Constraints on the use of the plural morpheme *men* in spoken Mandarin

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Abstract: This study returns to the oft-debated question of grammatical number and plurality in Modern Standard Chinese and attempts to shed new light on the constraints operating on the plural marker *men* by analysing its use in a corpus of half a million characters of spoken data. Data from the present research indicate that the plural morpheme *men* is less sensitive than previously assumed to a number of constraints outlined in the standard literature, including structural constraints involving NPs with quantifiers and explicit number expressions. At the same time, it is also more sensitive to a range of other factors that have hitherto been largely overlooked, including parallelism, the length of NP modifiers and lexical diffusion. The findings also suggest that the morpheme *men* is not used only to indicate plurality and collectivity but may have a number of other roles as well, such as functioning like a diminutive suffix and contributing to the organization of discourse and information structure.

Keywords: Spoken Mandarin, Corpus-based research, Plural marker *men*, Grammaticalization

1 The plural marker *men*

Number and plurality in Mandarin Chinese have been the subject of many previous studies (e.g. Chao 1968; Cook 2009, 2011; Iljic 1994, 2001, 2005; Li 1999; Li and Thompson 1981; Liu 2012; Maury 1992; Zhang 2014). In common with many other East and South-east Asian languages, Mandarin Chinese is usually described as having nouns that are essentially unmarked for number or that do not encode a systematic number contrast. In the existing literature, the use of the plural morpheme *men* in Modern Standard Chinese is usually portrayed as being disallowed in some contexts and optional in others, but rarely, if ever, obligatory (e.g. Li and Thompson 1981; Norman 1988; Ross and Ma 2006; Yip and Rimmington 2006). Questions that have often been asked include which conditions license its use or, conversely, render its use ungrammatical or infelicitous.

The present study likewise sets out to explore the constraints operating on the use of the plural morpheme *men*; however, in contrast to the bulk of previous research in the area, the data selected for analysis are examples of attested spoken utterances. The evidence presented here both refutes some traditional constraints and simultaneously points to the existence of other constraints on the use of this morpheme that remain relatively unexplored in the literature.

2 Conventional accounts of the plural marker *men*

Early records of written Chinese from 2000 years ago or more are often described as revealing no use of a morphological plural marker (Norman 1988), although some scholars have drawn attention to the possible existence of number distinction in a set of Archaic Chinese pronouns (Pulleybank 1995; Zhang 2001). Plural meaning could be expressed, most commonly by means of various adjectives and adverbs; however, there was no inflexional distinction between the plural and singular forms of nouns in Classical Chinese. The suffix *men*, which has been evolving as a marker of grammatical number for several centuries now (Maury 1992; Norman 1988), started by attaching itself to personal pronouns, thereby effecting the transformation of the pronouns 我 *wǒ* 1SG, 你 *nǐ* 2SG and 他/她 *tā* 3SG into their plural equivalents 我们 *wǒmen* 1PL, 你们 *nǐmen* 2PL and 他们/她们 *tāmen* 3PL.¹ From there it was a relatively small step to develop into a nominal suffix; however, this process is not (yet) complete in that not all Chinese nouns are eligible candidates for grammatical pluralization. The following paragraphs provide a summary of conventional accounts of the use of the plural marker *men* in academic articles and standard grammar references.

The use of the morpheme *men* as a plural marker with personal pronouns and certain nouns has been described by a number of grammarians (e.g. Chao 1968; DeFrancis 1963; Kubler 1985; Li and Thompson 1981; Ross and Ma 2006; Si 思果 1994; Yip and Rimmington 2006), most of whom have focussed on its use in the written language. There are some minor discrepancies between the various treatments of the morpheme; nevertheless, in general they provide a reasonably unified account of its use.

Several constraints are alleged to apply to the use of the plural marker, the most oft stated and unequivocally formulated of these being the exclusion of nonhuman and inanimate nouns from plural inflexion (Chao 1968; DeFrancis 1963; Kubler 1985; Li and Thompson 1981; Ross and Ma 2006; Si 思果 1994; Yip and Rimmington 2006). Significantly more restricting are the assertions that the plural marker can only be attached to polysyllabic, not monosyllabic nouns (Li and Thompson 1981), and even that nouns cannot be inflected for grammatical number if they are already modified by a plural quantifier such as 很多 *hěnduō* ‘many’ (cf. Kubler 1985; Li and Cheng 李德津, 程美珍 2008; Lin 2001; Si 思果 1994). This claim is somewhat contentious, as one source expressly sanctions the use of the plural marker in conjunction with the plural demonstrative 那些 *nàxiē* ‘those’ (Chao 1968). Much less controversial is the prohibition on the use of the plural marker with an explicitly specified number (Chao 1968; DeFrancis 1963; Kubler 1985; Li and Cheng 李德津, 程美珍 2008; Lin 2001; Norman 1988; Ross and Ma 2006; Yip and Rimmington 2006). Another interesting point of distinction between *men* and plural morphemes in many other languages is that when used after two coordinated nouns in the structure N_1 - N_2 -*men* it is taken to apply to both the preceding nouns. The overall picture of grammatical marking of number in Chinese is that of a discretionary and rather rare event (Li and Thompson 1981; Norman 1988; Ross and Ma 2006; cf. Yip and Rimmington 2006).

