

## Enregistering mask-wearing in the time of a public health crisis

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how during the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Taiwan, mask-wearing emerged as a semiotic register in health communication. Focusing on enregisterment (Agha 2007), I analyze interactional recordings of press conferences by the Taiwanese government, Chinese language lessons offered to international students, and conversations at a convenience store between an Australian student and her Taiwanese friend. The analysis reveals information production and reception on three social scales: public health policies, institutionalized health instruction, and interpersonal-care practices. On each scale, masking is enregistered as a semiotic sign associated with particular social actions, actors, and relations. This enregisterment transpires through an orchestration of verbal and non-verbal resources, conveying ideologies about invisible viruses in everyday life. While inconsistencies exist across scales, masking is consistently overlaid with civic solidarity and moral responsibility. In times of crisis, mask-wearing is an issue of public health and a process of typifying behaviors, identities, and relationships. (COVID-19, enregisterment, scale)\*

### INTRODUCTION

On January 26, 2020, Johns Hopkins University released a report capturing researchers' epidemiological modeling and forecasting of the coronavirus spread. The report predicted that in comparison to other countries, Taiwan would be especially severely affected by the pandemic (Gardner 2020), given the number of people who regularly travel across the Taiwan Strait. Throughout the year 2020, Taiwan had sidestepped the fate of having one of the highest numbers of confirmed cases in the world. In investigating what prevented Taiwan and some other countries in Asia from higher rates of infection and more rapid outbreaks in early 2020, some mass media suggested that mask-wearing might be to thank for this positive outcome (e.g. Griffiths 2020).

This article is not to praise Taiwan's containment measures as flawless. Nor is this article to promote or criticize particular public health policies, as it is beyond my expertise to assess the effectiveness of the policies. Rather, my focus is on contextualized language use. Adopting this focus helps me explain how mask-wearing

became (re)enregistered (Agha 2007) in Taiwan as the government and the public responded to the global health emergency in February and March 2020, and in doing so, to shed light on the crucial roles that language and other semiotic channels can play in coordinating pandemic responses. To understand the process of register formation as layered spatiotemporal phenomena, I adopt the notion of scale defined as “‘levels’ or ‘dimensions’... at which particular forms of normativity, patterns of language use and expectations thereof are organized’ (Blommaert 2010:36). The two types of scale discussed in this article are *spatiality* (i.e. public health policies, institutionalized health instruction, and interpersonal-care practices) and *temporality* (i.e. minutes, days, and months). More specifically, in the analysis that follows, I first show how the government communicated mask-wearing information to the public during a forty-seven-minute press conference. I then focus on how mask-wearing was valorized across five days at the institutional level by analyzing scenes from a Chinese language class offered to study-abroad students at a university in Taipei. Finally, I focus on the interpersonal-care practice of wearing, carrying, and commenting on masks by analyzing a month-long chain of intercultural encounters between an Australian study abroad student and her Taiwanese friend at a convenience store. While the scalar approach does not provide sufficient evidence to generalize about the mask-wearing practices of everyone and everywhere in Taiwan, it offers glimpses into information production, circulation, and reception across different spatiotemporal domains. Across these domains, there exist gaps in terms of imbuing masking with particular actions, actors, and relations. Yet there are also consistencies in imbuing masking with a sense of civic obligation and interdependence. The findings suggest that masking is simultaneously an issue of public health and a morally charged process of typifying behaviors, identities, and relationships. Governments need the timely and proactive enregisterment of science to coordinate public responses.

In the remainder of the article, I first situate the study within the existing research on epidemic and pandemic discourses, paying particular attention to responsibility and scale. I then introduce enregisterment as the theoretical framework and explicate the data collection and analysis procedures. Subsequently, I present the findings as they relate to three spatial domains: public health policies, institutionalized health instruction, and interpersonal-care practices. I conclude by summarizing the findings, extrapolating implications, and discussing limitations.

#### RESPONSIBILITY AND SCALE IN HEALTH - CRISIS DISCOURSE

While the scale and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are believed to be once in a century, many language-related issues that have materialized alongside the pandemic are not unfamiliar. For instance, research on epidemic and pandemic discourses has shown that the responsibility for contracting, spreading, and

preventing pathogens may be racialized (Briggs & Mantini-Briggs 2003, 2016), politicized (Chiang & Duann 2007), and foreignized (Jones 2007; Black 2013). Consider racialization. In their research on the cholera epidemic in eastern Venezuela from 1992 to 1993, Briggs & Mantini-Briggs (2003:115) revealed that the Venezuelan government had minimized the roles of nation-states, creating outbreak narratives that portrayed indigenous people as ‘poor, dirty, [and] helpless’ and thus to be blamed for the outbreak.

During a public health crisis, it is common to observe that a disease is politicized or foreignized. Chiang & Duann (2007) analyzed articles about the 2003 SARS epidemic published in different newspapers in China and Taiwan. They found that war metaphors and naming strategies were used to demonize China, underscore the incompetence of the ruling party in Taiwan, and minimize the Chinese Communist Party’s responsibility for spreading the virus to the world. These discursive practices reflect the divergent political agendas and ideologies of the newspapers. Additionally, epidemic and pandemic discourses encode local beliefs and ideologies about the foreignness of viruses. In his research on HIV/AIDS discourses, Black (2013:481) indicated that when asked about the origin of HIV/AIDS, many Americans are likely to say Africa, associating the virus with the labels of ‘primitive’ and ‘dark continent’. South Africans, however, tend to consider HIV/AIDS as a European or US disease of modernity and technology. The latter ideology is encoded in the use of the noun-class system by isiZulu speakers as they mark HIV/AIDS terms with prefixes that index foreignness. Likewise, in China, following the dominant discourses of the party-state, gay men tend to connect HIV/AIDS with the ‘promiscuity’ of foreigners or the ‘superficial’ relationships in the West (Jones 2007:98).

