

A Study on the Usage of the Appellation “Tongzhi” in Contemporary Times

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Abstract

The term “tongzhi” has undergone evolving semantic and contextual transformations across historical periods. This study employs a combination of questionnaire surveys, interviews, and corpus analysis to investigate the use of “tongzhi” in both real-life oral communication and virtual online interactions. The research reveals that “tongzhi” has become a niche term in contemporary contexts, demonstrating relatively low vitality in practical speech contexts but slightly higher vitality in virtual communication environments. Furthermore, the study utilizes encoding-decoding theory and discourse framework theory to explain the original meanings behind these contextual differences.

Keywords: epithet, tongzhi, contemporary, usage

1. Introduction

The term “tongzhi” is defined in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* with two interpretations: ① Individuals who strive for common ideals or causes, specifically referring to members of the same political party; ② A customary mutual address among people.¹ With the proliferation of diverse terms since China’s reform and opening-up, the usage of “tongzhi” has significantly diminished, facing unprecedented neglect. Despite its niche status, this term has undergone semantic evolution in contemporary contexts, no longer strictly corresponding to

dictionary definitions.

Current research on the term “tongzhi” as a proper noun primarily includes: Jia Yanzhu (1997) traced the semantic evolution of “tongzhi,” ultimately highlighting its marginalization in contemporary Chinese society. Xie Zerong (1999) analyzed from a cross-cultural perspective that “tongzhi” in Chinese emphasizes deep camaraderie and inseparable bonds in revolutionary endeavors—a concept absent in Western contexts—ultimately stressing the need for cultural awareness in English teaching. Xu Hui (2012) employed literary examples to demonstrate how the term’s usage underwent three phases during China’s early years, Cultural Revolution, and post-reform era: expanding widely before becoming ceremonial, then

¹ Lexicographical Office of the Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (eds) (2019). *Modern Chinese Dictionary: 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China Collector’s Edition*. 7th edition. Beijing: The Commercial Press, p. 1314.

flourishing in mainstream media and formal meetings while fading from informal interactions. Its pragmatic function evolved from signifying equal communication to representing political identity, ultimately losing its original connotations of trust and solidarity, instead acquiring humorous and entertaining meanings.

The aforementioned studies each demonstrate distinct characteristics. Jia's research focuses on diachronic analysis, revealing that the term "tongzhi" had fallen out of favor by the 1990s. Xie's work emphasizes cultural comparison studies and highlights the importance of cultural export in international education. Xu's comprehensive examination traces the evolution of "tongzhi" as a title across three historical periods, offering analyses of its changing motivations. However, since language evolves over time, these findings fail to capture contemporary developments. Moreover, while Xu's study touches on modern contexts, it primarily analyzes textual examples with only cursory references to real-world usage, thus failing to fully reflect the current practical application of this honorific in oral communication.

Therefore, this study will build upon previous research by employing three methodologies: questionnaire surveys, interviews, and corpus analysis. The research is divided into two phases: Phase I involves data collection and analysis through questionnaires to clearly demonstrate the usage vitality of the term "tongzhi" (excluding non-mainstream connotations like "homosexuality") in real-life communication. This phase will be supplemented with observational data and interview transcripts to examine whether the term's meanings and functions have undergone contemporary transformations. Phase II conducts statistical analysis of online communication platforms (which more closely resemble authentic speech than literary works), aiming to identify distinctive usage patterns of "tongzhi" in virtual spaces and comprehensively map its specific synchronic variations across different contexts.

2. Overview and Analysis of the First Stage of Research

2.1 Investigation Methods

This research phase integrated three methodologies: covert observation,

questionnaires, and interviews. The covert observation phase was conducted from April to May 2024, serving as a preliminary analysis and data collection for subsequent studies. Observations primarily involved relatives, friends, and individuals of various age groups observable in society. To ensure balanced gender and age distribution among participants, the questionnaire survey commenced in mid-May 2024 using non-random chance sampling. Questionnaires were administered after confirming respondents' ages (primarily through physical appearance, supplemented by preliminary age assessment through casual conversation). Initial observations revealed emerging patterns of "tongzhi" usage among young adults. To comprehensively examine the synchronic usage of this term and determine whether its evolution is influenced by age or social trends, participants were divided into decade cohorts spanning from the 1960s to the 2000s, with equal representation across all age groups. Ultimately, 137 completed questionnaires were collected (65 males and 72 females), with gender distribution as follows:

Men: ≤ 24 years old: 13; 24-35 years old: 15; 36-45 years old: 7; 46-55 years old: 9; 56-65 years old: 11; > 65 years old: 10.

