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# Exploiting language affordances in Chinese-mediated intercultural communication

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**Abstract:** In this study, we explore how language affordances are exploited in intercultural communication using the socio-cognitive approach. Based on previous discussions of language affordances, we divide the exploiting practices into three categories, namely, enabling a language affordance, constraining a language affordance, and presenting multiple language affordances. Data were collected from 16 roundtable discussions that took place over four seasons of a Chinese TV program. Each roundtable discussion involved four L1 Chinese speakers and eleven L2 Chinese speakers. The L2 speakers are multilingual, frequently speaking more than one language, including English. A quantitative analysis of the data reveals a collective pattern in the participants' exploitation of language affordances, that is, they tend to activate more core common-ground knowledge than the knowledge of emergent common ground. In addition, they are inclined to construct multicultural common ground, which they actively align themselves with. Their awareness of communicative goals and self-identification as competent multilingual speakers also influence their choice of language affordances.

**Keywords:** language affordance; multilingual; multicultural; common ground; reality show

## 1 Introduction

This study employs the socio-cognitive approach (SCA, Kecskes 2013) to analyze how language affordances provided by a speaker's speech are exploited by his/her hearers in intercultural communication (hereafter IC). Affordances are defined as the action possibilities that are provided by an environment in relation to human capabilities (Gibson 1979). They are not restricted to the action possibilities provided by a material or physical environment, but also include those provided by social, symbolic, and conceptual space created by speeches, pictures, gestures, and so forth. Language affordances provided by a linguistic expression are "available to the active

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interlocutor (or addressee) who may pick up one or more as they are relevant at the moment” (van Lier 2004: 95). However, as an affordance is a descriptive concept and not an analytical framework, it is not self-explanatory as to how speakers pick up the action possibilities provided by a speech, or, why they make use of certain language affordances when a range of language affordances are available. In this regard, the SCA provides a useful framework that analyses the key elements, i.e., a speaker’s attention and intention as well as speech context, concerned by studies of language affordances.

Previous studies have primarily examined language affordances in the discussions of second language acquisition and multilingualism (e.g., Kirner-Ludwig 2022; Kudo et al. 2019; Murray and Fujishima 2013; Qin and Ren 2021; Reid and Reid 2010). While these studies often involve IC data, their focus is predominately on how affordances are picked up for language learning purposes rather than for communicating interculturally. This study fills this research gap by investigating language affordances exploited in the intercultural communications occurring in 16 roundtable discussions collected from a Chinese TV program. It casts light on the different common-ground knowledge activated by the roundtable participants and how they corporate egocentric attention and cooperative intention in their exploitation of language affordances.

In the following section, we begin by introducing the concepts and characteristics of affordances and language affordances and then move onto a review of the SCA. Data and findings are presented in Sections 3 and 4, respectively. Section 5 discusses the findings. Lastly, we provide brief remarks on the findings and limitations of this study in Section 6.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Affordances and language affordances

The notion of affordances was introduced by the ecological psychologist Gibson (1979: 119), as “what [an environment] *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill” (italics in the original version). For example, a piece of paper affords the action possibilities of writing, painting, and folding to its users. Similarly, a speech may provide more than one affordance for its interlocutors to pick up (van Lier 2004). They are characterized by several features: (i) language affordances are subjective to human perceptions (Gibson 1979: 129). One cannot directly ‘see’, ‘hear’, or ‘touch’ a language affordance. It is only identifiable when a speaker realizes it verbally, bodily, or mentally (i.e., at the metalinguistic level). Therefore, researchers often find in interactions the language affordances that are provided by a speech; (ii)

language affordances are not neutral, but rather conditioned by both physical features and perceptions of the interlocutors, for example, their understanding of a context. As pointed out by van Lier (2004: 95), they are biased by “design from the utterer’s perspective and interpretation from the hearer’s perspective”; (iii) among the variety of language affordances provided by a speech, speakers may choose to pick up one or more language affordances, while abandoning others. Evans et al. (2017: 36) use “enabling or constraining” to describe the practices of exploiting affordances. van Lier (2004: 4) also argues that a speech bears both “an opportunity for and inhibition of” language affordances. He uses a hot stove as an example, which provides the affordance of warming a room, while inhibiting the action of touching. Language affordances are, however, not so straightforwardly observable to one’s sensory experience. They are often “half someone else’s” (Bakhtin 1981: 345, cf. van Lier 2004: 90) depending on the interlocutor’s perceptions and interpretations. As a result, the interlocutor’s attention – a key element that “unites action and perception” (van Lier 2004: 97) – plays a key role in the intentional enablement and inhibition of language affordances.

Kecskes (2013: 33) uses egocentric attention and cooperative intention to explain the process of information pick-up. He finds that individuals’ egocentric attention, i.e., their attention that is automatically paid to the information which is significantly related to their experience and existing knowledge, often leads them to neglect other action possibilities (Kecskes 2013: 34), even though s/he is aware of the multiplicity of affordances. In contrast, their cooperative intention, namely, the intention of achieving mutual understanding by incorporating the other’s perspectives (Kecskes 2017: 10), helps interlocutors to realize more language affordances than the one(s) that they had paid attention to. Considering the multi-speaker setting that is investigated in this study, we distinguish the practice of utilizing multiple language affordances from enabling and constraining, and we regard them three as the potential practices of exploiting language affordances.

Previous studies of language affordances have tended to focus on the language-learning affordances which are picked up in the context of second language learning or multilingualism, with few attending to the language affordances used for communicating interculturally. In SLA contexts, Darhower (2008) and Ahn (2016) investigated language affordances provided by language exchange programs, which involved intercultural interactions. Darhower (2008) examined how language affordances provided by linguistic feedback forms were picked up by L1 speakers and L2 learners. He found that the L1 speakers frequently provided explicit reformulations of learners’ nontarget-like speeches, while the learners did not appear to pick up the many learning affordances that were provided by the reformulations. There was often no response or merely a simple acknowledgment (e.g., “thank you”) from learners. Darhower (2008: 65) thus concluded that, instead of functional

affordances (i.e., learning the target language), “the process of relationship and community building in telecollaborations might often take precedence”.