In all of these studies, understanding epidemics and pandemics requires comparing discourses across sources or scales. A conventional but important comparison is to understand how a disease is discursively constructed in the biomedical explanatory framework and in the realm of everyday social lives, or the gap between the healthworld and the lifeworld (Higgins 2018). Such a comparison reveals how science in official or professional discourse is locally (re)contextualized and helps explain the gaps that exist between science and society (see examples in Higgins & Norton 2010). Comparisons of different information sources have also been made by analyzing how mass media such as newspapers report on an infectious disease (e.g. Chiang & Duann 2007). Health knowledge does not flow linearly from scientists to the general public. Journalists select the information that laypeople need to know and present collected materials as medical facts. Thus, health knowledge production is a process of biomediatization, defined as ‘the co-production of medical objects and subjects through complex entanglements between epistemologies, technologies, biologies, and political economies’ (Briggs & Hallin 2016:5). Another comparison that can be made is between global discourses and local discourses. This comparison oftentimes overlaps with the healthworld-versus-lifeworld comparison. HIV/AIDS research shows that local discourses and global biomedical discourses about prevention are not usually in

consonance (Drescher 2007). However, the dissonance can be transformed if local beliefs and practices are acknowledged rather than dismissed (Drescher 2007) or if appropriate collaboration with international aid can be instituted to positively reframe the association with the foreign (Black 2013).

Beyond the global-versus-local dichotomy, a scalar approach to language use is particularly pertinent to the current study as this approach can lay bare the complexity of producing, circulating, and receiving health knowledge across social domains. Adopting a scalar approach, Jones & Norton (2010) helped uncover how the discourses on HIV/AIDS prevention in Uganda became a site of struggle at the national and international policy levels, institutional health-education level, and personal level. However, it is important to note that scales are not simply analytical categories. In perilous times, scaling is also a means by which individuals make life-or-death decisions. In their research about a mysterious epidemic that claimed the lives of thirty-six indigenous children and young adults in Venezuela, Briggs & Mantini-Briggs (2016) analyzed narratives told by a parent of one of the deceased children, Yanilka. Yanilka's parents had learned from other parents about the scales they had traversed in order to save their children from the plague: houses of vernacular healers, nursing stations, a health clinic, a regional hospital, and finally a medical center. Therefore, when Yanilka came down with the same fever as those children who eventually died, Yanilka's father decided to send Yanilka to the regional hospital rather than follow the path taken by the other parents. He hoped this scale jumping could save his child.

Engaging in the discussion about pandemic responsibility and scale, this study focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, a time in which mask-wearing, and particularly mask mandates, has sparked public cooperation and contestation worldwide. Discussions about masking center on the multiple meanings this semiotic act indexes (Jones 2021), such as the East versus the West (Ho 2021) and responsibility versus individuality (Akhtar 2020). The case of Taiwan is a noteworthy example. Universal masking was not mandated but quickly became prevalent in February and early March 2020 before the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. While the prevalence might be associated with Taiwanese air quality or its epidemic history (see ENREGISTERMENT below for further discussion), researching how masking is imbued with new values, beliefs, and attitudes across not just the spatial but also the temporal movement of discourses can help elucidate the process of community mobilization. Also important to understand is how second language users including international students access these values, beliefs, and attitudes when public health information is localized.

Thus, this study aims to examine how language is used to constitute the social indexicality (Silverstein 2003) of masking, the semiotic resources that are recruited in the process of valorizing masking, and the extent to which language acquisition and intercultural communication can foster the appreciation and appropriation of this emergent semiotic register. To account for the formation of masking as a semiotic register, I draw on Agha's (2007) theory of enregisterment.

## ENREGISTRATION

Enregistration is a social process whereby ‘diverse behavioral signs (whether linguistic, non-linguistic, or both) are functionally reanalyzed as cultural models of action, as behaviors capable of indexing stereotypic characteristics of incumbents of particular interactional roles, and of relations among them’ (Agha 2007:55). Agha proposed a dimensional approach to understanding register organization and change. In particular, he argued that registers have social lives because they change in *repertoires*, *ranges*, and *domains*. In what follows, I illustrate these three dimensions of registers by drawing on mask examples across countries.

Register repertoires vary in size (number of forms), grammatical range (number of categories), and semiotic ranges (associated linguistic and non-linguistic signs). Consider the example of masks. Since the 2020 emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, three categories of masks have been discussed in mass media (e.g. Parker-Pope, Abrams, Weingart, & Cenicola 2020): N95 masks, medical masks, and cloth masks. Each is made with different materials and in different styles. During the initial outbreak, the availability of these masks (number of forms) varied significantly. N95 masks were difficult to procure, and surgical masks were limited; however, cloth masks were relatively easy to access and make. Masks were associated with linguistic signs such that N95 masks were labeled as personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers. Masks might also co-occur with non-linguistic signs such as gloves or hand sanitizer, signaling the stance an individual took toward the virus in everyday life (see Starr, Go, & Pak (2021) for enregistering a pandemic lifestyle through crisis commodification).

Registers have a range of pragmatic meanings. They are imbued with positive or negative social values because they are associated with stereotypical identities, behaviors, and relationships. For instance, in early April 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States recommended that individuals wear cloth masks in order to avoid the transmission of the coronavirus. Yet mask use was politicized (Pew Research Center 2020) as an issue of Democrats versus Republicans (identities) and debated with regard to responsibility versus individuality (behaviors). This provoked conflict among interactants at venues such as the Rose Garden of the White House, where then-US president Donald Trump commented on a reporter’s refusal to take off their mask as an attempt to ‘be politically correct’, as well as retail and grocery stores, where confrontations between customers and staff (relationships) erupted in regard to the stores’ mask mandates. These events unfolded through language use because language is ‘involved in the performance of [emergent or stereotypic] effects and in their construal’ (Agha 2007:16).

Finally, the social lives of registers hinge on the registers’ circulation over a period of time and in a particular space where a group of individuals recognizes the values and forms of the registers or is competent in the use of the registers. In other words, registers prevail in different social domains rather than live as a universal phenomenon. The semiotic register of masking has emerged differently

across nations depending on the pandemic temporalities—that is, first or second wave—each country endured. In the United States, masking was first recommended in April 2020 and gradually became mandatory in several states and cities. In Australia, in August 2020, masking became mandatory in Victoria and recommended in New South Wales as both states strove to contain community spread; however, at that time, masking in public was not required or generally recommended in other states or territories in Australia where community spread was scarce or absent. While the United States and Australia share the enregistered signs of responsibility versus individuality, the partisan identities associated with masking in the United States are less likely to be recognized by Australians. Instead, in August 2020, masking in Australia was likely to be seen as an emergent sign that the state government had lost control of the virus, as it had in Victoria (Wootton 2020). Furthermore, within a community, there are discrepancies in register competence. Newcomers such as international students and social minorities such as migrant workers often require additional assistance or explicit instruction to acquaint themselves with the emergent or stereotypic semiosis in the local community. After all, registers constitute semiotic capital that gives access to, or advances, rights and privileges (Agha 2005). If being healthy is a fundamental human right, ensuring every individual access to health-related information is a matter of social justice.

