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From indicating similarity to establishing online alignment: interactional functions of *ye* “also” in Mandarin Chinese

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Ye “also/too/as well” is one of the most frequently used adverbs in Mandarin Chinese. Although the lexical meaning and syntactic properties of *ye* have been widely discussed, there are few analyses of *ye* expressions in interactional discourse, let alone analyses examining its interactional functions. Under the framework of interactional linguistics, this paper investigates the interactional functions of *ye* in second positions within natural spoken conversations. The findings show that *ye* indicating similarity between two states of affairs seems to be generalized in different interactional contexts with two interactional functions, i.e., rapport building and conflict mitigation. These functions are deployed by speakers to establish online alignment between interlocutors, expressing their affiliative stances and highlighting (inter) subjectivity, though practices of achieving a certain alignment vary in different environments. Hence, a continuum of similarity and the underlying evolution of language use is proposed to account for the diverse range of uses of *ye* expressions in face-to-face conversation. This paper not only reveals the interconnected relationship between linguistic forms and the construction and maintenance of social rapport but also sheds light on studying grammar entities with an interactional approach.

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Introduction

Ye “also/too/as well” is one of the most frequently used adverbs in Mandarin Chinese. Previous studies mainly focus on the semantics and syntactic categories of *ye*, and generally believe that *ye* is a connective adverb which is used to conjoin at least two propositions P and Q, indicating similarity between two states of affairs (Eifring, 1995). Notably, there is a lack of research regarding *ye* expressions in interactional discourse. Consequently, how *ye* expressions are used by speakers in talk-in-interaction, and whether or not the use of *ye* to express similarity is attested in natural conversation, remain open questions. It has been proposed that *ye* can be taken as a lexical resource to express one’s aligned positioning, similar to the use of its counterparts *me too/either* in English (Du bois, 2007: 163; see also in Luo, 2013: 146).¹ Since there is no response or response element that is intrinsically affiliative or disaffiliative (Sorjonen, 2001), *ye* can only be used to display a speaker’s affiliation or stance (if any) in certain sequential positions. In view of this, this paper outlines an in-depth exploration of the use of *ye* in second positions in social interaction under the framework of interactional linguistics (see Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018). The paper attempts to answer the following questions:

- (1) What social interactional achievement(s) do *ye* expressions help accomplish?
- (2) How do *ye* expressions contribute to realizing this/these social interactional achievement(s) in a discourse context?

To address these questions, we examine the two identified interactional functions of *ye*, (a) as a rapport-building device in an affiliative context, and (b) as a mitigation device in a disaffiliative context. In our examination, we show how the pragmatic continuum of *ye* and interactional motivations contribute to the two identified interactional functions. This paper deepens our understanding of the relationship between linguistic forms and the construction and maintenance of social rapport, showing that an interactive-analytic approach can shed new light on seemingly objective expressions in Chinese and beyond.

Brief review of previous *ye* studies

As a high frequency adverb, *ye* has received extensive treatment via diverse theoretical approaches. Given the vast literature involved, we can only provide a brief overview of some of the most representative accounts. Lü (1980: 595-597) summarizes the meaning of *ye* into four aspects: 1) indicating that two things are the same; 2) indicating that two consequences are the same; 3) strengthening the tone of a sentence with a preceding *lian* “even”; and 4) expressing a euphemistic tone. Based on these interpretations, the meanings and functions of *ye* have been studied by linguists from multiple perspectives. It has been argued that the core meaning of *ye* is to express similarity (e.g., Ma, 1982; Biq, 1994; Li, 1997), or more specifically to highlight similarity in differences (Shen, 1983) from which other meanings are derived. In contrast, other scholars have suggested that *ye* has multiple senses and thus should be interpreted in different ways, i.e., expressing juxtaposition, relevance, and modality (e.g., Zhang, 2001; Hole, 2004). Furthermore, the co-occurrence of *ye* as a focus sensitive particle with other constituents in a sentence has been discussed by researchers such as Shyu (1995) and Liu and Xu (1998). However, these studies mainly focus on the semantics of *ye*, and most of them use created examples at the sentence level which are not representative of the function and nature of *ye* in real spoken interaction.

Although some studies on *ye* have moved beyond the frameworks of formal syntax and semantics, a consensus regarding the pragmatic functions of *ye* has yet to be reached. For example, a

number of studies on *ye* expressions have moved to explore its pragmatic functions from the perspective of modality, suggesting that the modal use of *ye* can be conceived as expressing mild tone (Ma, 1982), concessivity (Yang, 2020), or emphatic tone (Hole, 2004). He and Zhang (2016: 15) argue that the euphemistic use of *ye* from the traditional point of view is a modal trigger with interpersonal functions. It guides the hearer to infer the additional modal meaning by triggering the contextual assumption of the clause as shown in (1).

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- (1) ni ye tai bu dongshi le. (Cited from Ma, 1982)
 2SG YE too NEG tactful PRT
 ‘You are too untactful!’
-

Ye in example (1) implies that not only are “you” untactful, but also that there are others like “you” who are untactful. This is achieved through the use of *ye* which also weakens the strong tone of criticism in the sentence (Ma, 1982). Furthermore, Deng (2017: 653) suggests that *ye* can be used in an interactional context, not to describe the event itself but to express the speaker’s attitude, emotion, and cognition. He further provides a unified interpretation for *ye*’s modal and propositional usage using the notion of scalar implicature. However, it has been argued that *ye* does not have a scalar meaning no matter what utterance or context it presents, while the so-called scalar use of *ye* requires both the specific contextual assumptions and the speaker’s subjective settings (Xue, 2023: 331). Although previous studies have noted the interpersonal meaning of *ye* and pointed out that such a logical connective has extended to an (inter)-subjective use (He & Zhang, 2016), the data they used are based on carefully processed dialogs in literary works, which are not conducive in portraying the communicative function of *ye* in everyday spoken conversation.