Similarly, Ahn (2016) analyzed the changing awareness of language affordances in an English–Korean language exchange program. Her participants often began with different awareness of affordances provided by the language-exchange program and then gradually realized the affordance of learning the target language during their interactions. For example, a Korean student initially viewed the language-exchange program as an opportunity to access the local community, while her exchange partner had the clear goal of learning the Korean language. The Korean student thus served primarily as a peer tutor in the initial stage of their relationship. With her growing awareness of language-learning affordance, the student started to ask for English vocabulary to be explained and actively made use of the language-learning affordances. Accompanied by the changing awareness of language affordances, the participant also switched her identity from a peer tutor to an English learner.

In the area of multilingualism, Singleton and Aronin (2007) treated language as a resource or capital of the user. Multilinguals were thus assumed to have more capital to use and more affordances to explore than monolinguals. To examine this assumption, Singleton and Aronin (2007) drew on several case studies, in which multilinguals switched between their L1 and L2 to learn different aspects of their L3. For example, data obtained from 214 immigrants in Israel indicated that “a sizeable proportion of students wanted new words in English, their target language, to be explained in Hebrew (their L2), not in their native language” (2007: 88).

Other studies incorporated a rather broad interpretation of language affordances into their survey. They not only included the affordances provided by the language itself or linguistic expressions (e.g., verbal feedback in Darhower 2008), but also the affordances provided by language-learning avenues and technologies. For example, Qin and Ren (2021) investigated the affordances provided by projectors and computers in relation to the prior experience of EFL speakers and their perceptions of using these facilities to learn English. Murray and Fujishima (2013) examined an ‘English café’ that had been organized at their university, which provided students with an array of action possibilities, such as socializing, cultural exchanges, information sharing, community building, and language learning.

In summary, the above-reviewed empirical studies have confirmed the three features of language affordances. Their findings corroborate the notion that language affordances are subjective to interlocutors’ perceptions, for example, participants in Darhower (2008) did not recognize the language-learning affordances, whereas participants in Ahn (2016) gradually did so as they became more aware of what is available in the language exchange program. They also substantiate the fact that the language affordances provided by a speech (or broadly speaking, a speech

context) are often multiple, including both functional ones, for example, facilitating language learning, and relational ones, i.e., developing intercultural relationships (Hutchby 2001).

## 2.2 The socio-cognitive approach and language affordances

The SCA offers three key analytical elements that can be used to explain the exploitation of language affordances, namely, a speaker's egocentric attention and cooperative intention, his/her knowledge of prior contexts and the immediate context, and the speaker's common ground knowledge.

As briefly elucidated in Section 2.1, egocentric attention may lead an interlocutor to enable specific language affordances while ignoring the others. Cooperative intention helps him/her to realize the multiplicity of language affordances by incorporating the other's perspectives. It is worth noting that practices of enabling, inhibiting, and presenting multiple language affordances may appear in short sequences of discourse because egocentric attention and cooperative intention interplay in every step of communication process. Kecskes and Kirner-Ludwig (2019) used the 'odd structures' produced by EFL speakers to show how this interplay takes place at the discourse level of intercultural communication. They found that the EFL speakers often adopted an egocentric approach during the initial planning of utterances by expressing merely what was at their disposal. In sequential utterances, however, they offered self-repair or adjustments and demonstrate their cooperative intention to build common ground with their hearers (2019: 89). The change in short sequences made their organization of utterances self-contradictory or frame breaking, hence featuring the odd structures collected by Kecskes and Kirner-Ludwig (2019).

In addition, language affordances are not neutral but partly conditioned by the interlocutors' knowledge of context. Here, the concept of context follows the dual model proposed by the SCA, which brings together both an interlocutor's existing knowledge of prior contexts and his/her awareness of immediate contexts (Kecskes 2008). Language encodes prior recurrent contexts, which enable a linguistic unit to be interpreted without the need for a specific situational context. For example, honorifics are conventionally related to the context of hierarchical relationships (Chen and Brown 2022). Meaning potentials, or language affordances (van Lier 2004: 92), are created in the interactions between the prior context encoded in language and the actual situational setting. Recent empirical research supported this argument by revealing the relationships between conventional meanings and situation-specific meanings (Beaulieu et al. 2022; Chen and Lee 2021). Kecskes (2013: 129) regarded the

encounter between the prior context and the actual situational context as the “third” context, in which language affordances are to be exploited.

The exploitation of a language affordance is mediated by the mutual understanding that exists between the speaker and the hearer in regard to the action possibilities that are provided by the speaker’s speech. The SCA provides a useful framework for analyzing mutual understanding, namely, the common-ground knowledge that is shared between different interlocutors.

Following the SCA, common ground is divided into two categories: core common ground and emergent common ground. Core common ground refers to “the relatively static (diachronically changing), generalized, common knowledge and beliefs that usually belong to a certain speech community as a result of prior interactions and experience”, whereas emergent common ground refers to “the dynamic, particularized knowledge created in the course of communication and triggered by the actual situation context” (Kecskes 2013: 160). Core common ground is composed of common sense (generalized knowledge and beliefs about the world), culture sense (generalized knowledge and beliefs about culture, society, and community), and/or formal sense (generalized knowledge and beliefs about a language system). Emergent common ground (e.g. Graci 2023) relies on current sense (emergent perception of the current situation) and/or shared sense (particularized knowledge shared between specific interlocutors).

Hart and Okkali (2021), which was set to examine language socialization, found that native English teachers and non-native English teachers utilized different common ground knowledge to effectuate the affordances provided by intercultural communication and intracultural communication, separately. Native English teachers were inclined to establish a ‘third’ culture sense by comparing the learner’s L1 and L2 cultures, while non-native English teachers preferred to maintain a shared L1 culture sense with students. In addition, the former activated formal sense of English more than the latter. The latter took advantage of their bilingual knowledge of both L1 and L2. In doing so, native English teachers effectuated the affordances of negotiating meanings in intercultural communication. Non-native English teachers, on the other hand, effectuated the affordances of knowledge transfer that were provided by intracultural communication.