Women: 16 cases were under 24 years old; 20 cases were 24-35 years old; 9 cases were 36-45 years old; 10 cases were 46-55 years old; 9 cases were 56-65 years old; 8 cases were over 65 years old.

Interviews are interspersed with observations and questionnaires to collect as much data as possible and understand the psychology of the users.

In addition, there are four considerations in the design of the questionnaire:

First, modern honorifics exhibit remarkable diversity, with speakers freely adopting various forms of address that vary in usage frequency. Since frequency directly reflects a term's prevalence, the survey specifically examines the usage and frequency of the honorific "tongzhi".

Second, the use of honorifics often varies between urban and rural areas. While "tongzhi" was once a widely used social term with minimal regional differences, does this remain true in contemporary society? Given the high mobility of modern populations, linguistic influences from their place of residence may lead to changes in speech patterns. Therefore,

the questionnaire presents options based on residents' permanent locations.

Thirdly, terms of address are primarily categorized into social and familial types. As families serve as the fundamental units of society, there exists a fluid communication channel between social and familial terms. For instance, familial terms like "uncle" and "auntie" have been widely adopted in social contexts. Based on covert observations during preliminary research, the questionnaire ultimately categorized the contemporary usage of the term "tongzhi" into two domains: family and society.

2.2 Investigation Results and Analysis

2.2.1 Usage

Among the 137 returned questionnaires, only 14 (10.21%) used the term "tongzhis" in family contexts, indicating its rare usage in modern households. The 14 cases included 5 males (35.71%) and 9 females (64.28%). All users were aged 35 or younger (100%), with 85.71% being students. Non-student groups all had bachelor's degrees or higher (100%), and all had permanent urban residency (100%). Parents (including parents-in-law) were the primary recipients (92.85%), followed by civil servants (64.28%), self-employed individuals (21.42%), and teachers (14.28%).

In the social domain, only 15 instances (10.94% of total) use "tongzhis" as a term of address, indicating its limited popularity and not being the preferred choice among the public. Among these cases, 4 were from male users (26.66%) and 11 from female users (73.33%). The majority (80%) of users were under 35 years old, with some appearing in groups over 56. Students constituted the main user group (73.33%), all of whom had permanent urban residency (100%), and primarily used this term in close-knit peer interactions.

2.2.2 Conclusions

As can be seen from the above, the listed conventional factors have different effects on the use of "tongzhis", some of which are obviously effective, while others cannot form an influence. The situation is diverse and needs to be discussed separately. The following is a description:

(1) Gender of the speaker: In family contexts, the gender of the speaker shows no significant influence on whether the term "tongzhi" is used.

However, in social settings: Among those aged 35 and under, women are significantly more likely to use the term "tongzhi" than men; conversely, among those aged 56 and above, the usage pattern is reversed, with all individuals being male.

(2) Age-related factors in usage: Within family contexts, the term "tongzhis" is predominantly used by individuals aged 35 and under, while its use remains uncommon among those over 35. In social settings, age-specific patterns emerge with the term being more frequently employed by groups aged 35-59 and 56+ respectively.

(3) Cultural Literacy of Communicators: The influence of educational background on the use of the term "tongzhi" in family and social contexts interacts with age and occupation, requiring stratified analysis. Specifically: Within family settings, students and individuals under 35 years old use "tongzhi" regardless of educational level; those not in student groups but aged 35 or younger with higher education (bachelor's degree or above) also use it. In social contexts, only highly educated students under 35 adopt "tongzhi"; while those aged 56 and above—due to historical circumstances—typically have higher education levels from junior high or high school. Teachers and workers, with relatively stable and respectable occupations, are more likely to use this term in their age group.