In this study, I examine how during the initial outbreak of COVID-19, masking became enregistered in Taiwan as a semiotic sign of civic solidarity and moral responsibility. Such enregisterment has a historical dimension in Taiwan's civil society discourses. These discourses are shaped by at least two incremental forces: the collective trauma of the 2003 SARS epidemic and the collective vulnerability of Taiwan due to its international isolation (Lo 2020). In 2003, Taiwan suffered the third largest SARS outbreak in the world due to multiple failures of public health administrators and medical professionals, and civic 'incivility' as labeled by some researchers. The uncivil acts included hoarding masks, lying about SARS-related symptoms, defying self-quarantine guidelines, and mobilizing 'not-in-my-backyard' protests to undermine health officials' pandemic responses (Ku & Wang 2004; Fan & Chen 2007). The chaotic response to the SARS epidemic along with the catastrophic loss of life propelled the reform of Taiwan's public health system, repair of the medical profession and ethics, and reflective discussions about uncivil acts and solidarity revitalization (Ku & Wang 2004).

Lo & Hsieh (2020) showed that during the initial outbreak of COVID-19, Taiwanese news media outlets of varying political ideologies emphasized societal cooperation and the civic virtue of responsibility by recontextualizing the collective trauma of the SARS outbreak. In particular, Lo & Hsieh (2020:400) argued that 'reflections upon past uncivil acts among citizens motivated the civil sphere to foster a discourse of interdependence and self-limitation, redefining the boundaries between individual choices and civic virtues through the lenses of pandemic intervention'. An example of civic solidarity during the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak is the online campaign 'I am ok. You take the mask first' organized by the

public. In response to a mask shortage and panic-buying, the campaign encouraged individuals to forgo surgical masks in the rationing system so that people in need could have priority access. Such a societal phenomenon presents a contrast to the initial outbreak of the SARS epidemic when individuals hoarded PPE, including N95 masks, out of distrust and self-interest (Hsu, Chen, Wei, Yang, & Chen 2017).

Taiwan's international isolation further contributes to the enregisterment of civil alliance. Given its enduring struggle with China over the island's sovereignty, Taiwan is not a member of many international organizations, including the WHO. Lo (2020) indicated that during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwanese news media recontextualized video footage of a Chinese diplomat's comment "who cares about you?" in response to a Taiwanese journalist's question about Taiwan's lack of access to the WHO during the 2003 SARS epidemic. Coupled with Taiwan's diplomatic isolation, this recontextualization reminded the public of their collective vulnerability: 'the international community, once again, would leave them to fend for themselves should they face a serious outbreak' (Lo 2020:20).

Thus, the linking of preventative measures such as masking to solidarity and responsibility in Taiwan during the 2020 pandemic has its sociohistorical and sociopolitical roots in the collective trauma and vulnerability of the island. Much of the research about these and the broader social meanings of health crises in Taiwan has concentrated on mass-media discourse (e.g. Chiang & Duann 2007; Lo & Hsieh 2020). This study expands the focus by exploring how masking has emerged as a register that indexes civic solidarity and moral responsibility across scales: public health policies, institutional health instruction, and interpersonal-care practices. Each level represents a register domain where different social groups—that is, government officials and journalists, teachers and students, and a study abroad student and her local friend—explicitly discussed the register of masking or implicitly introduced newcomers to the register. The introduction and discussion underscore a range of pragmatic values (i.e. identities, behaviors, and relationships) associated with masking. While my analytical focus is not on types of masks, I do show in one example how the color of masks (number of categories) was imbued with pragmatic values in local interaction. All of the semiosis took place through contextualized language use in time and space. Several interactions were accompanied by the use of multimodal repertoires such as gestures and artifacts. As such, the study underscores how verbal and non-verbal resources are used to facilitate enregisterment. Throughout the article, I address the following questions.

- (i) What actions, roles, and relationships came to be associated with mask-wearing in Taiwan?
- (ii) How were these associations made salient through the use of linguistic and multimodal resources specific to the local practice?
- (iii) How did similarities and differences across the three social domains of enregistering mask-wearing (i.e. press conference, classroom instruction, and interpersonal conversation) reflect the semiotic values of solidarity and responsibility?

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data used in the study came from a video corpus of COVID-19 press conferences held by the Taiwanese government and a longitudinal database of Australian students learning Chinese at home and abroad. The Taiwanese government established the Central Epidemic Command Center to coordinate responses and resources. The center has been holding regular press conferences to update pandemic information since January 21, 2020. The conferences have been livestreamed on YouTube and broadcast by mass media. Overall, I collected 159 videos from January to June 2020, yielding 132 hours of video recordings.

The language-learning database was created from 2019 to 2020 in order to study a group of Australian students' Chinese learning processes in Australia and during study abroad in Taiwan. The students participated in the study by allowing me to video- or audio-record their classroom interactions and interviews with me in Australia. The students also made regular interactional recordings inside and outside of the language classroom in Taiwan. Additionally, I interviewed the students' families in Australia as well as friends and teachers in Taiwan whenever possible. This study relies on the recordings made in Taiwan by two students, Didi and Joan (both pseudonyms). Both students were selected because they were in Taiwan during the initial outbreak of COVID-19. Their data offer a glimpse into how institutional instruction and intercultural interaction mediate newcomers' beliefs, values, and attitudes toward masking.

Didi received a scholarship from the Taiwanese government to study Mandarin Chinese at a university in Taipei from September 2019 to February 2020. During his study abroad, with the permission from all individuals in his Chinese language class, he made regular audio recordings of the class. His study abroad data include 118 hours of interactional recordings in the classroom and nine hours of research interviews.

Joan received a scholarship from the Australian government to study abroad in Taiwan. She arrived in Taiwan in early February 2020 but returned to Australia in the middle of March because the Australian government required all scholarship awardees to return to Australia due to the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19. During her seven weeks of living in Taipei, she made friends with an eighty-year-old Taiwanese woman at a convenience store. They relished each other's company and attempted to meet at least once a week at the convenience store. The woman gave her consent to participate in this study and agreed to let Joan audio-record their exchanges. Overall, Joan recorded three hours of convenience-store interaction and four hours of research interviews.