Similarly, Li (2012) examines the discourse functions of the expression *ye shi* “also be” from the speaker’s perspective, which is derived from the grammaticalization of [modal particle *ye* + copula *shi*], proposing that *ye shi* has three functions: explanation, identification, and complaint. Among these, Li (2012: 90)’s *identification* refers to situations where interlocutors may not hold the same or similar views at the beginning of a verbal exchange but come to understand and then accept the other’s views after the addressees provide clarifications. While Li (2012)’s notion of identification is similar to our identified function of online alignment, Li (2012) examines *ye shi* as a whole and does not focus on the actual interactional functions of *ye*.

To summarize, previous studies have carried out a relatively comprehensive description of the meaning of *ye*, laying the research foundation for this paper. However, existing research fails to reveal the role of *ye* in real spoken conversation. Although some studies partially touched upon the interpersonal meaning or euphemistic usage of *ye* in conversation, they only stay at the sentence level and have not conducted a longitudinal analysis of interactional functions of *ye* in sequences, nor have they examined the emergent mechanism(s) of those functions in an interactional context. This paper attempts to address these issues and fill the gaps under the framework of interactional linguistics.

Data collection and methodology

The data are drawn from the corpus of Mandarin Chinese conversations created by our research team. The corpus was transcribed from a total of about 97 h of audio and video materials, totaling ~1.77 million words. These materials were collected from themeless everyday conversations in private contexts, involving

2–3 participants in spontaneous, naturally occurring face-to-face interactions.² All the data were collected with informed consent of the participants. The transcription conventions are based on the GAT2 transcription system as detailed in Appendix A. Due to the high frequency of *ye* in the corpora, it was not necessary to examine each one. Hence, the first 200 instances of *ye* expressions were extracted for analysis (examples of repeated transcription and typos were removed), and they were re-organized as a sub-corpus of about 50,000 words. A quantitative and qualitative combined analysis was then carried out on these 200 instances of *ye*, focusing on *ye*'s interactional functions. During the process, the instances were sequentially numbered from 1 to 200 and were then manually coded by the researcher to mark for the functions they displayed. Finally, the instances of *ye* were categorized and quantified based on their different functions. As introduced above, Interactional Linguistics (IL) is the main framework adopted in this study to address the research questions as IL lays particular stress on how language structure and interaction shape each other (Selting & Couper-Kuhlen, 2001).

Ye for establishing online alignment

Our examination of the data shows that the interactional achievement of the speaker's response with *ye* expressions in the interactional context is not merely to highlight the similarity or affinity among things, states, or evaluations, but to establish or seek to establish "online alignment" (Morita, 2005: 214)³ among co-participants. That is, the interactional goal is to temporarily form a common stance or positioning in talk-in-interaction, displaying alignment with another speaker, and then to build and maintain a harmonious social relation with the addressee through communicative activities. As defined by Du Bois (2007: 163), "stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field". Keisanen (2007: 254) further points out that all verbal means and paralinguistic features of language, as well as related linguistic structures, can be used for stancetaking. In Chinese conversation-analytic and interactional linguistic studies, *ye* is recognized as a linguistic element which can be deployed to express one's stance that is aligned with the addressee not only in the institutional conversation context but also in ordinary conversations (e.g., Luo, 2013). However, when *ye* is deployed in the process of establishing online alignment, there are various ways in which such an achievement is accomplished. Consequently, different interactional functions are attributed to *ye* accordingly: a) when expressing agreement, *ye* can serve as a rapport-building device to create solidarity among participants; b) when expressing disagreement, *ye* is taken as a mitigation device to alleviate (apparently) conflicting stances. In the following two sections, we elaborate on how *ye*-formulated similarities are deployed to show affiliation, establishing stance alignment and creating solidarity among participants, and explore how such a similarity indicated by *ye* is used to mitigate dispreferred responses that are confronted with stance conflicts, maintaining social relations until the online alignment is re-built.

Ye as a rapport-building device

Ye-formulated similarities are frequently found in affiliative environments, accounting for 81.8% (90/110) of the surveyed data. In this case, *ye* is employed by speakers in response to a statement, evaluation, or assertion of the prior speaker to convey that they have common ground with co-participants. This interactional strategy, either explicitly expresses or implies that the speaker's stance aligns with that of the other party and is the

prominent path of establishing online alignment. In what follows, we will examine three cases to advance this argument: (1) *ye* for shared characteristics, (2) *ye* for listing, and (3) *ye* for supporting a claim.

Ye for highlighting shared characteristics to evoke common ground. As is well known, Chinese culture is typically characterized as collectivistic, while collectivism does not just exist within people's minds, but rather manifests itself in talk in interaction (Wu & Tao, 2018). Seeking commonality rather than individuality is less likely to cause disagreement, and it is easier to reach a common position and establish an alignment. In response to a prior speaker's utterance or comments, speakers can use *ye* expressions to offer affiliative responses in real-time, indicating that they share states, thoughts, or feelings with their recipients. By invoking a shared past and establishing a common ground for further talk, *ye* can help build interpersonal connections among interlocutors and result in positive reactions from co-participants. Excerpt (2) is a case in point.

Excerpt (2) "So sleepy"

01	Y: a(-)	chi	bao	le	jiu	hen	kun.								
	PRT	eat	full	PFV	will	very	sleepy								
	'Ah, I feel very sleepy on a full stomach.'														
02→	M: wo	ye	hao	kun.											
	1SG	YE	so	sleepy											
	'I am so sleepy too.'														
03	Y: a	duibuqi!													
	PRT	sorry													
	'Sorry!'														
04	M: [haha														
	[[[laughter]]]														
05→	L: [wo	ye	hao	kun.											
	1SG	YE	pretty	sleepy											
	'[I am so sleepy too.]'														

In excerpt (2), Y initiates an exclamation to her partners about her drowsiness after the meal in line 1, M then responds to this assertion in the form of a *ye* expression (line 2). On the one hand, the expression communicates that she is sleepy as well, and on the other, it establishes that her situation aligns with Y's description. This allows M to put herself in a subordinate position. Y apologizes immediately in line 3, as she is worried that M's judgment is negatively affected by her previous exclamation. But M does not take it seriously and laughs away Y's embarrassment in line 4. At the same time, another participant L, includes herself in the group that has a shared characteristic of drowsiness caused by satiety through her *ye* expression in line 5, confirming that Y and M's prior statements are not a particular case. Such a supportive move demonstrates the speaker's in-group identity, sharing a common understanding or reinforcing a common stance (Wu & Tao, 2018). In this way, L is connected to Y and M through the overtly common feature of post-meal drowsiness, establishing solidarity among co-participants.