As shown by Hart and Okkali’s (2021) findings and the three analytical components, the SCA offers great potential for gaining an insight into language affordances. Thus, this study further incorporates it into the analysis of language-affordance practices and answers the following research questions:

- (1) How do IC participants enable a language affordance?
- (2) How do they constrain a language affordance?
- (3) How do IC participants present multiple language affordances?

## 3 Data

Data were collected from a Chinese TV program, ‘Informal Talks (*feizhengshi huitan*)’. The program began in 2015 and, by the end of 2021, a total of 174 episodes had been produced. The program defined itself as a ‘cultural talk show’, with a cast of four L1 and eleven L2 Chinese speakers. The L2 participants were from different countries, i.e., Argentina, Australia, Burma, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. For the ease of distinguishing between the participants and to anonymize their real identities, this study uses their countries as pseudonyms.

### 3.1 Program setting

Of the eleven L2 participants, ten took part in all the episodes of one season (regular participants), with one participant joining only one episode (a specially invited participant). Each season of the show involved a different group of eleven L2 participants. All the participants had an advanced level of Chinese proficiency, allowing them to engage in various discussions. The show also included several award-winners from Chinese proficiency contests, such as the popular ‘Chinese Bridge’ competition.<sup>1</sup>

Up until 2021, all the L2 participants were male. A few female participants were invited to take part as the special participant in the latest season. Despite the imbalanced gender ratio of the participants, the production team was led by female staff members. The show’s audience criticized the all-male cast for trying to please female consumers, by suggesting that the male participants were all young (aged 18–40 years), good-looking, and well-educated. The production team also called their participants a “boy idol group”.<sup>2</sup>

Each episode consisted of several components, including a topic-defined discussion, an introduction to the participants’ native cultures, and a debate on a question raised by the audience. The L2 participants played the role of discussants in the show, while the four L1 Chinese participants acted as the host, the comedian, the expert, and the clerk, respectively. Specifically, the Chinese host navigated the flow of different components in each episode by opening, closing, or continuing a topic, such as “let’s talk about the food in your country”. The host was assisted by a Chinese comedian, who often entertained the other participants, and a professor, who, as an expert, provided summaries of different discussion points. The role of clerk was

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1 For details about the Chinese Bridge contest, see <http://bridge.chinese.cn/>.

2 For the source of the group name, see the video titles at <https://space.bilibili.com/15080107>.



undertaken by the only female in the show prior to 2021. She was responsible for reading out the questions that had been raised by the audience to the other participants.

### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

A total of 16 h of recordings from four seasons of the program, namely, 2017, 2018, 2020, and 2021, were collected. The recordings included two episodes from the beginning of each season, when the participants were starting to form their relationships, and two episodes from the middle of each season, when the participants had become well acquainted. This ensured that a variety of data was collected to prevent the data analysis from being biased by temporal, spatial, or relational settings.

The program falls under the category of reality shows, which have been a popular analytical resource for pragmatics studies in recent years (e.g., Liu and Ran 2016; Yang and Ren 2020; Zhang et al. 2021). Unlike dramas or movies, data collected from reality shows are described as containing “unscripted behavior of ‘ordinary people’” (Bignell 2004: 100). Ro and Jung’s (2022) examination of intercultural reality shows suggests that it is a useful resource for the exploration of mutual understanding between IC participants. However, we are not overlooking the possibility that the show might be biased by the creator’s (i.e., producers’) ideologies and design. Also selected and edited was its presentation. As discussed by Zenner and Mieroop (2017) as a drawback, what a reality show presents to its audience may contain only those fragments that fit into the designed purpose of the show and the watching interests of the audience.

We addressed these issues in two ways. First, the entertaining purpose of this show was taken into consideration as part of our data analysis. As will show in the next section, the participants were not oblivious of this purpose during their interactions. Indeed, the observations provided an interesting insight into how IC participants manipulate their language affordances for certain communicative goals. Second, we focused our data collection on conversations in which the participants responded to each other with regard to the same topic. This focus allowed us to gather more coherent, uninterrupted, and collaboratively constructed dialogs, which, to some extent, provided more generalizable examples of IC. On the other hand, it serves the research interest in the affordances that have been picked up (i.e., realized via verbal and non-verbal responses) by the interlocutors.

In total, 159 conversations were identified by four research assistants (RAs). We excluded 22 conversations that only took place between L1 participants and included 137 conversations between L1 and L2 participants or between L2 participants. Four

research assistants were trained to code the data according to types of common-ground knowledge (Kecskes 2013) and the three practices that were adopted to exploit language affordances, namely, enabling, constraining, and presenting multiple language affordances (see Section 2). During the training, the RAs were provided with lay explanations, instead of technical terms of these practices. For example, enabling a language affordance was explained in the task of ‘identifying where someone picks up a meaning provided by what someone said’, given that van Lier (2004: 92) equals language affordances to meaning potentials. Inhibiting a language affordance was explained as ‘denying the possibilities that are proposed by what someone said’. Exploiting multiple language affordances involves ‘different extensions that one or more people had to what someone said’. The RAs were also allowed to identify more than one language-affordance practice and different common-ground knowledge in one conversation. As discussed in Section 2.2, egocentric attention and cooperative intention interplay in every step of communication, and their interplay often results in different mechanisms being deployed in a short interactional sequence (e.g., Kecskes and Kirner-Ludwig 2019). Frequencies of each type of language-affordance practice and common-ground knowledge are calculated separately, whilst their co-occurrence is discussed in qualitative analysis.

Each RA independently coded four recordings, while the researcher coded all the data from the 16 recordings. The RAs agreed with the researcher on the three types of language-affordance practices (enabling, constraining, and multi-picking) in 75.89 % of cases and on the types of common-ground knowledge in 80.85 % of cases. Any remaining discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was reached.