After all data were collected, I entered them into the qualitative coding software ATLAS.ti and coded for sequences that involved talk about masking. I selected a sequence from the press conference held on February 1 in order to show the masking policies created and adopted by the Taiwanese government in response to the initial outbreak of COVID-19. In Didi's classroom recordings, I identified seven sequences about masks. Focusing on Didi's exchanges with the instructor, I narrowed down these seven sequences to three sequences that I used for further

analysis. Joan's recordings include five sequences about masks, and all were selected for the analysis in order to show the emergence of an interpersonal register over time. Therefore, the analysis covers two types of scale: spatiality (i.e. governmental, institutional, and interpersonal) and temporality (i.e. minutes in the government's press conference, days in Didi's classroom instruction, and weeks in Joan's interpersonal conversation).

Subsequent to identifying the sequences, I transcribed the sequences according to an adapted version of the discourse transcription system created by Du Bois, Schuetze-Coburn, Cumming, & Paolino (1993).<sup>1</sup> In the transcripts, which appear throughout the rest of this article, each utterance is presented in Chinese characters followed by an English translation. To enhance the readability of the translation, I changed the English syntax or inserted additional English words in brackets whenever necessary. In analyzing the transcripts, I attended to both content and Chinese language use at the phonological, lexical, syntactic, discursive, and pragmatic levels. I also attended to the ways in which non-linguistic signs such as gestures and artifacts were recruited by the interactants to imbue masks with social indexical meanings. Photos of gestures are provided in the analysis. In the transcripts, gesture photos are placed beneath each utterance that co-occurred with the gestures. The order of the photos is from left to right, as marked with black arrows, and the gesture movement is labeled with red arrows. Agha's (2007) dimensional approach to registers provided an analytical lens for understanding register formation, and I expanded the discourse analysis by referencing constructs in other disciplines—e.g. McNeill's gesture-speech interface (2005), Goffman's footing (1981), and Tannen's machine-gun questions (1981)—that can help reveal various ways of creating social indexicality in communication.

## FINDINGS

The analysis that follows shows how mask-wearing acquired social indexical values at three places—the press conference, language classroom, and convenience store—each of which exemplifies the production, circulation, and reception of health information in the governmental, institutional, and interpersonal domains. In the discussion of each domain, I first provide background information to contextualize the sequences. I then explain how various semiotic resources, including contextualized language use, were orchestrated by the participants to discursively construct solidarity and responsibility.

### *Press conference*

Between the time the first case of COVID-19 in Taiwan was confirmed and February 1, 2020, the Central Epidemic Command Center in Taiwan held sixteen press conferences. Questions from the press about purchasing and wearing masks had been raised in every conference in January (seventy sequences). In light of

the incessant concerns, on February 1, the commander of the Center introduced a slogan to help the public understand when to wear a mask: 一不、三要、一自覺 ‘one no, three needs, one self-awareness’. The ‘one no’ refers to not wearing a mask in outdoor spaces where there is good ventilation. The ‘three needs’ are three situations or types of people who need to wear masks: people with chronic illnesses when going outside; people who are unwell, particularly those with respiratory infections; and people who are visiting hospitals, accompanying patients, or visiting patients. The ‘one self-awareness’ asks individuals to be vigilant in determining whether wearing a mask is required.

While ‘one no, three needs’ overtly connects mask-wearing to a range of pragmatic values (i.e. identities, behaviors, and relationships), the construct of self-awareness is elusive because it requires an evaluation of contextual factors that are versatile. Excerpt (1) shows that the commander elaborated on this construct verbally and imagistically. Through reported speech and a strategic juxtaposition of nouns and pronouns, the commander constructed a question-and-answer frame in which journalists 大家 ‘everyone’ asked a question and officials at the Center 我們 ‘we’ responded to the question (lines 2–6). The epistemic authority of the officials was emphasized through the use of the degree adverb 很 ‘very’, the evaluative adverb 明確地 ‘clearly’, the association with 專家 ‘experts’, and the subjective epistemic claim 我們認為 ‘we think’ (lines 5–6).

As excerpt (1) shows, the commander articulated the interactant relationship in a crowded setting. While his verbal speech focused on the numerical definition of crowdedness, his gestures provided a visualization of the numerical meaning of 五十公分 ‘fifty centimeters’: the commander moved his left hand outward and inward two times, his palm stayed inward, and his fingers were extended (line 7). He then stressed spatial proximity and contact frequency 時時 ‘constantly’ by moving his hand left to right and right to left, forming an arc around his body (line 8). These gestures created three-dimensional images of physical proximity. Finally, he repeated the gestures of left-right and inward-outward as he overlaid spatial proximity with the temporal frame of fifteen-minute contacts (line 9). The recurring gestural features, or ‘catchments’ to borrow McNeill’s term (2005:117), offered a ‘window into discourse cohesion’ through which the audience was meant to understand that the kind of contact he referred to in the speech was built on his previous utterances. After spatializing the interactant relationship, the commander exhorted the public to take responsibility for avoiding crowded venues. This responsibility was underscored in the epistemic marker 其實 ‘actually’ and the obligatory modal verbs 應該 ‘should’ and 最好 ‘had better’ (lines 11–12), through which the epistemic authority was amplified by the commander in a relatively modest and polite manner (Wang, Tsai, & Yang 2010). Thus, with 可以 ‘can’, wearing a mask was identified as a permitted measure if physical distance could not be maintained (lines 13–14).

(1) February 1

1 Commander: ... (1.2) 那至於說一自覺就是自己來決定啦

'then as for a (sense of) self-awareness, it is to be determined by oneself'

2 ..大家常常問我們就是說

'so everyone often asks us'

3 ... (7) 那擁擠

'crowdedness'

4 ... (8) 通風不良的定義到底是怎麼樣

'(and) poor ventilation' (then). what exactly are (their) definitions?'