From excerpt (2), we can clearly see how *ye* is deployed to establish online alignment between two or more participants. Through *ye* expressions, speakers convey that they have the same characteristics or status as recipients, increasing the relevance of both the form and meaning of utterances (Zhang & Li, 2023). Hence, a common ground among participants is established, and it can be taken to implement further actions.

Notably, interrupting the turn or other party's speech is initially an impolite turn competition behavior, but sometimes speakers' interruptions are out of a rush to express their own

opinions that are in line with the other party's point of view, such as L in excerpt (2). It is *ye* that often occurs in this type of overlap based on cooperation, and its function to establish online alignment may temporarily eliminate the negative impact of the induced interruption.

In spoken conversation, speakers may often selectively repeat some words or elements of those who have spoken before to build their own utterances. That is, an utterance is derived from either the partial or the whole structure of the previous discourse (Du Bois, 2007: 140), and the analogy implied by the structural parallelism can induce resonances in multiple functional domains, including information transfer, cognitive processing, affective alignment, and interpersonal cooperation (Du Bois, 2014). In excerpt (2), L's affiliative response in line 5 is exactly the same as the response of M to Y in line 2, shown as a *repetition* (Schegloff, 1997: 525) or an *echo utterance* in which speakers repeat all or part of a message of another speaker in order to realize particular communicative functions (Quirk et al., 1985: 835–838). L's repetitive assertion here is clearly not only for the previous speaker Y, but also an endorsement of M. As echo utterances function to hold the floor, express one's involvement, provide backstage response, express understanding, appreciate and support one's words, "register receipt" and "target a next action" (Tannen, 2007: 15–17), the co-occurrence of *ye* and echo utterance expressing agreement and support can be attributed to the interactional function of building rapport. It seems that *ye* plays an important role in the construction of this type of echo utterance, not only operating on the coherence between the current utterance and the previous one but also linking the positioning of the speaker with a prior speaker, projecting a common ground or in-group identity among co-participants.

In the data examined for this paper, 37 out of 40 responses that highlight shared features are in the form of [first person pronoun + *ye*], which express the same thoughts or attitudes among participants. Generally speaking, the first-person pronoun is considered as an essential sign of subjective expression in language (Scheibman, 2002). This is based on the observation that the first-person pronoun is a marker of a deictic center from which one's discourse is organized (Iwasaki, 1993). However, the first-person pronoun is also taken as a sign that objectifies the speaking self (Langacker, 2002). A speaker may put themselves on "the stage" through the use of the first-person pronoun to observe themselves objectively. We need to take into

account both perspectives, where the first-person pronoun can be construed either objectively or subjectively. This explains why [I + *ye*] can be understood either as speakers informing addressees of their information, or as an interpretation of the stance taken by speakers and their affiliations with the previous speaker.⁴

Therefore, in this type of interactional environment showing participants' common characteristics, *ye* embodies both objective meaning and subjective use (cf. Lyons, 1981).⁵ *Ye* expressions are deployed not only to convey propositional information related to speakers' own cognitive states, feelings, or attitudes but also out of interactional needs. The production of such an utterance at a given time is a reflection of speakers' subjective intentions, revealing their stance towards a prior speaker's turn, which has an effect on the development of the current topic and the subsequent course of conversation. As is suggested, stancetaking is not simply a static presentation of the speaker's personal view, but a dynamic, emerging, and cooperative product of language in social interaction. Interactors both align with the ongoing course of action and associate with each other (Stivers, 2008) in response to local contingencies in interaction. Hence, stancetaking is a public action that is shaped by joint inputs from all participants, and as a result, stance is considered to be situated, inter-subjective, and collaborative (Kärkkäinen, 2006; Iwasaki, 2015).

***Ye* to list in-group items for promoting solidarity.** In Chinese spoken conversation, Tao (2019: 65) defines list construction as the production of a set of formally similar and functionally related items in adjacent conversation units (either in the same speaker turn or in adjacent turns) that fall under a broad discourse theme. By listing comparable items, speakers indicate that their positioning is consistent with that of the previous speaker. In the context of lists, the inherent lexical meaning of *ye* allows for the creation of adjoining lists, and its logical properties illustrate that the use of *ye* always projects the existence of a conjunct that shares some similar features (Yang, 2000). As a result, *ye* expressions allow speakers to add items that are considered to be in the same group but not yet present in the list, inducing a parallel relationship between items already listed and the new additions. In this way, speakers show their agreement with what has been communicated and establish online alignment in talk-in-interaction. This listing process is demonstrated in excerpt (3) below.

Excerpt (3) "Bitter is ok as well."

- | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|----|---|-------|--------|--------|------------|---------|---------|------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-----|------|-----|
| 01 | M: | jiemei | ni(.) | ni | shi(.) | jiu shi(.) | suan(.) | suan(.) | suan | tian | ku | la | dou(.) | dou | keyi | ma? |
| | | sister | 2SG | 2SG | COP | just COP | sour | sour | sour | sweet | bitter | spicy | all | all | ok | PRT |
| | | 'You, are you, that is, sour, sour, sour sweet bitter and spicy, all, are they ok?' | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 02 | | [en | | | a(.) | suan | tian | la | dou | xing@ | | | | | | |
| | | umm | | | PRT | sour | sweet | spicy | all | ok | | | | | | |
| | | '[Umm-huh, sour, sweet and spicy are ok?' | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 03 | Y: | [en | | | dui | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | umm | | | right | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | '[umm right.' | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 04 | | hahaha | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | ((laughter)) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 05 | L: | [meiyou | | | ku | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | not | | | bitter | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | '[Not bitter.' | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 06→ | Y: | [ha | | ku | ye | xing | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | ha | | bitter | YE | ok | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | '[((laugh)) Bitter is ok too.' | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

In excerpt (3), M initially asks Y if she can accept all four flavors, i.e., sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy (line 1), but then M removes “bitter” deliberately in her revised question (line 2), since she may suddenly realize that bitter is less acceptable than the other three flavors. Y’s affirmative response in line 3 overlaps with M’s turn and is completed before M, thereby she confirms that sour, sweet, spicy, and bitter are good, but L jokes that *meiyou ku* “there is no bitterness” (line 5) in terms of this confirmation, so Y further supplies that *ku ye xing* “bitter is ok as well” to close the list (line 6).