(4) The permanent residence of the speaker: The urban group is the subject of the use of the term "tongzhi".

(5) The working type of the speaker: it interacts with age, educational level and field of use, as seen in the above section on "educational level".

(6) Identity factors of the object of address: In the family domain, the object of address is parents (including parents of spouses) and parents, that is, upward reference and peer reference; in the social domain, people aged 35 and below only use "tongzhis" for acquaintances, while people aged 56 and above do the opposite.

(7) Work Type Factors in Addressing Objects: Within the family domain, whether a speaker uses "tongzhi" largely depends on their age and educational level, as outlined in the "Educational Level" section, rather than the work type of the addressed individual. In social contexts, those aged 35 and under exclusively use "tongzhi" when addressing peers with

similar occupations, while individuals aged 56 and above extend this usage downward to younger groups.

2.3 Corpus Analysis

The aforementioned data presents limitations that inevitably raise several questions: First, do the meanings and functions of the term “tongzhi” used by speech subjects across different age groups remain consistent? Could these terms influence each other? Second, does the use of the term “tongzhi” in one context potentially affect its application in another? Addressing these issues requires analysis based on specific linguistic data.

According to the preliminary observation and cross-interview, a total of 32 use cases were obtained. Now they are sorted and merged, and one example of the same type is selected, resulting in the following 14 cases:

A. Family sphere:

(1) Lao Xu tongzhi, are you still my good friend? Give me some more money, living expenses! Don't be as stingy as my mother. (Lao Xu refers to the speaker's father, the speaker is a 19-year-old male student)

(2) Tongzhi, I'm not talking about you, but you're over fifty. You have no memory. How can people say that? (The word “tongzhi” refers to the speaker's father. The speaker is a 33-year-old male teacher)

(3) Dad, listen, listen, this is what your Yao tongzhi thinks! Tell me, who's right? (The word “tongzhi” refers to the speaker's mother. The speaker is a 17-year-old girl)

(4) I said, “My dear tongzhi, how can you not be tired of starting a business? I have taken good care of myself. Let's not criticize my big tongzhi, okay?” (The word “tongzhi” refers to the husband of the speaker. The speaker is a 32-year-old female entrepreneur with a bachelor's degree)

(5) You can't say that to Xu tongzhi either. What's wrong with her? Who made your father disobedient? (A dialogue between a husband and his wife. “Tongzhi” refers to the mother of the speaker's husband. The speaker is a 28-year-old female doctor.)

(6) Lao Huo tongzhi in our family is so clever that he doesn't even think about anything related to making money. (“Tongzhi” means the father of the speaker, who is a 33-year-old male

teacher)

B. Social domain:

(7) Well, tongzhi, what's wrong with 150 Hospital? (“Tongzhi” refers to the female cleaner. The speaker is a 56-year-old male township teacher)

(8) Tongzhis, would you like to go to the school singing contest tonight? (“Tongzhi” means the speaker's roommate. The speaker is a 20-year-old girl)

(9) Tongzhis, the revolution is not yet finished, we all need to work hard! (“Tongzhis” refers to the speaker's students, the speaker is a 28-year-old middle school teacher)

(10) Tongzhi, I couldn't have done it without you, hehe! (The word “tongzhi” refers to the speaker's boyfriend. The speaker is a female PhD candidate)

(11) I'm also impressed. Why is Du Fu tongzhi so busy these days? He can be found in every painting. (“Du Fu” refers to the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu, said by a college student)

(12) Then you can't say that either. Xiao Zhao tongzhi's acting is so good that she should be awarded! (“Xiao Zhao tongzhi” refers to actress Zhao Liying, and the speaker is a female college student)

(13) Nowadays, how crazy are the fans like Wu tongzhi? Who dares to break into a prison? (“Tongzhi” refers to the original actor Kris Wu. The speaker is a female college student)

(14) Go take a shower? Lao Meng tongzhi? Borrow the water card, okay? (“Lao Meng tongzhi” refers to the speaker's friend, and the speaker is a male college student)

In the family domain and social domain, the core meaning of the predicate “tongzhi” used to refer to people has not changed, but it is not completely equivalent to the dictionary definition, and its extension meaning and function have changed.