## 4 Findings

This section starts with a quantitative overview of the three language-affordance practices and the different types of common-ground knowledge that each practice activated (Section 4.1). We then analyze qualitatively how different types of common-ground knowledge contributed to the participants’ exploitation of language affordances in Sections 4.2–4.4.

### 4.1 Quantitative overview of language affordances and common ground

A total of 141 instances were identified with 37 enabling a language affordance, 44 constraining a language affordance, and 60 presenting multiple language affordances. This number was slightly larger than the number of conversations (137) that

**Table 1:** Frequencies and percentages of common-ground knowledge.

	Enabling		Constraining		Multi-picking	
	Fre	Per	Fre	Per	Fre	Per
Core common ground	22	59 %	26	59 %	37	62 %
Common sense	12	32 %	12	27 %	15	25 %
Culture sense	5	14 %	11	25 %	17	28 %
Formal sense	5	14 %	3	7 %	5	8 %
Emergent common ground	15	41 %	18	41 %	23	38 %
Current sense	4	11 %	7	16 %	11	18 %
Shared sense	11	30 %	11	25 %	12	20 %

were collected because four conversations included more than one language-affordance practice. Table 1 shows the frequencies of each type of common-ground knowledge that was activated by each type of language-affordance practice.

Overall, all types of common-ground knowledge were sought and employed. Across the three practices, core common-ground knowledge was consistently activated more frequently than emergent common-ground knowledge. However, one type of common-ground knowledge in each category, namely, common sense in core common ground and shared sense in emergent common ground, was sought to a considerable extent. Culture sense was sought less frequently when enabling a language affordance but was most frequently activated when presenting multiple language affordances.

The preference for common sense, shared sense, and culture sense led to an insignificant Chi-square result ( $\chi^2 = 5.4973$ ,  $p = 0.7033$ ), namely, these types of common-ground knowledge have preceded the others across the three language-affordance practices. The disproportionate distributions between different common-ground knowledge are indicators of the participants' multicultural and multilingual capabilities, their awareness of defined communicative goals, as well as their self-identification, as detailed in the following sections.

## 4.2 Enabling a language affordance

By enabling, the speaker picks up a language affordance that s/he perceives as being provided by a speech. Analyzing the IC participants' enabling practice shows that they were more inclined to enable unintended, counter-intuitive, and even counterfactual language affordances. Such practice often creates a preposterous effect, which complies with the entertaining goal of the TV program, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, helping the participants to demonstrate their multilingual competency.

As illustrated in Table 1, common sense and shared sense were sought most frequently when enabling a language affordance. Excerpt (1) demonstrates how the comedian brings to the fore the shared sense of a Disney movie, to enable a surreal language affordance. The conversation was prompted by a question regarding exciting jobs in Russia.

Excerpt (1)

- 1 Russian: ... 然后还有什么呢, 就是我们的胆子大的话, 我们的孕妇胆子也非常大。 (holding two pictures of pregnant Russian women wearing bikinis on an ice rink) 在零下这种寒冷的冬天, 她们会这样锻炼孩子的身体。  
... Then what else, saying that we are courageous, our pregnant women are also very courageous. (holding two pictures of pregnant Russian women wearing bikinis on an ice rink) In the cold winter of minus zero, they would train their babies like this.
- 2 Host: 气温大概是多少?  
What is the temperature?
- 3 Russian: 零下二十五度左右吧。  
It's about minus twenty-five degrees.
- 4 Comedian: 怀着孕还这样, 生出来的小孩, (singing) let it go (hands moving like he is controlling snow in the air), let it go, can't hold it back anymore (hh) (claps). ((theme song from the movie *Frozen*))  
Pregnant and still like this, the child born, (singing) let it go (hands moving like he is controlling snow in the air), let it go, can't hold it back anymore (hh) (claps). ((theme song from the movie *Frozen*))

The Russian participant considered motherhood to be a job. In line 1, he described how pregnant women in Russia trained their unborn babies in extremely cold weather. Despite this training being praised as “very courageous” (line 1), what his speech depicted does not afford the affordance of giving birth to Elsa, a Disney movie character who can control snow. This affordance was constrained by the physical features of the human body. However, in line 4, the comedian intentionally sought the shared sense of the movie theme song and Elsa’s body moves. He made use of the similarity between the cold weather described by the Russian participant and the snowy scene depicted by the movie, and thereby verbally enabled the language affordance of having an ‘Elsa-like’ baby. In other words, he deliberately introduced a physically ‘impossible’ affordance into what the speech affords. The idiosyncrasy of enabling such a language affordance created a preposterous effect, to which the other participants applauded and laughed (line 4).

Excerpt (2) involves a conversation between the Italian and Turkish participants. The latter activated common sense, together with culture sense and formal sense, to enable a language affordance that the former found hard to accept.

Excerpt (2)

- 1 Italian: 我住在北京的胡同。可是我为什么住在北京的胡同呢=  
I live in a local alley in Beijing. But why do I live in a local alley=
- 2 Turk: =看附近的阿姨=  
=watching aunties nearby=
- 3 Italian: =是因为, (hh), 不是, 是因为我那个时候觉得, 我这样可以更多地了解中国的文化, 更好的学中国的语言。  
=because, (hh), no, because at that time, I thought I would be able to learn more about the Chinese culture, learn the Chinese language better.

At the beginning of the conversation, the Italian participant tried to explain his reason for living in a local alley in Beijing. He initiated a self-question “why do I live in a local alley?” (line 1), which entailed several language affordances, including “understanding Chinese culture” and “learning the Chinese language”, as shown by the participant’s self-answer in line 3. In comparison to these affordances, the affordance of “watching aunties nearby” (line 2) was rather unintended. The Turkish participant deliberately enabled this language affordance based on the common sense that heterosexual males tend to be attracted to females. The word “aunties” (*ayi* in line 2) in Chinese is, however, used to address women who are the same age as one’s own mother. Many of these Beijing aunties live in local alleys, and thus were described by the Turkish participant as “aunties nearby” (line 2). The other participants apparently shared the formal sense and cultural sense of *ayi* with the Turkish participant. They laughed at the preposterous image portrayed by the Turkish participant, forcing the Italian participant to stop his self-questioning and to quickly provide a denial (“no” in line 3).