As pointed out by Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (2018: online chapter F), items in a list share, or present as sharing, some sort of sameness. Here “bitter”, as an item in the same group with similar properties as “sour, sweet, and spicy”, is activated by the speaker and introduced by the *ye* expression indicating that the new item “bitter” belongs to the same category as “sour, sweet, and spicy”. The use of *ye* not only increases the list of items, but also backtracks to confirm that the presupposed alternatives in the background, such as sour, sweet, and spicy, are of the same category as bitter and are thus all equally acceptable. Most lists are in fact constructed to consist of triple singles (Jefferson, 1990: 64). That is, if a third item is missing, speakers will be observed to display trouble, hold the turn, and search for it or generalized list completers are often provided by a recipient (Jefferson, 1990: 65, 67). However, lists with *ye* expressions are not necessarily the same. Instead, *ye* expression lists are open lists which are often co-constructed while the speaker is expressing agreement

***Ye* to support a previous speaker’s views or actions.** Alignment moves such as assessments, collaborative contributions, and collaborative completions index shared understanding, the ability to adopt the other’s point of view, and the ability to speak in the other’s voice (Dings, 2014). In addition to the two means discussed above, speakers in the interactional context can also coordinate and cooperate with each other by providing further supportive evidence in their own turns to express their positive attitudes towards prior discourse. van Eemeren (2010) points out that argumentative discourse is a specific communicative interaction between interlocutors to prove their own position or refute the other party’s. When speakers align with each other, the explanatory statement can naturally be reduced to a defense of the recipient’s stance. By adding further explanation, the supporting rationale introduced in the same argumentative direction by the *ye* expression can establish a connection with the previous speaker’s view or action. The rationale is not presupposed but arises gradually as the sequence progresses. This non-presuppositional property and the sequence advancing process are compatible with the additive meaning of *ye*, giving rise to the use of *ye* as a resource for supporting and maintaining one’s stance. Consider the following excerpt (4) to illustrate this. Y, L, and M are ordering dishes in a restaurant and they have ordered Mapo Tofu and Black Pepper Beef, then L notices “refreshing okra”.

Excerpt (4) “Order dishes”

01	Y: en uhm 'Uhm [(I) want to eat, umm-hmm.]	[xiang want	chi(.) eat	enheng. PRT		
02	L:	[o PRT [Oh.]				
03	M: na then 'Add one more.'	jiu just	jia add	yi one	ge CL	bei. PRT
04	L: [jia. add '[Add.]					
05	M: [jia add '[Add one.]	yi. one				
06→	L: fanzheng anyway 'It is cheap anyway, [fifteen yuan.]	ye YE bijiao relatively	pianyi(.) cheap	[shiwu kuai qian, fifteen CL money		
07	Y:			[hao ba ok PRT '[All right.]		
08→	L: guji probably 'Probably very few.'	ye YE	hen very	shao. few		
09	M: en(.) umm 'Umm, probably very few.'	guji estimate	hen very	shao. few		

with the previous speaker by listing an item that shares common features with other listed items. It seems that expressing agreement or affiliation by listing in-group items is similar to the way of highlighting shared characteristics. However, the first approach is more explicit and direct, as there is no need for analogical reasoning to affirm what is previously communicated.

In excerpt (4), Y indicates that she wants to add the dish “refreshing okra” in line 1. At first, L does not explicitly agree with this desire but M proposes to add the dish in response to Y’s utterance (line 3). Subsequently, L expresses her agreement with M’s proposal by repeating the verb *jia* “add” (line 4), and after M’s confirmation of

the addition (line 5) L uses the *ye* expression to give further comments on the ordered food. That is, the dishes are relatively cheap (line 6) and their portion is small (line 8). Although these assessments are nearly interrupted by Y's affirmation (line 7), they are recognized by Y and M in the following sequences. On the one hand, L's additional description of the characteristics of dishes provides more positive evidence to support Y's desire to add the dish and M's decision to support this so as to rationalize their propositions; on the other hand, it implies that L's stance aligns with Y and M's. In such cases, the speaker introduces a positive event related to the current topic into the conversation through the use of the *ye* expression, serving as a supportive justification for the addressee's view to eliminate contingent refutation and maintain the addressee's stance and promote solidarity through which online alignment is established.

In excerpts (2) (3) and (4) above, speakers convey their agreement with the previous utterance through different practices, such as highlighting shared characteristics (excerpt 2), listing in-group items (excerpt 3), and supporting prior talk with evidence (excerpt 4), which show their high involvement in the current topic. These various practices illustrate *ye*'s interactional function as a rapport-building device to establish online alignment. In the following section, we examine *ye* expressions used to convey a speaker's opposing stance and analyze the role and interactional functions of *ye* as a conflict mitigation device.