The term “tongzhi” has two main functions in the family domain:

First, establishing equal identities and alliance formations: For instance, in (1), grouping the speaker “I” with the listener “Dad” into the same camp; example (3) involves aligning the listener “Dad” with a third-party neutral party. In (5), the designation of the spouse's mother as “tongzhi” arises from the complex relationships involving the speaker, listener, and absentees.

This terminology not only unites the speaker and absentees but also mitigates potential conflicts between the listener and the natural familial bond formed by the absentees.

Second, the construction of equal identity and the weakening of disrespect: In (2), when the pragmatic environment is negative, the face-asserted father “tongzhi” has the role of constructing equal identity, weakening intergenerational accusations and conflicts, and emphasizing educational warnings.

In social contexts, individuals aged 56 and above predominantly use the term “tongzhis” when addressing strangers (7). This communication pattern serves three primary functions: establishing equal relationships, bridging personal boundaries, and attracting attention to initiate dialogue. For those under 35, the usage of “tongzhis” can be categorized into three distinct contexts:

First, as illustrated in the example (10) (14) (9) (8), the term “tongzhi” refers to different contexts: roommate, student, boyfriend, and friend. This reveals an uncommon detail in the data: unlike the family domain where terms are used with upward and peer references, the social domain employs downward and peer references. Downward references help reduce power gaps, bridge distances, and foster emotional resonance (9). Peer references, meanwhile, maintain general familiarity and convey warmth.

Second, as shown in the example (11), “tongzhi” refers to a historical figure and has a teasing color.

Third, as shown in the example (12) (13), especially in the example (13), “tongzhi” is used to refer to contemporary stars, and the star referred to by “tongzhi” in the example is still a dirty star, which completely contradicts the positive connotation of “tongzhi”. It can be seen that at this time, “tongzhi” also has the function of tacitly referring to the known information between the two parties without praise or criticism.

This reveals that the term “tongzhi” in this context carries dual implications when used as a familiar address. It refers to two aspects: first, the speaker’s perceived familiarity with the person being addressed; Second, the mutual familiarity between the speaker and the interlocutor. These aspects may sometimes merge into one (as seen in the face-to-face

scenario illustrated in (8) (9) (10) (14)), while at other times they remain distinct entities (as demonstrated in the narrative context in (11) (12) (13)).

So far, it can be seen that there are great differences in the meaning and pragmatic purposes of the term “tongzhi” between the two age groups. In addition, the data in the previous article show that the term “tongzhi” used by speech subjects of different ages does not have an infectious relationship.

The corpus analysis reveals distinct contextual variations in the semantic connotations, functional roles, and usage patterns of the term “tongzhi” across different social domains. When examining the spatial distribution of linguistic actors across these domains (as detailed in the original data—though not fully presented in the preceding table), we observe minimal overlap between those using this term in social interactions versus family contexts. The only shared usage occurs among students aged 15-26, including two females and one male. This evidence demonstrates that the use of “tongzhi” maintains a non-overlapping relationship between these domains, meaning the communication patterns observed in one context do not directly influence usage in the other.

However, why does the use of “tongzhi” among speakers of different age groups lack contextual contagion? Why do speakers aged 35 and under exhibit distinct meanings and functions of “tongzhi” in family versus social contexts? Why does the use of the term “tongzhi” in social settings create gender-specific differences among speakers aged 35 and under? Why is the term “tongzhi” exclusively used by speakers aged 56 and above in interactions with strangers within social circles? The code-decode theory provides a compelling explanation for these phenomena.