Excerpt (3) is another conversation involving the same Turkish participant. In this excerpt, he used the formal sense of both English and Chinese to challenge the factual knowledge that turkeys (animal) are native to North America (lines 1–3).

Excerpt (3)

- 1 Turk: 你知道那个火鸡从哪里来的吗?  
Do you know where turkeys come from?
- 2 American: 墨西哥, 是墨西哥, 是吗?是墨西哥。  
Mexico, it’s Mexico, isn’t it? It’s Mexico.
- 3 Turk: 什么墨西哥, 土耳其呀。  
What Mexico, Turkey.

- 4 American: 不是!  
No!
- 5 Turk: 英文的火鸡叫什么啦, 你跟我说。  
What's *huoji* in English, you tell me.
- 6 Others: 是啊, 为什么叫 turkey?  
Yeah, why is it called turkey?
- 7 Argentinian: 你本来就不是因为这个生气嘛。  
You were not mad because of this.
- 8 Turk: 我本来就没有生气啊。他们火鸡, 连火鸡都不知道是什么东西。以前土耳其的商人去美国的时候带了火鸡, 但[火鸡]  
I wasn't mad. They, turkeys, they don't even know what a turkey is. Before Turkish businessmen took turkeys to the U.S., but [turkeys]
- 9 Russian: [哎呀, 你在]说什么?这就跟老婆饼里面有老婆一样, 你说的这是一个道理。(hh)  
[Oops, what are you] talking about? It is like a wife cake having a wife in it. You are saying the same thing. (hh)

In line 5, the Turkish participant forced the other participants to think about the English translation of *huoji* (lit: turkeys) (“What’s *huoji* in English, you tell me”). He raised the pitch of his voice on the word “English”, prompting the other participants not only to translate the word, but also to consider the same spelling between animal turkeys and the country Turkey in English (“Yeah, why is it called turkey?”, line 6). By activating the formal sense of both English and Chinese, the Turkish participant enabled the affordance that turkeys were brought to America by Turkish businessmen (line 8), which was unlikely to be factually true.

Intriguingly, the Turkish participant was not the only participant playing with multilingual knowledge. The Russian participant joined the end of the conversation by puncturing the Turkish participant’s verbal trick. His argument, “It is like a wife cake having a wife in it” (line 9), activated both culture sense and formal sense of L2 Chinese. That is, a specific form of Chinese food is known as a ‘wife cake’ (i.e., culture sense), and has the same spelling ‘wife’ as wife (spouse) (i.e., formal sense).

When enabling a language affordance, the participants appear to have enjoyed the privilege of having the knowledge of multiple languages. In both Excerpts (2) and (3), the Turkish participant repeatedly demonstrated his competence in L2 Chinese and L3 English. The Russian participant and a number of the other participants also closely followed his practices. They used their multilingual knowledge to realize language affordances that would not be available in one language. Their exploitation of these language affordances thus highlighted the participants’ self-identification as competent multilingual speakers.

### 4.3 Constraining a language affordance

By constraining, the speaker intends to exclude a language affordance from what a speech affords and thereby attempts to redefine the scope of the affordances with their interlocutors. Common sense and culture sense were the most frequently sought when constraining a language affordance.

Excerpt (4) details an argument made by the Argentine participant, in which he described the behaviors that irritate the Argentine people. The participant referred to common geographic knowledge to constrain two language affordances.

Excerpt (4)

- 1 Argentinian: 还有一点就是, 你会问美国人是哪里人的时候, 他们会直接说“我是*America*的”。这就把我们气死了! 为什么呢, 因为*America*在西班牙语里面, 也是在英语里面, 或者在很多语言里面, 就是美[洲的意思]  
Another point is, when you ask U.S citizens where they are from, they would directly say “I’m from America”. This really pisses us off! Why, because America in Spanish, also in English, or in many other languages, means the [American continent].
- 2 Comedian: [美洲], 嗯=  
[American continent], yeah=
- 3 Argentinian: =他们一说这句话, 我每次就会回复“那你是美洲哪一个(leaning forwards)国家的呢?”, 然后还有一个(raising his index finger), 比如说你是哪里人, 他们说我是纽约的。我问你是哪一个国家的!  
=Every time they say this, I always reply “which country of (leaning forward) America are you from?”. Then there is another one (raising his index finger), for example, tell me where you are from, they say “I’m from New York”. I am asking you which country!

In Excerpt (4), the Argentine participant used quoted speech (“they would directly say ...”) to demonstrate two ‘affordable’ answers provided by the question “Where are you from?” to U.S. citizens. The first answer was “I’m from America” (line 1). The Argentine participant inhibited this language affordance because using the continent name (America) to represent a specific country diminishes the status of other American countries, including Argentina. He referred to the geographic common sense to express his concerns of the linguistic accuracy and rejected the provided language affordance emotionally (“This really pisses us off”, line 1). Another affordance was to use a city (New York) to highlight the fact that geographical information about the U.S. is well-known. The Argentine participant inhibited this

answer by repeating “which country” (line 3) loudly. The affordable answer was thus re-defined in terms of responding with a country name, instead of the name of a city.

Excerpt (5) presents how culture sense was sought to constrain a language affordance. It is worth noting that the culture sense sought here was not the participants’ native cultures. In this conversation, the Indian and Egyptian participants debated their understanding of Brazilian culture.

Excerpt (5)

- 1 Indian: 我觉得巴西人, 他的身材很好看, 很好看, 对吗? 所以你说我像一个巴西人的话, 说明我的body很sexy. (two hands up) (hh), 谢谢大家, 谢谢!  
I feel Brazilian people, their body looks good, very good, right? So if you say I look like a Brazilian, that means my body is sexy. (two hands up) (hh), thank you, thanks!
- 2 Egyptian: India, 我想说一下, 就我们平时说巴西人的身材很好的时候, 我们说的是女人, 不是男人。  
India, I want to say, when we say a Brazilian body looks great, what we are saying is women, not men.
- 3 Brazilian: (standing up) 男人也是啊 (lifting arms to exhibit biceps)。  
(standing up) men too (lifting arms to exhibit biceps).

