Mock Politeness in Intensifier Constructions

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This paper sets out to examine whether different syntactic constructions of Mandarin intensifier *zhen* 'truly', *zhende* 'really', and *hen* 'very' would influence the degree of mock politeness the readers perceived. Despite their similar meanings (Fang, 2012; Shan, 2004), these intensifiers have different pragmatic functions. For example, they evoke different degrees of mock politeness, which is defined as a way of expressing impoliteness indirectly (Taylor, 2015). I argue that the degree differences among these intensifier constructions might be due to the different syntactic layers that these intensifiers modify by using Role and Reference Grammar (Van Valin & LaPolla, 1997).

The target data were collected from an online forum in Taiwan and were rated by Chinese native speakers to find out their mock politeness degrees, and the labels are shown in Table 1. Each sentence would receive a certain label based on the results of the vote. For example, a sentence with a "not mock" label means that almost none of the raters considered that sentence to be mock.

In addition, to test which layers the intensifiers modify, operators were inserted in different positions in the sentences to see if the whole sentence could still be grammatical (Van Valin & LaPolla, 1997). With this test, expressions with *zhen*, *zhende*, and *hen* were recategorized into four constructions according to the layers they modified. The four constructions are *hen* construction, *zhende*-core construction, *zhende*-clause construction, and *zhen* construction. Table 2 demonstrates the layers they modified and the examples.

Table 3 presents two examples with *zhen* construction from Academia Sinica balanced corpus of Modern Chinese (Huang & Chen, 1998) to demonstrate how the layer that each intensifier modified was determined by comparing the intensifiers with the operators (Van Valin & LaPolla, 1997). These examples show that it is more possible that *zhen* modifies the clause layer. If an epistemic operator *keneng* 'possible' modifying the clause could be placed after *zhen*, it means that this intensifier could not modify a layer lower than the clause.

This study indicates that *zhen* construction and *zhende*-clause construction tend to show a higher level of mock politeness than the other two. Table 1 shows the results of the label count for a construction. It seems that more raters relate mock politeness with *zhen* constructions because 32% of the sentences containing *zhen* constructions were labeled "mock." Almost 40% of the sentences containing *hen* were thought to have no mock politeness, showing that *hen* construction is less likely to be related to mock politeness.

Moreover, Examples (1) and (4) in Table 2 demonstrate that *zhen* seems to have more connection with mock politeness than *hen*. Even though the sentence would still be grammatical if *hen* replaced *zhen* in Example (4), the mocking feeling of the new sentence seemed to decrease according to my survey. Lastly, the result of a Welch's ANOVA shows that the four constructions have significant differences in terms of raters' votes ($F = 17.375$, $p<.001$), meaning that different syntactic constructions could arouse different degrees of mock politeness.

This phenomenon perhaps can be best explained by Interclausal Semantic Relations Hierarchy, describing that sentences joining at a higher syntactic layer are more likely to express the speakers' attitude (Van Valin & LaPolla, 1997). The present study shows that this hierarchy

not only works at the syntactic level but also at the phrasal level and that the layers of a sentence the intensifiers modify could be a clue to determine the degree of mock politeness.

Table 1: The proportion of mock politeness function for 4 constructions

Construction \ Label	not mock	little mock	some mock	mock
zhen	10.20%	6.12%	51.02%	32.65%
zhende-clause	17.14%	20%	37.14%	25.71%
zhende-core	41.38%	29.31%	22.41%	6.90%
hen	36.82%	21.82%	28.18%	13.18%

Table 2: Example for each construction

Construction	Layer modified	Example sentences
hen	nucleus	(1) ta dui ni **hen hao** he treat you **very good** 'He treats you well.'
zhende	core	(2) *fu zhentou* ***zhende xiao chulai*** with pillow **really laugh out** 'It is really funny (to see) a pillow (there).'
zhende	clause	(3) *dan nande jiajing* ***zhende tai hao*** *le* but man's family **really so good** PART[1] 'But the man's family (financial situation) is too good.'
zhen	clause	(4) *youqian* ***zhen hao*** *du you nüyou* rich **truly good** all have girlfriend 'It is truly good to be rich, (because) they all have girlfriends.'

Table 3: Example sentences with *zhen* construction and operators

epistemic *keneng*	(5) *(zhexie yichan)* ***zhen keneng*** *shiguwucun* (This heritage) **truly possibleEPIS** lost 'It is possible that (this heritage) could be lost.'
	(6) *Li Da-Jing huoxu* ***zhen*** *you* ***keneng*** *chengwei yige… xuezhe*[2] Li Da-Jing maybe **truly** EXIS **possibleEPIS** become one scholar It is (highly) possible that Li Da-Jing would become a scholar.

References:

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[1] Abbreviations used in the examples: PART: participles; EPIS: epistemic modality; EXIS: existential

[2] The original text is *Li Da-Jing huoxu zhen you keneng chengwei yige* ***zhishi feng fu*** **'knowledgeble' shouren jingzhong 'respectful'** *de xuezhe* ***ye buyiding ne*** **(implying there's a possibility)**