5 ... (8) 齣那我們也可以很明確地經過專家的一個  
討論

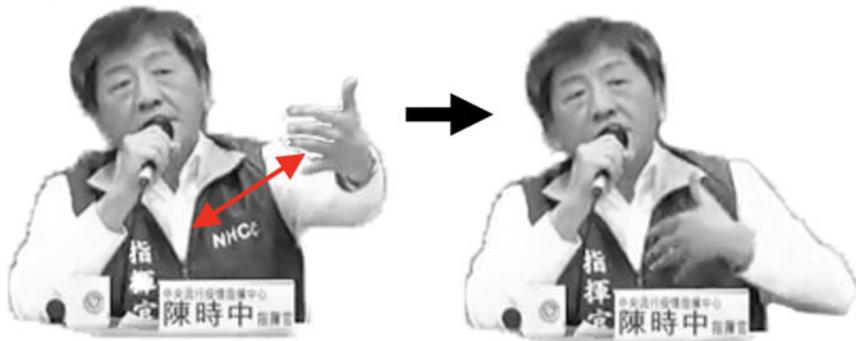
'okay, then, we can also very clearly- after a discussion among experts'

6 ... (1.0) 我們認為

'we think'

7 ... 在五十公分之內

'within fifty centimeters'



8 ... (1.0) 有時時都維持在五十公分內

'constantly keeping within fifty centimeters'



9

...那有一個十五分鐘的這樣的長距離的接觸

'then there is fifteen minutes of this kind of long contact at this distance'



10

... (1.0) 那這樣的情況下

'then, in this situation'

11

..其實應該要避免

'actually, (you) should avoid (the situation)'

12

..勸其實最好也避免

'okay, actually, (you) had better avoid (the situation) all together'

13

..但無法避免的時候

'but when (you) cannot avoid (the situation)'

14

... <P那可以戴口罩P>

'then (you) can wear a mask'

The commander continued to spatialize other interactant relations in excerpt (2).

(2) February 1

1	Commander: ...(.8) 那至於在五十公分 到一公尺	'then as for (the distance) between fifty centimeters and one meter'
2	...(.7) 那你可以..決定	'then you can decide'
3	..倘若假如比較擔憂	'okay, if- if (you are) very worried'
4	..覺得有那種可能性	'(you) feel there is that kind of possibility'
5	...(.7)<DIM 夠那可能你 戴口罩 DIM>	'okay, then you may wear a mask'
6	...那超過一公尺	'then (if the distance is) over a meter'
7	...<P 其實是沒有必要	'actually, there is no need (to wear a mask)'
8	...(.9) 夠超過一公尺其實 是沒有必要 P>	'okay, (if the distance is) over a meter, actually there is no need (to wear a mask)'
9	..所以擁擠是這樣定義但 我們希望說避免到擁擠 的區域	'so this is how crowdedness is defined, but we hope (people) avoid going to crowded areas'
10	那避免跟人跟人之間近距 離的接觸的時間太長	'and avoid long-time contact when people are in close proximity'
11	...(.7) 那根據這樣的一個 判定的標準	'then based on this kind of criteria for making decisions'
12	其實我們都可以還正常地 生活	'actually we all can still live normally'
13	..可以過我們的日子	'can live our (normal) lives'

In excerpt (2), when talking about the distance between fifty centimeters and one meter, the commander deployed the conditional construction (line 3) and modal verbs that mark permission, 可以 'can' (line 2), and possibility, 可能 'may' (line 5). The deployment rendered mask-wearing an optional practice, not an absolute moral responsibility. While the commander did not use gestures to embody interactant relationships, his use of the indefinite second-person pronoun 你 'you' (lines 2, 5) engaged the audience in this hypothetical situation. Subsequently, he repeated the argument that wearing a mask was not necessary when the proximity between two interactants was greater than one meter (lines 6–8). Finally, he reiterated the definition by urging the public to avoid crowded spaces and close contact with other individuals over a long period of time (lines 9–10). In his reiteration, he reverted the footing (Goffman 1981) to the prior question-and-answer frame via the institutional plural 我們 'we' (line 9). Despite the chasm between the institution and the public, toward the end of this sequence, the commander unified all parties through the inclusive pronouns 我們 'we' and 我們的 'our' coupled with the universal quantifier 都 'all'

(lines 12–13). In doing so, the commander changed his footing from that of the author of the statement to that of the recipient who could also benefit from mask-wearing practice and awareness. The pronouns and quantifier thus create a sense of moral unity in the drive to sustain normalcy.

Excerpts (1) and (2) demonstrate that the commander strove to enregister mask-wearing as a sign of the civic virtue of responsibility. The enregisterment was achieved through a complex but delicate interweaving of verbal and non-verbal resources, including footings, pronouns, modal verbs, embodied gestures, and epistemic markers. Solidarity was discursively constructed by first distancing the general public from the officials to convey epistemic authority and then uniting both parties under the collective goal of living a normal life.

### *Language classroom*

On February 3, two days after the mask slogan was introduced, language classes at Didi's university resumed following the Chinese New Year break. When Didi and his classmates entered the building where they had had classes before the break, there was clear evidence that the virus had spread abroad and become a greater concern in Taiwan. At all entrances of the building, the school had placed hand sanitizer and posters about personal hygiene and travel history. Inside the classroom, Didi's teacher was introducing vocabulary about the pandemic and engaging the students in a discussion of how the pandemic had changed their daily lives. His classroom experience underscores that schools are 'sites of overt metadiscursive activity' (Agha 2003:261) where instruction replicates awareness of pandemic registers.

As excerpt (3) shows, when the teacher introduced the pandemic vocabulary, she homogenized mask-wearing as a universal practice by recruiting the pronouns 大家 'everybody' and 我們 'we' along with the modal verb 應該 'should' that underscores obligation (line 1). The homogenization occurred in the discursive pattern of initiation-response-feedback (IRF) that represents classroom talk. Specifically, the teacher first initiated a display question (line 1) and then continued the initiation by elongating 戴 'wear' (line 2) to solicit students' responses. Didi swiftly responded with the answer (line 3), which the teacher repeated to confirm her understanding (line 4). After issuing the evaluative token 對 'right', the teacher repeated the complete expression (line 5). The repetition and evaluation were means of providing feedback on Didi's answer.