Ye as a conflict mitigation device

Just as *alignment* in Du Bois's (2007) stance triangle can be divided into two sides, i.e., "align" and "disalign", the notion of *affiliation* also has a counterpart, i.e., *disaffiliation*. In the excerpts above (2–4), the use of *ye* can be categorized as affiliative and is harmonious in nature from the speakers' stance perspectives. In addition to affiliation, our data also show the use of *ye* expressions for similarity in conflicting talk or disagreement sequences, i.e., contexts of disalignment. Research has shown that the speakers

always manage to use practices that serve to maximize opportunities for affiliative actions and minimize opportunities for disaffiliative ones (Heritage, 1984). When the asymmetric dispreferred action arises in response to an initial action, speakers usually try to soften the disagreement in order to decrease negative effects that do not support the accomplishment of the activity and threaten social solidarity (Schegloff, 2007). Given the relevance of agreement and disagreement, the production of weak agreements may be disagreement implicative (Davidson, 1984: 112). Accordingly, weak agreements are usually deployed to implement a disapproval-based action to reduce the likelihood of a dispreferred response, such as disagreement or refutation. Following this line, we find that the speaker often uses a *ye* expression to alleviate implicit conflicting stances and dissolve an apparent disagreement. This usage of *ye* can be divided into two types: (1) controlling explicit opposing views, and (2) alleviating implicit disagreements. In the following two subsections, we further explore how *ye* expressions invoking similarity are used to mitigate (apparent) conflicts among participants.

Ye for controlling explicit opposing views to maintain harmonious relations. Controlling an opposing view refers to the practice of the speaker using the lexical resource *ye* to mitigate an explicit conflict caused by the stance conflicts between interlocutors with the intention of weakening the degree of disalignment and/or re-establishing online alignment. As has been discussed in the extensive conversation-analytic literature, dispreferred responses may be expressed in attenuated or mitigated form (Schegloff, 1988; Kendrick & Torreira, 2015). *Ye* expressions can be deployed in a second position as opposed to the first pair part based on the previous speaker's statement or attitude.

In excerpt (5), W tells Y that she will go home immediately and asks Y to recommend a low-brain-power film for her to watch during dinner.

Excerpt (5) “Marvel movies”						
01	Y: manwei de Marvel ASSOC	ni 2SG	kan watch	wan finished	le PFV	ma? PRT
	‘Are you done with the Marvel series?’					
02	W: kan watch	wan finished	le PFV	a! PRT		
	‘Done!’					
03	Y: manwei Marvel	de ASSOC	dou bu yong dongnao all not need think			
	‘Marvel series movies are low brain power.’					
04	manwei de Marvel ASSOC	yao dongnao need think	ma? PRT			
	‘Does the Marvel series require you to think?’					
05	[haha [((laughter))]					
06	W: [ta(.) 3SG	bu not	shi COP	xiju comedy	a. PRT	
	‘[They are not a comedy.]’					
07→	Y: ye suan YE be-considered	xiju comedy	ba PRT			
	‘They might be considered as a comedy.’					
08	W: manwei Marvel	dianying film	you and	bu not	xiafan interesting	
	‘Marvel series movies are not interesting.’					

Y asserts that Marvel movies do not require a lot of brain power from viewers (line 3), which meets W's requirement. Thus, Y recommends that W watch Marvel movies during dinner. However, W produces a negative judgment against the Marvel series (line 6). The short pause after the reference indicates that W is searching for how to reasonably reject Y's recommendation. In the following line 7, Y does not agree with W's assertion in the previous turn, and instead, she gives her own opinion that the Marvel series movies can be regarded as comedy films. Xue (2023) suggests that the *ye*-utterance in an acceptance context points to the status of being no higher or worse than the threshold expectation assumed, hence even though what is uttered could be accepted, the validity of that utterance is weakened. In other words, the pragmatic scale of the item modified by *ye* is lower than that of a general situation. This allows for the realization of the subjectively small quantification of the item modified by *ye*, which is in this case Marvel movies. In line with this view, due to the presence of *ye*, Y's utterance triggers an implicit analogy alternative treated as the comparing item, which occupies the point of threshold expectation, and is derived from pragmatic accommodation. Although an implicitly referenced alternative is unclear, the discourse suggests this to be a film with prototypical comedy features and which is located at a higher point on the pragmatic scale of being classified as a comedy. Compared to this triggered alternative, although Marvel series movies have some of the same characteristics found in comedy films, they are not typical comedies. That is Marvel series

maintain the initially friendly interaction between the speaker and the recipient while making the weakened view easier for the recipient to accept, thus contributing to re-establishing online alignment among co-participants.

Ye for alleviating implicit disagreements to weaken the dis-alignment. As Schegloff (1988) observes, dispreferred actions can be produced with preferred turn formats and preferred actions can be produced with dispreferred turn formats (cf., Heritage, 1984: 267–268; Lerner, 1996: 305). In Chinese spoken interaction, alleviating implicit disagreements is an exact case in point, which is a practice that the speaker employs when expressing a view or action contrary to the recipient's. The act of alleviating implicit disagreements is shaped by offering a preferred response accompanied by a downgraded operation on wording. Unlike controlling explicit opposing views, in some cases, speakers use the *ye* expression to produce an opinion consistent with the previous speaker's stance while deploying relevant lexical resources to downgrade the utterance. The result is a kind of weak agreement or concessive affiliation. By doing this, speakers not only highlight their epistemic independent status towards the object under discussion but also pave the way for implementing a dispreferred action or changing the topic, projecting the forthcoming disagreement in the sequence. For example, in (6), Y describes to W the writing style of “grand narrative” movies that she likes (omitted due to limited space), then W recommends Y watch the film *The World is a World of the Past*.

Excerpt (6) “Grand narrative”

01	W: na	wo	tuijian	ni	kan renjian zhengdao shi cangsang				
	then	1SG	recommend	2SG	see world right-way COP change				
	'I recommend you watch <i>The World is a World of the Past</i> .'								
02	juedui	you	ni	xiang	yao	de		dongxi	
	absolutely	have	2SG	want	require	CSC		content	
	'which definitely has what you want.'								
	((40 lines omitted where W introduces the main content of the film in detail))								
43	W: zhe jiu	shi	ni	yao	de	da		xushi	
	this just	COP	2SG	demand	CSC	grand		narrative	
	'This is the grand narrative you want.'								
44	[juedui	shi	ni	yao	de	xu		da	xushi(.)
	absolutely	COP	2SG	demand	C	narrative		grand	narrative
	'[Definitely the grand narrative you want, I tell you.]								
45	Y: (((laughter)))								
46→	qishi	ting(.)	yinggai	ye	ting	hao	de	zhe	zhong
	actually	quite	should	YE	quite	good	C	this	type
	'Actually quite, this type of grand narrative should also be very good.'								
47	ai buguo	youde	shihou	kan	da	xushi		kan jiu	
	hey but	some	moment	see	grand	narrative		see long	
	'But sometimes if I see grand narrative too much.'								
48	wo	ye	xihuan	kan	yixie(.)	bu yong dongnao	de		pianzi
	1SG	YE	like	see	some	not need use-one's-brain	ATTR		film
	'I also like seeing some: films that are low-brain-power.'								