Fillmore (1992) observed: “The meaning of a word can only be understood when it is situated within a structured context of relevant experiences, beliefs, or habits—this contextual framework constitutes the conceptual prerequisite for comprehending lexical meaning.”¹ While Fillmore specifically addresses how to grasp lexical meaning (i.e.,

¹ Fillmore, C.J. & B. T. S. Atkins. (1992). Toward a frame-based lexicon: The semantics of RISK and its neighbors. In A. Lehrer & E. F. Kittay (eds.) *Frames, fields and contrast: New essays in semantic and lexical organization*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 75-102.

establishing that structured contextual background serves as the conceptual prerequisite for linguistic interpretation), it could be argued conversely that the structural background formed by speakers' experiences, beliefs, or habits also constitutes a prerequisite. In other words, the current evolution and uneven development of the term "tongzhi" have been shaped through deconstruction and reconstruction processes influenced by speakers' contextual backgrounds.

The word "tongzhi" has formed the inherent meaning listed in the dictionary. However, all different individuals or different stages of the same individual may be affected by the cultural background and social conditions of the times, so as to deconstruct and reconstruct them again. The group composed of individuals will form the main characteristics of the group due to the joint efforts of individuals.

Through interviews, we have identified two key communication patterns among men aged 35 and under. First, their preference for concise address terms avoids emotional overtones, favoring direct nicknames like "bro" or simple forms of self-reference. The term "tongzhi" is considered too formal and historically charged, typically reserved for specific purposes such as facilitating cooperation, where it carries both respectful and playful undertones. Second, female users of this age group prioritize the "circle" dynamics formed through dormitory and friendship networks. They perceive "tongzhi" as inherently revolutionary and communal, using it to project a bold, unambiguous sense of shared identity. This linguistic evolution reflects how both genders reinterpret the term through cultural lenses: Men selectively adopt its historical and formal connotations to emphasize their outgoing nature, while women prioritize its revolutionary and community-building aspects, redefining it as feminine and dynamic. The use of "tongzhi" exclusively in social interactions among those aged 56 and above stems from three interdependent factors: First, the cultural environment during their youth has subconsciously preserved this address in social contexts. Second, current life experiences (such as acceptance of such terms) have led to adaptive adjustments. Finally, combined with pride from cultural backgrounds and workplace contexts, along with empathetic living environments, this results in "tongzhi" being

used only in downward communication as a sign of respect. Differences in family preferences emerge between speech subjects under 35 and those aged 56+. Younger groups (under 35) increasingly desire family environments characterized by [equality, harmony, and emotional solidarity], while older individuals—particularly rural residents—typically maintain traditional hierarchical lifestyles.

The fundamental reason for the varied transformations of the term "tongzhi" across different contexts and social groups ultimately lies in the qualitative differences between linguistic subjects when selecting deconstruction or reconstruction options. Specifically, one party chooses to reconstruct meanings while the other opts to filter referential objects. As long as communicative purposes are met, cross-group influence becomes unnecessary. Therefore, the contemporary usage of the term "tongzhi" reflects natural formation within respective communities rather than mutual constraints or influences. Moreover, given current practical usage patterns, it is foreseeable that the likelihood of such transformations occurring across different domains and groups remains extremely low.

3. The Second Stage of Research Overview and Comparative Analysis

3.1 Description of the Survey Subjects and Corpus Transcription

3.1.1 Subjects of Investigation

Weibo is flooded with government announcements like "Proposed Appointment/Dismissal of tongzhi XX to XX Position" and obituaries such as "tongzhi XX died in the line of duty at age XX." The term "tongzhi" is an officially mandated honorific for government personnel, primarily serving as a polite address equivalent to its definition in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*. This designation refers specifically to members of the same political party who strive for common ideals and causes, with clearly defined pragmatic purposes and psychological motivations. Therefore, it falls outside the scope of this study.

3.1.2 Corpus Transcription

The corpus was transcribed as authentically as possible, with only missing punctuation added to ensure clarity and maintain textual integrity. For longer source texts, only sections containing

the explicit term “tongzhi” were selected. When emojis appeared in the corpus, WeChat emoticons were replaced with textual annotations using a combination of square brackets and descriptive notes.