#### (3) February 3

- |   |          |                                  |   |
|---|----------|----------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Teacher: | ...大家=..都說=我們應該要什麼               | 'everybody .. all says we should do what' |
| 2 |          | ..戴= (THROAT)                    | 'wear'                                    |
| 3 | Didi:    | 口罩                               | 'masks'                                   |
| 4 | Teacher: | 口罩                               | 'masks'                                   |
| 5 |          | ..對齣戴口罩 ((writing on the board)) | 'right, mh, wear masks'                   |

After introducing the vocabulary, the teacher engaged students in instructive conversations. In the conversations, the students were encouraged to use the words that they had learned to share their thoughts and feelings about the pandemic. Didi shared with the class that his mother was very worried and had been talking about the pandemic, which exasperated him (not shown in the excerpts). Upon hearing this, the teacher surmised that Didi had often heard the vocabulary (see excerpt (4)).

## (4) February 3

- |    |          |                                |   |
|----|----------|--------------------------------|---|
| 1  | Teacher: | 所以-所以這些生詞你都=                   | 'so- so you (often hear) all of these words'                                  |
| 2  |          | 常常聽到                           | 'often hear'  |
| 3  | Didi:    | ..mh=                          |   |
| 4  |          | ...<L mh yeah L>               |   |
| 5  | Teacher: | 常常聽到                           | 'often hear'  |
| 6  | Didi:    | <P<HI oh= Arian 發燒了<br>嗎 HI>P> | 'oh, did Arian have a fever?'   |
| 7  | Teacher: | @ @ @ @                        |   |
| 8  |          | 發燒了嗎有沒有發燒有沒<br>有洗手=            | 'did (he) have a fever? did (he) have a fever?<br>did (he) wash (his) hands?' |
| 9  |          | [然後]戴口罩什麼的喔                    | 'and wear a mask (or) something like that'                                    |
| 10 | Didi:    | [<P mh= P>]                    |   |

Excerpt (4) shows that Didi replied to the teacher's query by adopting a talking voice that imitated the way his mother had asked if Arian—one of Didi's classmates who had come back to Taiwan after a trip to China—was sick (line 6). The talking voice, with the interjection 'oh', its higher pitch, and its soft volume, triggered the teacher's laughter (line 7). Echoing Didi's talking voice, the teacher created a series of machine-gun questions (Tannen 1981). These questions typified inquisitive caring and embodied the 'characterological images' (Agha 2007:104) of a mother. Wearing a mask, in Didi's experience, was valorized as a semiotic register indexing familial relationships because he had implemented this practice to ease his mother's concern.

Four days later, in the same class, the teacher rekindled the discussion about masks and Didi's family. Didi was asked to read aloud a sentence on a PowerPoint slide (see excerpt (5)).

## (5) February 7

1	Teacher:	再來=Didi	‘next, Didi’
2		張先生	‘Mr. Zhang’
3	Didi:	張先生為了=	‘Mr. Zhang, in order to’
4		...除=	‘ele-’
5	Teacher:	<MRC 消除 MRC>	‘eliminate’
6	Didi:	<MRC [消除 MRC]>	‘eliminate’
7		...(1.6) 太太的擔心決定	‘(his) wife’s worry, (Mr. Zhang) decides to’
8	Teacher:	...(1.1)<MRC [每天] MRC>	‘every day’
9	Didi:	<MRC [每]天= MRC>	‘every day’
10	Teacher:	...(1.2)<MRC 戴 MRC>	‘wear’
11	Didi:	戴口罩=上b-	‘wear a mask to wor-’
12	XXX:	...@@@	
13	Didi:	[<@ 上班 @>]	‘work’
14	Teacher & other students:	[<@ 上班 @>]	‘work’
15	Teacher:	<@ 對 @>@是為了消除媽媽 的擔心要每天戴口罩上課	‘right, to eliminate (his) mom’s worry, (Didi) has to wear a mask to class every day’

Excerpt (5) shows that wearing a mask to work was enregistered as an action of 消除 ‘eliminating’ worries in the family. Given the intertextual tie between the fictional character and Didi’s prior sharing in the class, the teacher and students began to laugh (lines 12–14). By reading aloud the sentence, Didi inhabited two different footings (Goffman 1981): an animator who uttered the sentence composed by the teacher and a principal whose experience of family relationships and mask-wearing overlapped with the character’s. Didi’s role as a principal was subsequently made explicit through the teacher’s revoicing of the sentence (line 15). The revoicing retained the syntactic structure of the original sentence but included several modified lexemes: 太太 ‘wife’ → 媽媽 ‘mom’; 決定 ‘decide’ → 要 ‘has to’; and 上班 ‘to work’ → 上課 ‘to class’. Particularly important is the replacement of the volitional verb 決定 ‘decide’ with the modal verb 要 ‘has to’, the latter of which carries a sense of deontic obligation, thereby suggesting mask-wearing as familial responsibility.

These scenes from Didi’s Chinese language classroom show that wearing a mask was first enregistered as universal practice that conveyed a sense of collective unity; ambivalently, it was also enregistered as a personalized practice grounded in familial responsibility. Language use at different levels—pronouns, modal verbs, revoicing, talking voice—worked in tandem with the material artifacts of a

vocabulary list and PowerPoint slides to metasemiotically annotate the sign of face coverings.

### *Convenience store*

On the morning of February 4, Joan was eating her breakfast at a convenience store in Taipei. It was her second day in Taiwan and three days after government officials' introduction of the mask slogan. Sitting next to Joan was an eighty-year-old Taiwanese woman, Yao Mama 'mother Yao'. Yao Mama lived close by and frequented the store to socialize with neighbors and acquaintances. At the store now, Yao Mama could not open the package containing her breakfast. Joan offered to help. A conversation ensued. An intimate friendship brewed. Over the span of the next six weeks, they often met at the convenience store until the pandemic forced Joan to return to Australia.

Their exchanges at the store during those weeks demonstrate mask enregisterment as a form of interpersonal achievement over time. Reflexive activities such as asking about and commenting on masks are caring practices. These practices acquire the indexical values of intimacy and solidarity in the time of a pandemic. Joan acquired 'a reflexive grasp' (Agha 2007:8) of these norms through Yao Mama's use of different interrogative formats that intermingled carrying and wearing masks with the behavior of going outside.