The Indian participant claimed in line 1 that the expression “look like a Brazilian” afforded a compliment about his sexiness. This language affordance was, however, eliminated by the Egyptian participant when he argued that the stereotype of Brazilians being sexy applied solely to females (line 2). He started his turn by adopting a personal position, namely, “I want to say”, but switched to “we” (“我们”) in the remaining part of his speech. This pronominal change indicates that the knowledge activated by the Egyptian participant was not assumed to be individualized, but a culture sense that he assumed to be shared among “us”, even though most of the other participants were not native Brazilians. His attempts to constrain the complimenting affordance were rejected in line 3. The Brazilian participant stood up to physically support that the affordance also referred to Brazilian males (line 3). Over the three turns of this conversation, it is interesting that the different perceptions of the three participants competed in terms of whether or not a compliment about sexiness was afforded.

#### 4.4 Presenting multiple language affordances

The multi-speaker setting of the program provided the opportunity to examine both the way in which different participants competed for their own perceptions of a



language affordances and how they collaborated to actualize the same or several language affordance(s). Their practice of presenting multiple language affordances was found to be an indicator of their cooperative intention.

Culture sense was activated most frequently when presenting multiple language affordances. As Excerpt (6) shows, four L2 participants contributed their own cultural perspectives when discussing whether eating potatoes affords an enjoyment. Interestingly, their contributions did not result in a relationship breakdown, but instead aligned the participants with multicultural common ground.

#### Excerpt (6)

- 1 Brit: 因为我会觉得在英国的话, 英国我们会觉得土豆是填满肚子的, 不是你爱吃。就像在中国, 中国可能很多饭都会, 你每顿饭都有米饭的, 没有中国人会说我很爱吃米饭, 所以我觉得很奇怪, 很多俄罗斯人都很爱吃土豆吗?  
Because I feel in the U.K., we think potatoes are for filling the stomach, not something you would enjoy. Just like in China, you may have many meals, you have rice for every meal, but no Chinese person would say they enjoy eating rice. So I find it very strange, do many Russian people really enjoy eating potatoes?
- 2 Russian: 这个是真的。(hh)  
This's true. (hh)
- 3 Argentinian: 他为什么那么开心的笑?  
Why is he laughing so happily?
- 4 Russian: 我, 我如果希望的话, 每顿都可以吃到土豆是最好的。我去年, 这个真的不夸张, 就是去年的冬天的时候, 我就买了五十公斤土豆, 我一个人全都吃掉了。  
I, if I hope, it's best to eat potatoes for every meal. Last year, this is really no exaggeration, last winter, I bought 50kg potatoes and ate them all.
- 5 Host: 所以土豆几乎是等于是主食。  
So potatoes almost equal a staple food.
- 6 Russian: 对对对, 我们做法有很多, 有煮的, 然后变成土豆泥, 然后还有碳烤的, 就是烤完肉串, 然后放到碳里面, 然后那样。然后还有炸, 就是煎的, 就有很多, 但是没有那个炸薯条, 炸薯条, 对, 就是炸薯条, 俄罗斯人不怎么喜欢[吃炸薯条]。  
Yeeeah, we have many ways of cooking them, boiling, then mashing them, then grilling as well. Just grill the skewers, and put them in the charcoal, like that. Then frying, pan-frying, a lot, but we don't have fried chips, right, fried chips, Russian people don't like [eating them].

- 7 Argentinean: [就是我/]们说那个土豆沙拉, 我们叫俄罗斯沙拉。  
[That's what] we call the potato salad, we call it Russian salad.
- 8 Italian: 我们也是, 意大利也是。  
Us too. Same in Italy.
- 9 Brit: 那我觉得这是英国和俄罗斯一个共同点。虽然我自己不爱吃土豆, 但是英国菜很多有土豆=  
Then I feel this's a common point between the U.K. and Russia.  
Although I personally don't like eating potatoes, a lot of British dishes have potatoes=
- 10 Host: =你开始在找共同点了, 是吗? (hh)  
=You're starting to look for things in common, aren't you? (hh)

The British participant stated that, in his native culture, eating potatoes is just for “filling the stomach” (line 1). He also provided an analogy for his argument by considering the L2 Chinese culture, in which “you have rice for every meal, but no Chinese person would say they enjoy eating rice” (line 1). From both his L1 and L2 cultural perspectives, he questioned “do many Russian people really enjoy eating potatoes?” (line 1). This question afforded at least two action possibilities – confirming or denying. The Russian participant chose to provide an affirmative answer in line 2 and then listed the various ways of eating potatoes to indicate the enjoyment that one can experience with eating potatoes (line 6). The Argentine and Italian participants aligned with the Russia participant by referring to their own cultures in which potato salad was called “Russian salad” (lines 7–8). This indicated that the culture sense of Russian people enjoying eating potatoes is acknowledged to an extent by other countries. After hearing the various cultural perspectives, the British participant interestingly repackaged “don't like eating potatoes” as his personal preference, while arguing that eating potatoes is common to both British and Russian cultures (line 9).

The above process also demonstrates how the British participant shifts from an egocentric position to a cooperative practice. In line 1, he used an evaluative lexeme “strange” to describe the enjoyment of “eating potatoes”. This evaluation was made from the egocentric perspective of his native culture, in which “eating potatoes” was just for “filling the stomach”. The Russian participant, however, started his speech by agreeing with the British participant (“This's true” in line 2). In lines 7 and 8, the Argentine and Italian participants joined in, to broaden the common ground by promoting the enjoyment of eating “Russian salad” across cultures. After being imbued with these multicultural perspectives, the British participant shifted his egocentric position to alignment to the multicultural common ground co-constructed by the other participants. His shift from egocentrism to cooperation was recognized by the host, who laughed at him for “starting to look for things in common” (line 10).