movies are positioned at a lower point on the scale and are barely regarded as comedy films, let alone prototypical comedies. Thus, the reliability of Y's utterance is downgraded, making the conflict between Y's and W's stancetaking less obvious. The downgrading of Y's utterance reliability can also be concluded from the collocation of *ye* and *ba* “PRT” in the sentence, as a sentence containing sentence-final particle *ba* expressing assertion shows the speaker's compromise by weakening the credibility of the utterance and transferring the decision power to the other party, thereby establishing online alignment with the recipient (Gao, 2016).

Hence, when the speaker produces an utterance that is obviously contrary to the previous speaker's stance, the presence of *ye* induces contextual assumptions through which the opposing view sounds mild. The use of *ye* in this context functions to

In this excerpt, Y first agrees with W's previous description of the film *The World is a World of the Past* with grand narrative features (line 46). However, compared to W's comments of the film in line 44, Y's assessment is relatively mild. She uses an inversion sentence containing *ye* with modal particle *yinggai* “should” embedded to downgrade W's utterance that is modified by *juedui* “absolutely”. We argue that Y's purpose in doing this is to make a preparation for the subsequent reverse, as Y intends to produce a contrasting statement in the following discourse. At the initial position of line 47, Y uses the topic transition signal *ai* “ah” (see Yu, 2022),⁶ which has the function of implying topic change (Li, 2019), followed by the weak adversative *buguo* “however”. By saying that she not only likes “grand narrative” films but also likes low-brain-power films, a new topic is introduced and the remaining discourse is focused on this new topic.

We can see that when *ye* is deployed in such an interactional environment, the validity of the utterance it involves seems to be downgraded as the item (i.e., the recommended film) modified by *ye* is located at a relatively lower point on the pragmatic scale of the likelihood of being good. By using *ye*, the speaker's agreement is downgraded, conveying their implicit disagreement, and based on this the disalignment between the current confirmation and the upcoming contrasting statement is weakened. This interactional strategy of transferring from weak agreement to disagreement can mitigate the negative impact of face-threatening acts or affiliation destruction resulting from stance conflicts between two participants.

The distribution of *ye* in establishing online alignment

In the data, there are various usages of *ye* to (re-)establish online alignment. However, as shown in our data, those practices have significant differences in their frequency as shown in Table 1. Of the 200 *ye* instances, 110 demonstrate online alignment construction, all of which are employed as the second response in an interaction. Among them, 90 instances of *ye* can be treated as a means of building rapport among co-participants, while the other 20 instances are deployed as a mitigation device for alleviating (potential) conflicts between the interlocutors. The former function (81.8%) is 4.5 times higher than the latter one (18.2%). In detail, in the cases where *ye* is used as a rapport-building device, the practice of highlighting shared characteristics is the most frequent (40/110), accounting for 36% of the total, which is not much different from the sum of the practices of listing in-group items (21.8%) and supporting a previous speaker's views or actions (23%). In contrast, in the cases where *ye* is used as a mitigation device, the practice of controlling explicit opposing views (9.1%) is equal to/on par with the practice of alleviating implicit disagreements (9.1%), but they are all less frequent than the rapport-building cases.

We propose several reasons for these distribution differences. First, interactional efficiency. Since speakers can directly show their in-group identity and explicitly convey their alignment with the previous speaker's stance, it is more direct and efficient to reveal shared characteristics in the course of establishing online alignment, which is in line with the economic principle of language use. Furthermore, listing in-group items and supporting a previous speaker's views or actions may be subject to different views from the recipient regarding the additional listed item and supplementary justifications, and in these two cases, the positive correlation between the added information and the previous information needs to be identified by the recipient through analogical reasoning. That is, the recipient is required to put more effort into processing the position expressed by the *ye*-expression. When things are equal, less processing effort is exerted and an utterance becomes more relevant (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). As a result, the two practices of listing in-group items and supporting a previous speaker's views or actions are more indirect than highlighting shared characteristics for online alignment construction. Second, the derivation of basic practice. As we have discussed, the practices of listing in-group items and supplying positive evidence are like "twins", they are employed to convey that the speaker's

stance aligns with the interlocutor's and both are carried out under the condition that the participants have a common ground. Therefore, it is essential to evoke a common ground on which the speaker implicitly demonstrates affiliation with the recipient by listing an in-group item or providing supportive evidence for the recipient's view. Third, the asymmetry of responses. There is no doubt that agreement, appreciation, and confirmation of a previous utterance are preferred responses. By contrast, disagreement, resistance, and refutation of the recipient's turn are dispreferred. Participants are more likely to give a preferred response to maintain a friendly relationship and promote the conversation. This essentially explains why *ye* expressions are more often deployed to build rapport in interaction rather than to mitigate conflict.

It is worth noting that although *ye* has the interactional function of building online alignment, this does not mean that *ye* is an agreement marker or can casually induce consensus among co-participants. In the data, 90 instances of *ye* expressions do not have the interactional function of establishing online alignment. This indicates that the interactional meaning of *ye* pertains to the specific sequence position. As proposed in positionally sensitive grammar (Schegloff, 1996: 108), the same linguistic entities in different sequences may exhibit various interactional functions. In other words, *ye* occurs in different sequences (both types and positions) that are interactively relevant to the implementation of different social actions and may perform different, or even diametrically opposite, interactional tasks.