3.2 Methods and Results of Investigation

Cyber communication represents an extension of real-world verbal interaction into the digital realm. Compared to textual data in literary works, speech patterns on online platforms closely resemble authentic spoken language, forming a vital component of contemporary oral communication. In modern society, Weibo has emerged as a widely used social platform with a massive user base and open nature, making it particularly suitable for linguistic data collection. However, Weibo’s linguistic corpus is characterized by its massive volume and rapid content generation. To investigate the specific synchronic variations of the term “tongzhi” in cyberspace, this study employs periodic quantitative statistical analysis to document its evolving patterns.

This paper uses 25 pieces of corpus containing all the survey conditions on June 10, accounting for 75.75% of the total corpus containing the keyword “tongzhis” on that day, and has a high vitality.

3.3 Comparative Analysis

3.3.1 Usage

The term “tongzhi” in Weibo has a variety of referents, which are listed in the following table:

Table 1. The referent of “tongzhis” in Weibo

The object of the term “tongzhi”	Quantity	Percentage (total 25)
Parents (below-above)	7	28
Cousinage (lower-upper)	1	4
Spouse (peer)	1	4
Children (top-bottom)	5	20
Grandson/daughter (top-bottom)	1	4
sweethearts	3	12
friend	1	4
doll	1	4
amount to	25	100

As shown in the table, on the Weibo communication platform, “tongzhi” is most commonly used for lower-level references to parents, followed by upper-level references to children, and then peer references between couples. Other reference scenarios account for a relatively small proportion and are nearly equal. The reference objects also differ from real-life communication contexts. The following analysis is conducted based on the corpus data:

(1) In Weibo, “tongzhi” is used to refer to children and grandchildren in the family, and is mostly used for young boys:

① I got up to cook, my son tongzhi goes to school at 5 o’clock, and my mother now makes his own food whenever she is at home, trying to correct it... hahaha ha ha ha ha ha...

② Hahaha, my son tongzhi said that one of the senior students in their school this year was also admitted to Peking University because he won a good ranking in the competition, hahaha!

③ The feeling of the head falling off ~ Pishrimp tongzhi went to bed at 5:30 last night, got up at 2:30... and kept pestering his mother until 4:30 ~ I’m drunk ~ (“tongzhi” refers to the child — still a baby, according to the inquiry, it’s a boy)

④ Five years into our marriage, here’s the ritual sense from Guo Zihe and his little tongzhi [love you]. Year after year, we have you and everyone is safe. With the right person around, year after year [heart] (“tongzhi” refers to his four-or five-year-old son)

⑤ The little baggy baggy tongzhi has been able to turn over very well [laughing] and is getting more and more funny [haha][hehe][cute] (“tongzhi” means speaker’s child — still a baby)

⑥ Every time I open my cigarette case tonight, I think of the note you once stuffed in my case: “Little tongzhi, smoking is not good. Thank you for leaving me a little beauty in my life.” (“Little tongzhi” refers to grandchildren)

(2) In Weibo, “tongzhi” is used to refer to the collateral elders in the family, and the speaker has a deep relationship with the person referred to:

⑦ Lao Meng tongzhi’s love for me is no less than my parents’. I have long wanted to express it. Lao Meng tongzhi is a little shy, but he can’t help it, hahaha! I love Lao Meng!... Weibo has few people, I love you, my aunt!

(3) “tongzhi” in Weibo refers to all users of the

platform and leads to topic discussion:

⑧ # Gaokao [Super Topic] # Tongzhis, what are you doing after the Gaokao? [I love you][I love you][Top][Top][sensitive][sensitive] (“Tongzhis” refers to all users of the platform)

(4) In Weibo, “tongzhi” is used to refer to animals, which contains the meaning of personification, intimacy and seriousness:

⑨ Yimao tongzhi stood ready to prevent Tule Heru from kicking the camp [wink]

(5) In Weibo, “tongzhi” is used to refer to the inorganic body, which contains a sense of rarity and importance:

⑩ My hero mother Chun Chun, whom I miss day and night, brought my baby — Super versatile Yang Meili tongzhi. (“Yang Meili tongzhi” means a doll)

In addition to the above, there are some differences between the use of the predicate “tongzhi” in the microblog communication platform and the actual spoken language, which are not reflected in the data. However, it can be explained by combining specific corpus:

⑪ After being up from 9 o'clock until nearly 1 o'clock in the morning, Doudou finally fell asleep. Xiaoming tongzhi had just come home after drinking. What can I say? It is probably that my mother can really do anything, but my father can not.