Excerpt (6) is a sequence from a recording created at the convenience store after Joan and Yao Mama first met. As this excerpt indicates, Yao Mama drew on the particle question 嗎 coupled with the auxiliary verb 有 'have' in Taiwanese Mandarin to inquire if Joan had a mask (line 1). Joan confirmed that she did by using the same verb (line 2) and issuing a confirmation token in English (line 4). She also showed Yao Mama the mask (lines 5–6) she had. Joan's action and response suggest that she took the question literally without knowing the interpersonal meaning of caring this question entailed or realizing that the question was a way of socializing her into the routine practice of carrying a mask when leaving the house.

#### (6) February 10

1	Yao Mama:	你有帶口罩來嗎?	'did you bring masks?'
2	Joan:	...[有]有	'(I) did did'
3	Yao Mama:	[有?]	'(you) did?'
4	Joan:	...<P yeah P>	
5		...(1.7)((unzipping her bag))	
6		...(0.9) 看	'look'

In their subsequent gatherings on different dates, Yao Mama persisted in asking Joan if she had a mask with her, especially when the number of confirmed cases surged worldwide in March. The recording made at the beginning of March is a case in point. Excerpt (7) shows that Yao Mama deployed the disjunctive question 有沒有 ‘have or not have’ to ask if Joan carried a mask (line 1). This time Joan replied with the affirmative token ‘uhhn’ and the auxiliary verb 有 ‘have’ without showing her mask to Yao Mama (line 3). Yao Mama did not request that Joan show her mask, suggesting that the interrogative was more a speech act of reassuring than controlling.

## (7) March 3

- |   |           |                                    |                        |
|---|-----------|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Yao Mama: | 你有沒有帶口罩                            | ‘did you bring masks?’ |
| 2 |           | ..有嗎                               | ‘did (you)?’           |
| 3 | Joan:     | uhhn<LO 有 LO>((food inside mouth)) | ‘uhhn, (I) did’        |

Fifty-six minutes after the query, when they were exiting the store (see excerpt (8)), Yao Mama requested that Joan wear a mask through a directive issued in an indicative form coupled with a modal verb of obligation (line 1). Joan verbalized the metasemiotics of wearing a mask (lines 2–5). In her verbalization, masking is a semiotic register for contact with the unknown in the outside world whereas not wearing a mask is a sign of contact with the familiar.

## (8) Fifty-six minutes after the exchange in excerpt (7)

- |   |           |                        |  |
|---|-----------|------------------------|--|
| 1 | Yao Mama: | 你要戴口罩                  | ‘you have to wear a mask’                  |
| 2 | Joan:     | ...我這裡有                | ‘I have (it) here’                         |
| 3 |           | 但是=                    | ‘but’                                      |
| 4 |           | ..怎麼說                  | ‘how to say-’                              |
| 5 |           | ...(3.3) 出去的時我=-我-我戴口- | ‘when going outside, I- I- I- wear a mas-’ |

On March 12, Yao Mama again initiated their encounter by asking if Joan had brought masks with her (see excerpt (9)). Her use of an indicative suggests that the questioning was a ‘known-in-common’ activity (Goodwin & Cekaite 2018:52) between them (line 1). Indeed, Joan showed her awareness of this routinized speech act through an affirmative response (line 2), an upgrade of the semiotic register as an everyday practice (line 4), and finally, an assessment that aligned and affiliated Joan with Yao Mama (line 5).

## (9) March 12

1	Yao Mama:	你有帶口罩 ((eating))	'you brought masks'
2	Joan:	..我有	'I did'
3	Yao Mama:	<LO<P mh P>LO>	
4	Joan:	每天有	'I do (it) every day'
5		...(8.1) 很重要啊?	'(it is) very important, right?'

The final sequence in their interactions about enregistered masks was recorded four days before Joan returned to Australia. In excerpt (10), Yao Mama routinized the importance of carrying a mask through a particle question (line 1) identical to that used in excerpt (6). However, unlike in excerpt (6) where Joan took the question literally as an information-seeking question, here Joan was able to reciprocate the question (line 5). In doing so, Joan demonstrated that she had been socialized to this relational practice. The reciprocation provoked reflexive talk about the pragmatic value of the register repertoire. That is, Yao Mama did not simply reply with a confirmation token (line 6); she also provided translanguaging to incite Joan's curiosity (line 8), and she positively valorized the register repertoire of mask color (line 12). The joint assessment created alignments, as shown in Joan and Yao Mama's repetition (lines 9–10), latching (line 10), and overlapping (lines 11–12).

## (10) March 14

1	Yao Mama:	你有帶口罩來嗎	'did you bring masks?'
2	Joan:	我有	'I did'
3		...ah	
4		...(1.2) 那@@@	'and'
5		...(5.1) 你呢?	'how about you?'
6	Yao Mama:	...有	'(I) did'
7	Joan:	啊好好	'ah, okay okay'
8	Yao Mama:	...(6.1) <LO<P you want this P>LO>	
9		...(2.1) 紅的	'(it is) red'
10	Joan:	紅的	'(it is) red'
11		...(9) 很[漂亮啊=?]	'very pretty, right?'
12	Yao Mama:	[這是]..比較好	'this (color) .. is better'

Joan's cumulative experience at the convenience store shows that wearing a mask is not simply about societal control but also about interpersonal caring. In Joan and Yao Mama's conversations, the use of indicatives, directives, auxiliary verbs, and particle and disjunctive questions imbued mask repertoires with moral import and interpersonal sentiments. Unlike the discourses of public health policies

and institutional instruction where metasemiotic typification was descriptively explicit, the semiotic encounters here show how an individual's semiotic activities became perceivable and inferable to another person over time and thus connected the parties. In this chain of semiotic encounters, civic obligations were foregrounded as intersubjective phenomena through modal verbs and repeated questioning; solidarity was interdiscursively constructed as talking about masks became the habitus of enacting intimate bonds.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored how mask-wearing emerged as a semiotic register in Taiwan during the initial outbreak of COVID-19. The analysis showed how speech organized mask repertoires into cultural models of civic solidarity and moral responsibility across scales of temporality (i.e. minutes, days, and weeks) and spatiality (i.e. governmental, institutional, and interpersonal). In the governmental domain, health officials enregistered mask-wearing as a sign of interactant relations within fifty centimeters and collective efforts to maintain normalcy. At the language school, the instructor initially normalized mask-wearing as a universal practice; four days later, however, the instructor portrayed personalized mask-wearing as an obligation associated with easing parental anxiety. In the interpersonal sphere, the practice of carrying, wearing, and commenting on face masks transformed personal behaviors into interpersonal caring over the span of six weeks.