Ye as a pragmatic device indicating similarity and for establishing online alignment

Given the seemingly diverse range of functions, one may ask if there is a unified account for the use of *ye* expressions in conversational interaction. We believe that such an account is viable. Inspired by the pragmatic continuum of Plural NP + *dou* "all" expressions in conversation proposed by Wu and Tao (2018), we attempt to establish a continuum of the generalized similarity indicated by *ye* based on the pragmatic continuum of rapport to address how *ye* expressions contribute to establishing online alignment and achieving a unified interpretation for different interactional functions of *ye*.

As a pragmatic notion, *rapport* concerns harmonious social relations and needs to be actively maintained and managed in social interaction (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). What is reflected by the patterns of *ye* used in the second position in the data can be understood as a continuum of harmonious social relations. In Fig. 1, which represents the pragmatic continuum, affiliative responses are positioned on the left. The farther left a response is positioned, the more harmonious relation it builds. Likewise, disaffiliative responses are positioned to the right of the continuum. The farther right a response is positioned, the less harmonious relation it builds.

Since the core meaning of *ye* is to indicate the (arbitrary) addition of similar items, the relation between what is introduced in the *ye* expression and what has been previously uttered becomes analogous as *ye* is used to connect these two parts. Thus,

Table 1 Distribution of interactional functions of <i>ye</i> expressions.				
Interactional achievement	Interactional function	Practices	Frequency (/110)	Percentage%
Establishing online alignment	Rapport-building	Highlighting shared characteristics	40	36
		Listing in-group items	24	21.8
		Supporting a previous speaker's views or actions	26	23
	Mitigation	Controlling explicit opposing views	10	9.1%
		Alleviating implicit disagreements	10	9.1%

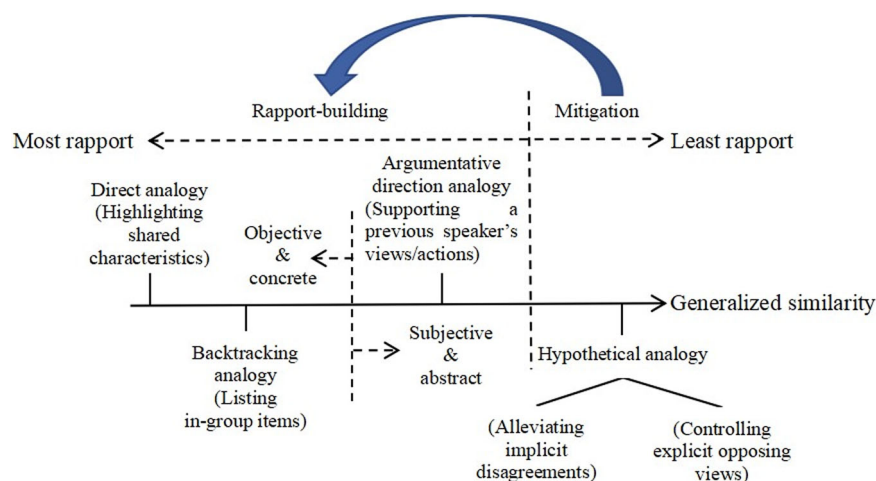


Fig. 1 The pragmatic continuum of *ye* expressions in interaction. This figure shows how the semantics of *ye* and its interactional meaning can be interpreted as a whole.

by employing *ye* expressions speakers not only illustrate that they belong to the same group as recipients by making a homogeneous comparison between themselves and recipients, but also back-track to, and confirm, the aforementioned items by listing and affirming a new in-group item (e.g., excerpts (2)–(4)). Moreover, since the semantic properties of *ye* can retroactively project a proposition or state of affairs with similar characteristics as the current proposition (Zhang, 2010), when speakers produce an utterance containing *ye* they naturally go back to the previous discourse for pairing. This connection back to previous discourse through the *ye* expression involves speakers relating current utterances to preceding ones, mapping the preceding proposition (i.e., the left conjunct of *ye*, P) by adding a new proposition that indicates a similarity or an explanatory relation between the two clauses. Hence, by using *ye* expressions speakers show their understanding and identification of views or actions involved in the previous speakers' utterances by providing more supporting explanations or justifications, i.e., supplementary arguments which align with those in the preceding discourse.

However, as shown in excerpts (5) and (6), when *ye* is deployed as a mitigation device to alleviate conflicts in a specific context, it is often manifested as the speaker's subjective judgment of similarity. That is, in some instances in the data, similarity is vague, hypothetical, or unverifiable—all traits of subjective evaluations. Such a subjective similarity is realized when the item modified by *ye* is assumed to be on the same pragmatic scale as the reference object or general situation according to the speaker's assumption. Moreover, in actual interaction, analogies are always considered to be rather vague and subjective, relying on the speaker's personal experience and cognition, and whether the so-called similarity can be verified is not a concern to the speaker. Furthermore, as shown in excerpts (5) and (6), *ye* can be used by the speaker to express disagreement with the previous utterance. When *ye* occurs in a context of disaffiliation, it appears to conflict with the interactional achievement of establishing online alignment. While this is, in fact, a merely provisional disalignment, the speaker's ultimate goal is to re-establish online alignment by mitigating divergence in the ongoing interaction. This process of re-establishing alignment is schematized as the big blue arrow in Fig. 1. The mitigation function of *ye* reduces the effectiveness and credibility of the evaluation which it modifies, assisting the recipient to adjust or re-accept the new perspective. Therefore, we argue that *ye* is a pragmatic device whose specific interactional meaning at any point in interaction can only be revealed by its interactional context and contingent talk (Morita, 2015).

From the different practices of *ye* for establishing online alignment discussed above, it can be seen that *ye* has evolved from indicating similarity between propositions or states of affairs to triggering paralleled item(s) in the background, then to connecting two related events that are similar in argument orientation, and finally has extended to implying similarity between the evaluated item and the hypothetical reference or threshold expectation. We call these four cases *direct analogy*, *backtracking analogy*, *argumentative direction analogy*, and *hypothetical analogy*. Hence, the property of *ye* expressing similarity undergoes generalization, expanding from indicating similarity in logical semantics to indicating pragmatic similarity. Consequently, the similarity indexed by *ye* acquires a broader range as shown in the schemata of Fig. 1.

