (cf. Tomasello and Rakoczy 2003).

Third, by using *yisi* constructions to organize repair, speakers are able to co-construct a common ground and mutual understanding between themselves as the conversation unfolds, which is crucial to the establishment of and defense of intersubjectivity in social interaction (cf. Schegloff 1992).

## 6.2 *Yisi* vs. *Mean*

The case of *yisi* in Taiwan Mandarin is also interesting in its parallelism with the verb *mean* in English and in its use as an abstract noun in particular lexico-grammatical patterns. As mentioned earlier, the word *mean* is often used in repair constructions in English, such as the use of *I mean* (Fox Tree and Schrock 2002; Imo 2005) and *you mean* (Benjamin 2012), to initiate self-repair or to identify the trouble source. Similar, though not identical, patterns are found in the instances of *yisi* in Mandarin conversation. As the analysis in section 5 shows, *yisi* is also frequently deployed in constructions and contexts where speakers attempt to repair their own turn or elicit repair from the interlocutor. It seems that cross-linguistically, lexical items with the sense of *meaning* often can function as or in a repair-related device in talk-in-interaction. This may be due to the fact that when the meaning of an utterance or the intention of the speaker is meta-linguistically or meta-communicatively referred to in a conversation, this act carries with it the implication that some elements of the previous discourse are in need of further explanation or elaboration (cf. Brinton 2007; Schiffrin 1987). Of course, more cross-linguistic research needs to be conducted to see if this tendency is applicable to languages other than English and Chinese (cf. Marmorstein 2016)<sup>11</sup>.

In spite of this commonality, a number of structural and functional distinctions are also found between *yisi* in Chinese and *mean* in English, largely because of the difference in their syntactic category and in the

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<sup>11</sup> Having scrutinized the use of the discourse marker *yaʕni*, whose literal meaning is ‘it means,’ in Cairene Arabic, Marmorstein (2016) suggests that one of the functions *yaʕni* serves in unplanned spoken Arabic discourse is to introduce (self-)repair. This observation resonates well with the findings presented in the present article and the previous studies on *mean*-based constructions in English.

typological features of Mandarin and English. Due to its status as a complement-taking verb in English, *mean* requires a subject, which is often a first or second person pronoun. The combination of a personal pronoun and a complement-taking verb, when used frequently enough, usually emerges as a stance marker (Thompson 2002) or a pragmatic parenthetical (Laury and Okamoto 2011). Formulaic expressions like *I mean* can thus be used in different positions to repair utterances of different scopes (Imo 2005; Laury and Okamoto 2011).

In contrast, *yisi* as a noun does not require a subject. This explains why in patterns like the bare *yisi shi* construction and the *shenme yisi* question, Mandarin speakers do not have to identify the person who should be held accountable for the meaning of the utterance or the intention behind the speech act. This may also explain why the second person pronoun is not found to co-occur with *yisi* as frequently (Benjamin 2012): The speaker does not have to use an explicit pronoun to inquire about the interlocutor's intended meaning and can still prompt him or her to carry out a repair.

On the other hand, unlike compliment-taking verbs, nouns need to be deployed in particular patterns like the NCC construction so as to be linked to a clausal utterance (Schmid 2000). These constructions in which *yisi* is recurrently used constrain how the entire pattern functions to some extent. For example, in the case of *wode yisi shi* '(lit.) what I mean is,' although it is functionally similar to *I mean* in English, the position where the chunk can occur is relatively fixed (usually utterance-initially) and, as a result, the scope of the utterance that it can help repair is much narrower<sup>12</sup>. Likewise, although both *you mean* and *shenme yisi* can function to initiate other-repair, the former is used in an understanding check, while the latter serves as a more general next-turn other-repair initiator (cf. Drew 1997).

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<sup>12</sup> The frequency of *wode yisi shi* '(lit.) what I mean is,' in Chinese also seems to be remarkably lower than that of *I mean* in English, which may be related to the length of the two expressions, the positions in which the constructions can be put, function(s) that have developed in the case of each pattern. Mandarin speakers may also use other expressions like *jiushi(shuo)* 'that is (to say)' instead to serve some of *I mean*'s functions in English (Biq 2001) and thus reduce the use of (*wode*) *yisi shi* in conversation.



These findings resonate with Laury and Okamoto's (2011) observation that comparable expressions across different languages may develop similar but not identical patterns and functions, partly due to the difference in their internal elements and actual usages.

### 6.3 *Yisi* and Abstract Noun Studies

This study is also a contribution to the research on abstract nouns across languages. In correspondence with Schmid's (2000) argument, a group of abstract nouns in Chinese seems to be able to occur in particular constructions to link to a proposition and characterize the nature of the proposition. Among these "shell-noun constructions," the NCC pattern, in which *yisi* is found to recur, appears to be the most frequently studied, if not the most pervasively used, cross-linguistically. Studies of English, German, and Mandarin, have suggested that the NCC construction is often used with particular abstract nouns to form pragmatic devices like *the thing is* in English (Delahunty 2012), *die Sache/das Ding ist* 'the thing is' in German (Günthner 2011), and *wenti-shi* 'the problem/question is' in Chinese (Hsieh 2018).