Across these spatiotemporal scales, 'communicative signs are used to typify other perceivable signs' (Agha 2007:16). Masks were enregistered through the discursive practice of spatializing ('within fifty centimeters'), homogenizing ('everybody... all says we should do what'), personalizing ('Didi has to wear a mask to class every day'), and valorizing ('this color... is better') mask repertoires. These discursive practices sought to foster the appropriation and appreciation of a new semiotic register even as they promoted different social indexical values, including living a normal life, easing a mother's concern, and creating intimate bonds. At the heart of these discursive practices are the values of socioculturally configured solidarity and responsibility. To mask up is not a choice of sociocentric responsibility over egocentric liberty. Instead, it is a choice made by 'a self-regulating moral agent' (Ochs & Izquierdo 2009:393) who attends to situated relations and is attuned to the interests and well-being of other individuals within their social groups.

Previous research shows that epidemic and pandemic discourses oftentimes involve 'otherizing' responsibility (e.g. Briggs & Mantini-Briggs 2003; Chiang & Duann 2007; Jones 2007), thereby underscoring the causal aspect of responsibility (i.e. X characteristic leads to Y epidemic). This study shows that beyond the universal quality of causality, responsibility is also relational and intersubjective as individuals come to understand that their behaviors have meanings to others. The identities of rational citizen, filial son, anxious mother, and caring friend are all

relationally defined and intersubjectively enacted. Intercultural communication inside and outside the language classroom is a vehicle for nurturing awareness of these kinds of moral convictions and promoting responsiveness from transnational individuals who otherwise might be neglected in the nation-state discourse. On this basis, the discourse surrounding mask-wearing is hardly a pure public health issue linearly transmitted from scientists to the public (Briggs & Hallin 2016). Rather, it is a collective endeavor of enregistering actions, identities, and social relations in everyday life. In this endeavor, speech exhorts individuals to assume responsibility by not just emphasizing the authority, transparency, and rationality of science but also acknowledging the anticipation, ambivalence, and idiosyncrasies of health values in social lives. As such, official or professional discourse is localized differently across spatiotemporal scales (Higgins & Norton 2010). To minimize gaps when communicating health policies, spokespersons can entextualize the moral values and sentiments that regulate actions, mold identities, and underpin relationships in the community. In so doing, enregisterment becomes focused, proactive, and strategic in mobilizing community engagement. If more shared values in the community are explicitly identified and resemiotized into the proposed behavior, interpersonal care is more likely to be extended from ingroup members to outgroup strangers.

This study presented one way that sociolinguistics research can engage in a global health crisis by explaining the process of register formation and its relationship with health information production, circulation, and reception that involve not just individuals who use Taiwanese Mandarin as their first language but also those who use it as their second language. Public health crises are not simply biomedical events; they are also communicative, intercultural, and instructional events. Problems emerge because to engage in these events is to cultivate new semiotic and linguistic repertoires. Sociolinguistics researchers have a responsibility to explain how individuals learn to engage in the emergence of social semiosis and why some resist the engagement. In this way, researchers can better advise health officials on how language and semiotic displays can be recruited to coordinate pandemic responses. Future research might explore this emerging area of inquiry by asking how intercultural communication under various social conditions tackles conspiracy theories that involve language, (geo)political power, and health information or to what extent public health communication can potentiate trust through genres such as pandemic narratives at government press conferences.

The findings of this study have implications for communicating public health policies. First, when introducing new policies to regulate individuals' behaviors, government officials can make explicit how the policies are related to social identities and relationships valued in the local community. Making the connection explicit helps the public understand that the policies are implemented to protect, not infringe upon, individual values and rights. Meanwhile, in addition to emphasizing various dos and don'ts, instructors can use materials that underscore the empowering aspects of the new policies in different social scenarios. These materials can be

pedagogically tailored for recontextualization in the classroom, particularly if the teachers are community influencers who can leverage the trust of the community to forge a connection between public health policies and interpersonal-care practices. The materials also need to be understood and trusted by the teachers so as to minimize inconsistencies. In the wake of a pandemic, language teachers play an even more crucial role than usual because they engage students in overt metadiscursive activity at school. Their expertise in words, grammar, stances, registers, and genres helps students, especially students who might not be in the social domain of the semiotic style at issue, understand community engagement.

While Joan's semiotic encounters with Yao Mama might be anecdotal and thus cannot be generalized to everyone and everywhere, the rewarding aspects of her interpersonal experience contribute to discussions about mask compliance. Since the start of the pandemic, we have seen distressing news about essential workers contracting the virus because others have failed to practice social distancing and face-covering (Levenson 2020). We have also learned from health officials and researchers about the importance of masking for preventing the emergence of new virus variants (Rabin & Stolberg 2021). Joan's story provides a vivid, concrete, and real-life example that underscores a positive view of masking. Masking in the time of a pandemic does not need to be seen as constraining individual freedom but can instead be recognized as communicating a sense of trust, caring, or even intimacy.

Finally, I return to the epidemiological modeling of Taiwan released by Johns Hopkins University on January 26, 2020. Model simulations are dynamic, not static or deterministic. They change according to the data inputs, and their predictions are often used to regulate behaviors and justify public health policies. Taiwan's success in 2020 attests to this very dynamic nature of modeling. As I am revising this manuscript in May 2021, Taiwan is facing a sudden surge in cases, the first major outbreak onshore, after maintaining its COVID-free normalcy for more than a year. Having adopted an alternative containment strategy in the initial fight against COVID, the island is now scrambling to re-enregister mask-wearing as a sign of solidarity and responsibility, with the hope that such an effort can once again save society from anomie.

#### APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

The following conventions were adopted in transcribing the interactional data. For detailed descriptions of the features, see Du Bois et al. (1993).

-	truncated word
?	appeal
[     ]	overlap
=	lengthening
..	short pause

...(N)	long pause
(THROAT)	clearing throat
(( ))	researcher's comment
<DIM DIM>	gradually softer
<L L>	slow speech
<MRC MRC>	each word distinct and emphasized
<HI HI>	higher pitch
<P P>	soft
<LO LO>	lower pitch
<@ @>	laughing quality
@	laughter

## NOTE

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<sup>1</sup>Transcription conventions are given in the appendix.

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## ENREGISTERING MASK-WEARING

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