Therefore, the semantics of *ye* and its interactional meaning are mutually reinforcing. More accurately, they are appropriate to be regarded as a continuum, the former represented on the left side of the continuum is more objective and concrete, while the latter on the right side is more subjective and abstract (see dotted arrows shown in Fig. 1). The use of *ye* has developed a subjective feature, which also reflects the driving role of subjectification in semantic change (Traugott & Dasher, 2002).

As discussed above, the interactional meaning of *ye* derived from its generalized core meaning, and the particular position in which it is deployed in sequences cannot be fully explained by *ye*'s inherent nature. In contrast, the speaker's interactional purpose and intention seem to be critical. The essence of establishing online alignment is an interaction among participants' stances or positions, whose nature is the interaction of communicative purposes, such as the implementation of a specific activity. In the interactional context, if the speaker in a responsive position wants to keep and expand the current topic or tries to change the recipient's point of view by giving a judgment that is different from the previous discourse, the speaker can deploy *ye* with the function of rapport-building or mitigation to achieve the pragmatic purpose under the cooperative principles and politeness requirements of communication.

In addition, the principle of progressivity is a universal linguistic practice of concern to all language societies (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018). Yao and Liang (2024) suggest that the likely positions of interactional resources that can extend and push the current action or restart a previous action are the positions of action promotion, which can appear in both initiating and responsive turns. In the responsive position of conversation, sometimes speakers intend to align with their

recipients' understandings, attitudes, or emotions and quickly establish online alignment in conversation to promote the progress of the conversation and the implementation of an action. To achieve this interactional task, *ye* is economically applicable because *ye* expressions can contribute to establishing interpersonal connections among co-participants, highlighting the speaker's enthusiasm for the current topic, narrowing the communicative distance with the recipient, and bringing in positive feedback. By contrast, in those positions that may hinder the progress of conversation, speakers can use *ye* expressions to mildly express disalignment or inconsistent positioning, contributing to reducing the negative impact of blocking conversation and rebuilding rapport. Interestingly, due to these, someone may deliberately disguise their positions, aligning with the recipient's stance. However, this does not affect the progress of the conversation. By contrast, it shows that establishing online alignment can be used as a means to achieve a particular communicative purpose and that *ye* is one of the linguistic resources that can be deployed. Such an interactional use of *ye*, which is biased towards the speaker's intersubjectivity, no longer focuses on the similarity between states of affairs but pays more attention to the shapes of interactional relations among participants and the implementation of target action.

Conclusions

Drawing on naturally occurring data, this paper investigates the interactional functions of *ye* from the perspective of interactional linguistics. It examines how to build online alignment through the use of *ye* and reveals how *ye* functions as a pragmatic device to indicate similarity and establish online alignment.

We find that *ye* expressions can occur in both affiliative and disaffiliative interactional environments. Their uses primarily exhibit two functions: 1) as a rapport-building device to create solidarity among co-participants; and 2) as a mitigation device to alleviate (apparently) conflicting stances. Both patterns function to establish online alignment, with different features shown in practices. To be more specific, through *ye* expressions, the speakers can not only build rapport by highlighting shared characteristics, listing in-group items, or supporting a previous speaker's views or actions but can also mitigate conflicting talk by controlling explicit opposing views or alleviating implicit disagreements. We also provide a unified account within the pragmatic continuum of rapport-building and generalized similarity to answer how *ye* expressions help accomplish the social interactional achievement of online alignment in a discourse context.

Our findings show that the meanings and functions of language resources are adapted to and shaped in the social interaction in which they occur, and this interaction is constituted and modified by the meanings and functions developed and performed in turn. From our analysis, we can gain a better understanding of the meaning and functions of *ye* in Chinese spoken conversations, and it sheds new light on seemingly objective expressions in Chinese and beyond.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the Corpus of Mandarin Chinese Spoken Conversation created by the research team and institution of the authors, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under licence for the current study and so are not publicly available. The data are, however, available from the corresponding author Shuangyun Yao on reasonable request and with the permission of the investigator of the research project.

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Notes

- 1 However, we can see that the interactive usage of *ye* is more complex than *me too* and what is proposed.
- 2 The participants are from different genders, between 18–30 years old, and have different social backgrounds. Moreover, the data extracted for this study are from various speakers in different conversations. Thus, we believe that our findings can be generalized.
- 3 The “alignment” discussed in this paper is different from Stivers's (2008) explanation, here the alignment refers to an affiliation of the speaker on the second position to the previous speaker's stance, which essentially follows what is proposed by Du Bois (2007: 144). “Alignment can be defined provisionally as the act of calibrating the relationship between two stances, and by implication between two stancetakers”. Hence, we do not deliberately distinguish the use of the two terms *affiliation* and *alignment*, and only choose the more appropriate term in different contexts.
- 4 It is worth noting that the current speaker occasionally uses the pattern of [I + *ye*] to upgrade the other party's assessment, that is the first speaker gave an evaluative expression, then the second speaker uses [I + *ye*] to express a similar judgment with different language resources such as the selected words that have been upgraded compared to the previous one. It shows that although the speaker is in a subordinate position, they manifest their epistemic independence to some extent.
- 5 Lyons (1981: 237) refers to an objective interpretation as something that is held as a matter of fact or the propositional content of an expression, while a subjective interpretation is defined as expressing the locutionary agent's “own beliefs and attitudes”.
- 6 Note that *ai* (唉) is originally discussed in Yu (2022). In our opinion, *ai* (哎) is similar to *ai* (唉) in sense and they are interchangeable in the corpus so we make no distinction here.

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Author contributions

L.X.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Writing—original draft, and Writing—review & editing. S.Y.: Data curation, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, and Writing—review & editing.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Approval was obtained from the research committee of Research Center for Language and Language Education of Central China Normal University with an ethical approval letter on 1st May 2018 (Approval No. 20180501RCLLE). The study fulfilled all the ethics requirements regarding human participants. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent

The informed written consent form was obtained from all participants before the data collection.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04480-0>.

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