However, the patterns of *yisi* can also be distinguished from those of English abstract nouns reported in the literature. First, the use of personal pronouns in the context of abstract nouns is not often mentioned in previous studies (Mahlberg 2005; Schmid 2000). Such use is nevertheless rather common in the occurrences of the [*yisi shi*] (NCC) construction. This may be partly because the sense of *yisi*, i.e. intention, implies a human possessor, and because the pattern is often employed as a means to elaborate the speaker's meaning in interaction.

Second, although question words like *shenme* 'what' have rarely been considered as an abstract noun or shell noun construction (Schmid 2000), this word is one of the most frequent collocates of *yisi* that serves to help the speaker relate the noun to an utterance. More interestingly, in this construction, both conversationalists jointly construct the abstract noun and the content that it refers to, which form of usage has not been mentioned let alone analyzed in the literature.

Finally, despite the existence of semantic equivalents of *yisi* like *meaning* and *intention* in English, these nouns are used in patterns that

differ starkly from the ones where *yisi* is employed (cf. Schmid 2000). This shows that even abstract nouns with comparable meanings may be used in very distinctive patterns in different languages. While the tendency of an abstract noun to occur in particular constructions is largely motivated by the semantics of the noun (Schmid 2000), the exact form-function pairings are usage-driven and language-specific.

As can be seen from the discussion above, the use of *yisi* in Chinese perfectly demonstrates how syntax, semantics, and pragmatics interact with one another and shape the patterns of the use of an abstract noun. The syntactic category of a word may affect the constructions in which it can be deployed, and its semantic property can contribute to the pragmatic meaning of an expression in which the word is embedded. These features together enable and constrain the interactional functions that the item can serve and the functions in turn influence the frequency and distribution of the use of the constructions (Hakulinen and Selting, 2005; Ochs et al. 1996; Selting and Couper-Kuhlen 2001).

## 7. CONCLUSION

In sum, based on instances retrieved from two corpora of spoken Mandarin, this study has shown that the Chinese abstract noun *yisi* tends to occur in a limited number of constructions and has argued that these *yisi* constructions are often used to organize repair actions and intersubjectivity. Moreover, the use of *yisi* not only demonstrates commonalities with similar expressions in Mandarin and English, but also displays distinctive features shaped by its syntax, semantics and pragmatics. The current study thus holds implications for studies on abstract nouns and repair devices in Mandarin Chinese as well as other languages. It also supports the general assumption of Interactional Linguistics that language and interaction are closely tied and fundamentally intertwined (Fox 2007; Selting and Couper-Kuhlen 2001).

The findings also suggest a few directions for future research. For example, words with senses akin to *mean* and *yisi* in different languages can be compared to see if semantic equivalents show similar functions and usage patterns in interaction. Second, more abstract nouns in

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Mandarin Chinese should be examined so as to explore in what patterns Chinese abstract nouns tend to occur, what factors may affect their distribution and how the patterns may resemble or differ from those reported in the literature. Finally, efforts should also be made to investigate other linguistic resources for the organization of repair in Mandarin conversation. In so doing, we will be able to present a more comprehensive picture of how Chinese speakers interact and manage intersubjectivity.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Abbreviations**

1SG	first personal singular
1PL	first personal plural
2SG	second person singular
3SG	third person singular
3PL	third personal plural
ASP	aspect marker
ASSC	associative
CL	classifier
COP	copular verb
GEN	genitive marker
INT	interjection
LOC	locative
NEG	negative marker
NOM	nominalizer
PN	proper name
FP	final particle
Q	question particle



## **Appendix B**

### **Transcription conventions**

[ ]	speech overlap
/	rising pitch
\	falling pitch
–	level pitch
...	pause
--	truncated word
=	lengthening
(H)	inhale
tsk	click
@	laughter
<@ @>	laughter quality
<A A>	allegro; fast speech
<Q Q>	quotation-like quality
<T T>	codeswitching to Taiwan Southern Min
<HI HI>	higher pitch level
<MRC MRC>	marcato; each word distinct and emphasized

修正中的意思：抽象名詞「意思」於漢語會話中的修正管理功能

謝承諭  
國立臺灣科技大學

儘管在英語語言學的文獻當中，已有眾多討論抽象名詞的相關著作，然而，對於其他如現代漢語等語言中抽象名詞的研究，仍付之闕如。本篇論文旨在探討漢語會話中，抽象名詞「意思」的分布與功能，藉以補足這方面文獻之不足。基於兩大臺灣漢語口語語料庫的資料，以及互動語言學的理论與方法，本研究發現，不同於一般名詞，「意思」傾向出現在特定詞彙語法結構當中，以達到會話中處理修正機制與互為主觀性的功能。由此可見，「意思」在口語漢語中的分布和功能，高度受到抽象名詞本身和所處構式之語法、語意與語用因素交互作用所影響。本研究不僅能做為未來抽象名詞與修正機制研究之基礎，更能增進對於語言結構與社會互動相互影響機制的了解。

關鍵字：修正、抽象名詞、意思、互為主觀性、互動語言學