Common sense was the second frequent choice when presenting multiple language affordances. Excerpt (7) below presents a conversation in which six participants collaborated to exploit three different language affordances provided by the same speech of the Sweden participant. The Sweden participant started the conversation by expressing a concern about his girlfriend being offered a lift (motorcycle) by a male friend.

Excerpt (7)

- 1 Swede: 我觉得他们见面聊天, 这个没什么问题, 毕竟是老同学, 是不是? 但是就是这个, 这个男孩载她, 这个问题还是有点(.)看不惯了。万一呢, 万一她坐在他的=
 

I think they meet and chat, this is not a problem, after all, they were classmates, right? But this is it, this boy is carrying her, this problem is a little (.) hard to bear. In case, in case she sits on his =
- 2 Japanese: =喝点酒=
 

=have a drink=
- 3 Swede: =背后就抱着他, 就一直抱着他, 或者这个男孩这样载着她, 他就, 可能万一心软, 心动了呢。
 

= his back and hugging him, hugging him all the time, or if the boy carried her like this, he might be soft-hearted, be attracted.
- 4 Japanese: 而且男的故意的 (braking move), 然后女生就 (bouncing) (hh)
 

And the guy intentionally (braking move), then the girl (bouncing) (hh)
- 5 Nigerian: Japan!((calling the Japanese participant's name))
- 6 Comedian: 你怕那个男生突然心动了, 因为有可能要抱他, 他就 (smiling as enjoying the physical contact), (hh), 就会心动, 突然觉得这个感觉很好。
 

You fear that the guy might be attracted, because of the possible hugging. He might (smiling as if enjoying the physical contact), (hh), then being attracted, feeling good suddenly.
- 7 Swede: 我<觉得>双方都有可能来电, 是不是?
 

I <think> both can spark some chemistry, right?
- 8 Host: 其实我跟你讲, 有时候真的就是一瞬间。因为他刚讲这个画面, 我觉得还挺有感觉的。你想啊, 男朋友在北京, 她自己一个人在台北, 然后呢, 明明去上班, 男朋友没法载她, 突然出现一个老同学=
 

In fact, let me tell you, sometimes it really is a moment, because the scene he described is quite sensible. Have a think, her boyfriend is in Beijing, she is in Taipei by herself, and then, when she goes to work, her boyfriend can't take her, and suddenly a classmate appears =

- 9 Expert: =而且还拎着大箱子, 一般下飞机又没人[帮忙]  
=And she was carrying a big suitcase, when she got off the plane no one [helps]
- 10 Host: [对吧], (singing) 那些年错过的大雨 ((the theme song of a famous Chinese love movie)), 对吧。  
[Right], (singing) the rain we missed that year ((the theme song of a famous Chinese love movie)), right.
- 11 Expert: 如果, 如果那个男孩身材还很好的话, 腰是= (hands moving along the line of his body)  
If, if that boy is in good shape, his waist is = (hands moving along the line of his body)
- 12 Comedian: = (hugging move) 一抱过去[腹肌八块]  
= (hugging move) when hugging [eight pack abs]
- 13 Expert: [那个, 那个]紧致的, 很有弹性的感觉。 (others clicking tongues)  
[that, that] tight, very elastic feeling. (others clicking tongues)
- 14 Host: 而且摩托车, 机车是一种很有速度感的东西。平时跟自己的男朋友在一起, <说话都>, 对吧, 慢吞吞的, 突然一下体验到了速度与激情 ((a movie name)).  
And a motorbike, a motor is something very speedy. Usually with her boyfriend, < talking >, right, slowly, suddenly experienced Fast and Furious ((a movie name)).
- 15 Others: Wowow! (hh)
- 16 Swede: 说得好, 说到重点了。  
Well said, you've made an important point.

In this excerpt, the Japanese participant and the comedian first picked up the affordance of physical contact (lines 4 and 6) provided by what the Swedish participant described as “sitting on his back and hugging him” (lines 1 and 3). The host and expert then added another affordance of feeling lonely (lines 8–10), resulting from loved ones being separated. Thirdly, the expert and comedian commented on the third affordance, that is, the girlfriend of the Swedish participant might be attracted to her male friend when she hugs his “eight pack abs” (lines 11–13). These three language affordances were all effectuated by referring to common sense, i.e., physical contact during motorcycling, loneliness, and sexual attraction. The last language affordance became available by activating the shared sense of the Sweden participant’s speaking habit (line 14), that is, he tended to speak at a slow pace. The host contrasted it to the “Fast and Furious” experience of motorcycling, which was echoed by the Sweden participant as “Well said, you’ve made an important point” (line 16).

The different turns of this excerpt were closely knitted together. There were several latched turns (e.g., lines 2 and 3, 8 and 9, 11 and 12), where a participant helped another participant to complete his speech. Overlapping was also frequent (lines 9 and 10, 12 and 13). In addition, the word “*erqie*” (lit: and) was used on three occasions to connect two turns performed by different participants (lines 4, 9, and 14). For example, in line 9, the expert started his turn with *erqie* to illuminate the possibility that the Swedish participant’s girlfriend was feeling lonely and helpless, thus complementing what the host had described in the previous turn. Such co-contributions well substantiated the participants’ collaborative practice and cooperative intention in exploiting multiple language affordances.

## 5 Discussion

When enabling, constraining, and presenting language affordances, the participants activated a variety of common-ground knowledge in different proportions. The first notable finding was that core common-ground knowledge was requested more frequently than emergent common-ground knowledge. Previously, it was assumed that IC interlocutors relied more on emergent common ground, because the “core common ground that they bring into interaction is limited” in comparison to intracultural communication (Kecskes 2013:154). Following this assumption, Liu and Liu (2019) and Zhang and Wu (2019) debated whether participants employing business English as a lingua franca have a lack of core common-ground knowledge to utilize. While the participants in this study had indeed activated a considerable amount of shared sense to establish emergent common ground, the findings, nevertheless, revealed that the efforts made by IC participants to establish core common ground are no less than their efforts to establish emergent common ground.