The use of “tongzhi” here appears in contexts of accusation and dissatisfaction. Unlike its typical positive connotations in everyday speech, the term lacks the semantic features of [+alliance, intimacy]. By removing the comparison with “tongzhi”, we can see that this usage serves to soften the sharpness of direct name-calling accusations while simultaneously emphasizing and employing irony.

In addition, due to the limitations of conditions, we can only analyze the discourse content. The speech subject who uses “tongzhi” in network communication is concentrated in the youth group.

3.3.2 Cause Analysis

Why does the same predicate “tongzhi” have different uses in actual oral communication and network communication? That is, the referent is expanded in the family domain but lacks and supplements in the social domain? The important reason lies in the difference of media.

Verbal behavior refers to the exchange of

information through speech within specific interpersonal contexts.¹ In real-life communication, the use of the term “tongzhi” establishes a “I speak, you listen” relationship where emotional expressions are conveyed directly through verbal sounds without intermediaries. While contemporary Chinese, influenced by Western ideologies, exhibit outgoing personalities and pursue interpersonal equality, the cultural genes of modesty and hierarchical order remain deeply rooted. This manifests in direct speech as a preference for respectful and polite titles, particularly evident in upward communication where hierarchical order is more pronounced.

In online platforms, speech acts inherently involve three parties: “I”, “you”, and “he”. The term “tongzhi” establishes a communicative framework characterized by a “I speak, you listen, he observes” dynamic. Emotional expressions now incorporate textual elements, platform-mediated channels, and interlocutors’ participation, often adopting or even exaggerating expressions that would be avoided in real-life conversations. This intensifies the authenticity, solemnity, and richness of emotional communication. The top-down use of “tongzhi” in online platforms particularly highlights this phenomenon. While these platforms appear open with seemingly unrestricted topic engagement—appearing to disregard familiarity or distance—they implicitly assume audiences will interact with speakers. This mirrors the context of “tongzhi” usage in real-life interactions among acquaintances.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the core meaning of the predicate “tongzhi” used to refer to people has not changed, but it is not completely equivalent to the dictionary definition, and its denotative meaning and function have changed.

In real-life verbal communication, the term “tongzhi” demonstrates limited vitality across different contexts due to age-related factors. Younger groups under 35 are the primary users of this term, with distinct usage patterns: In family settings, “tongzhi” refers to parents and spouses, serving to establish equal relationships, form alliances, and reduce disrespectful

¹ Hu Fanzhu. (2024). The Yuan Subject, Social Identity, and Situational Role: A Reanalysis of the Scope of Speech Subjects. *Journal of Fudan University*, (3).

connotations in educational contexts; when used in social interactions, it can denote friends, celebrities, historical figures, or students, conveying affectionate remarks, playful references, or neutral information sharing without positive or negative connotations. Groups aged 56 and above exclusively use “tongzhi” in downward interactions with strangers, primarily to attract attention and demonstrate respect. The usage patterns of younger groups under 35 remain unaffected by the habits of older groups.

On online social platforms, the term “tongzhi” demonstrates greater vitality than in real-life speech, predominantly used by young people. Within family contexts, it can be applied to parents, collateral relatives, spouses, children (grandchildren), conveying equality and intimacy, and may even carry negative connotations for emphasis or irony. When used outside family circles, it may refer to romantic partners, friends, platform discussion participants, historical figures, animals, or toys, expressing affection and respect. Influenced by media trends, its usage differs from natural speech patterns, particularly through frequent top-down address patterns within family interactions.

However, limited by the author’s level, space and time, there are still many shortcomings and unsolved problems in this paper. For example, the terms must be used by both parties, so the attitude survey of the recipient should be added; the number of survey groups should be expanded, and more data such as corpus should be added. It is expected that this paper can be supplemented and improved in the later stage.

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