The different findings between the current study and previous studies could be a result of the different contexts and communicative goals that are investigated. Business meetings as the one investigated by Liu and Liu (2017) tend to focus on information sharing. Each party of the business meeting may possess different and specific information. They share or negotiate the information with their partners, which often requires less core common ground, such as culture sense, but more emergent common ground, which concerns their future development of commercial relations. In contrast, the ‘cultural talk show’ investigated by the current study had a designed focus on cultures and a goal of entertaining its audience. When attempting to fulfill these expectations, the participants appeared to bring about more core common ground that is (assumably) shared not only between themselves but also with the audience.

Another reason for the different findings may lie with the participants' construction of, and alignment with, multicultural and multilingual common ground in the current study. During their interactions, the participants activated both their native and other cultures, and assumed that their audience, namely, the other IC participants, shared the same multicultural knowledge. This mutual belief constituted the multicultural common ground between the IC members in the show. For example, the Indian and Egyptian participants debated whether a Brazilian-like appearance affords a compliment of sexiness to men (Excerpt 5). They used "we" to represent the shared culture sense of Brazilian sexiness. In Excerpt 6, different participants contributed different cultural knowledge, which also led to the construction of multicultural common ground, and with which the participants actively aligned.

The participants' alignment with multicultural common ground also explains why culture sense was comparatively less frequently activated when enabling a language affordance. As shown in Section 4.2, the participants tended to enable an 'unusual' language affordance so that they could create the intended preposterous effect. However, this unusualness might not be universally recognized across different cultures, that is, a language affordance which appears unusual in one culture might be common in another. Consequently, the culture sense was less frequently visited, and when enabling such a culturally unusual language affordance, the participants preferred to make a reference to the Chinese culture, in which they shared some mutual understanding of unusualness as L1 or L2 speakers (see, for example, Excerpts 2 and 3).

Formal sense activated by the participants was also multilingual. The participants not only referred to their L1 and L2, but also to their L3 (i.e., English for those participants who had a different L1). Code-switching was also frequent (see, for example, Excerpts 2, 3, 4, and 5). Multilingual knowledge provided the participants with additional resources to pick up a language affordance that would not be utilizable in one language. For example, by calling on the multilingual knowledge of Chinese and English, the Turkish participant was able to enable the language affordance that turkeys were brought to America by Turkish businessmen (Excerpt 3). This finding supports Singleton and Aronin's (2007) assumption regarding the relationship between language affordances and multilingualism, namely, the more language resources a speaker possesses, the more affordances are available to him/her.

The participants' preference for utilizing multicultural and multilingual knowledge cannot, however, be separated from the current research focus of language affordances. Language affordances are, by nature, perceived in relation to a speaker's capability (Gibson 1979; van Lier 2004). The IC participants in this study were capable of understanding multiple languages and cultures and were also

advanced L2 Chinese speakers. Consequently, their attention was automatically recruited to those language affordances that were attuned with their multilingual and multicultural capabilities. Their language competence and experience of multiple cultures also allowed them to shift from their egocentric position to cooperative practice, as well as claiming alignment with the multicultural common ground.

Moreover, the current participants' exploitation of language affordances reflected their awareness of self-identities and the entertaining goal of the program. As exemplified in Sections 4.2, the participants purposefully played with their multilingual resources to enable idiosyncratic language affordances. In doing so, they demonstrated that they were competent multilingual speakers. Claiming identities while exploiting language affordances has also been found in previous studies. Ahn (2016), for example, finds that a L2 English learner changes her identity from a helper to a learner as her awareness of language affordances increases.

On the other hand, the participants also enabled idiosyncratic language affordances to create preposterous effects. Jocular approaches were also found in their practices of constraining and presenting language affordances, as evidenced by laughter, claps, body waving, etc. In other words, the participants chose to use the language affordance that could help them to achieve the entertaining goal of this talk show program. This finding demonstrates the dynamic awareness of L2 speakers in regard to language affordances in IC contexts. With awareness of the communicative goals, they do not always pay attention to the language-learning affordances that previous studies tended to focus their investigations on (e.g., Ahn 2016; Darhower 2008; Murray and Fujishima 2013; Qin and Ren 2021). Rather, this study supports the general conclusions of these studies, that is, L2 speakers' exploitation of language affordances is both functional and social, provided the latter does not take precedence over the former.

## 6 Conclusions

Focusing on the IC, this study categorized the participants' practices of exploiting language-affordances into three types: enabling a language affordance, constraining a language affordance, and presenting multiple language affordances. It used the analytical framework provided by the SCA to examine how each practice entailed different types of common-ground knowledge of the IC participants. The findings have interestingly revealed that the participants' multilingual capabilities and multicultural experience contributed to establishing multicultural common ground when exploiting language affordances. Their exploitation of language affordances was also navigated by their awareness of the communicative goal and their self-identifications.

While this study contributed to the less examined research area of language affordances in IC, it also has several limitations that future studies are expected to address. Firstly, the participants in the current study were all highly competent multilingual speakers. A question thus remains as to how IC participants with lower L2 capabilities enable, constrain, and collaboratively present multiple language affordances. Secondly, the IC participants were found to activate more core common-ground knowledge and actively aligned with multicultural common ground. This finding may have been affected in part by the entertaining goal of the program, as discussed in Section 5. It is thus worthwhile to look at whether the pattern in constructing core common ground will still be present when the communicative goals differ. Lastly, the data from the reality show were inevitably biased by the design of creators and their editing. We thus encourage additional research into language affordances that are exploited in natural intercultural interactions.

## Transcription conventions (adapted from Ochs et al. 1996: 461–465)

[	The point at which overlapping talk starts
]	The point at which overlapping talk ends
=	Contiguous utterances after an interruption
(.)	Short pause
...	Omitted part
<u>word</u>	Stress or emphasis indicated by loudness or high pitch
<>	Slow talk
(hh)	Laughter
(word)	Bodily movement
( )	Indistinct/inaudible part
((word))	Transcriber's remark

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