In view of the fact that grammatical pluralization in Chinese is described in the literature as non-obligatory, it is worth considering the justifications offered by the various commentators for using the plural marker when it does appear. Li and Thompson’s (1981: 40) explanation is that grammatical inflexion for number is “generally ... used only when there is some reason to

¹ Refer to the List of Abbreviations for an explanation of grammatical abbreviations used. In Modern Standard Chinese grammatical marking of number is obligatory with 1st and 2nd person pronouns and common with 3rd person pronouns.

emphasize the plurality of the noun”. Chao (1968: 244) and DeFrancis (1963: 419) both have similar interpretations of the effect of pluralization, the former describing an inflected noun as “a collective noun” and the latter describing it as having “a general collective meaning”. Ross and Ma (2006: 23) develop this theme further when they write that a plural noun with the marker *men* “conveys a sense of inclusion and is sometimes used when addressing an audience”. Yip and Rimmington (2006: 14) echo this in their comment on the predilection for using plural nouns “when groups of people are addressed”, noting that there is often some associated “implication of familiarity”.

In addition to rating a brief mention in many grammar textbooks, the morpheme *men* has been the subject of a few more specific studies. Maury (1992) analysed the behaviour of the plural marker and found, in common with many of the authors mentioned in the previous section, several restrictions applying to its use. These included its exclusive application with nouns denoting humans and its incompatibility with the explicit mention of a specific number. She also found that it could not be appended to a noun functioning as a predicate following a copular verb such as 是 *shì* COP or 成为 *chéngwéi* ‘become’ (cf. Kubler 1985). In investigating the functions performed by the plural marker, Maury (1992) again noted that it was frequently used when addressing a group of people. Additionally, she found that it can often emphasize the totality of the group or the fact that a particular attribute applies without exception to all members of the group rather than merely to the majority. She concluded that its use was not likely to undergo further expansion.

Guo and Zhou 郭鸿杰, 周国强 (2003), in their investigation of the influence of English on written Chinese, found numerous instances of the use of the plural marker *men* used in contravention of traditional constraints. It appeared with monosyllabic nouns, e.g. 兵们 *bīng-men* soldier-PL ‘soldiers’, 贼们 *zéi-men* thief-PL ‘thieves’ and 官们 *guān-men* cadre-PL ‘cadres’. It was also used to pluralize animate nonhumans, e.g. 狗儿们 *gǒu’ér-men* dog-PL ‘dogs’. Even more surprisingly, the plural marker was appended to nouns denoting inanimate objects, e.g. 车们 *chē-men* car-PL ‘cars’, 花们 *huā-men* flower-PL ‘flowers’, 书们 *shū-men* book-PL ‘books’ and 电脑们 *diànnǎo-men* computer-PL ‘computers’.

In research investigating the behaviour of the plural morpheme *men* in spoken Mandarin in mainland China (Cook 2009) and Taiwan (Cook 2011), several interesting aspects of its use were noted. Examples were found of the plural marker violating many of the structural restrictions described by earlier researchers. The plural marker was also observed to perform a variety of other roles, including contributing to discourse structure and information flow. In addition, there were indications that the morpheme might, in some contexts, be capable of expressing pragmatic nuances typically associated in other languages with diminutive suffixes. This was in some ways similar to findings of earlier research that highlighted the different perspective and pragmatic affect afforded by a noun explicitly marked as plural compared with a noun with plural reference but no explicit plural marker (Iljic 2005).

3 Data and methodology

The data for this study were collected from a well-known Chinese chat show, 鲁豫有约 *Lǔyù Yǒu Yuē* ‘A Date with Luyu’. The host, Chen Luyu, has a huge following in China and across the Chinese diaspora. She has been hosting the chat show now for nearly two decades, and her celebrity status is such that she has sometimes been referred to as “China’s Oprah.” Chen Luyu interviews people from all walks of life, many of them experts in their field (including

scientists, literati, successful businesspeople etc.), of course numerous celebrities, but also many ordinary people with an interesting story to tell.

‘A Date with Luyu’ was selected in preference to other chat shows because of its high degree of popularity and wide audience appeal, attracting viewers from across the breadth of Chinese society and over a large geographic area. Dialogues tend to be less ‘official’ than in shows produced and broadcast by CCTV, while at the same time being less vernacular than in many locally produced talk shows in a number of Chinese provinces. As such, the language use in this chat show reflects a range of Mandarin varieties across Mandarin speaking regions.

Although there are quite a few existing Chinese language corpora, a number of factors converged to make the use of chat show transcripts a more practical choice for this research. One very pragmatic reason is that many Chinese language corpora are not readily accessible, whereas transcripts of ‘A Date with Luyu’ are available online. Another key consideration is that many existing Chinese language corpora contain only written texts (e.g. the UCLA Written Chinese Corpus) or only a small proportion of spoken data. Even when spoken data is included, it is not always from spontaneous dialogue, but may be sourced from more or less scripted spoken texts such as news reports, as is the case with the balanced Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese, one of whose 15 genres is press reportage. Spoken data in existing corpora are not necessarily primarily from Mainland Chinese speakers. The Mandarin Conversational Dialogue Corpus and the NCCU Corpus of Spoken Mandarin contain spontaneous dialogue from Taiwan, which would have put a different geographic (and hence dialectal) slant on the research. At 300,000 words, the Callhome Mandarin Chinese Transcript, released in 1996, is of a similar size to the present corpus but is 15 years older and contains only telephone conversations, which is a very specific type of dialogue.

For this research, a corpus of around half a million characters of spoken data was created by downloading 88 publicly available transcripts of episodes of the show from 2011 into a single Word document. Non-spontaneous material in the transcripts of the chat show, including song lyrics, recitations or other short performances by guests, voiceovers and narrations, was not included in the corpus. Removal of such non-spontaneous material reduced the original database of over 700,000 characters to a corpus of just over 500,000 characters of spoken Mandarin, including utterances by several hundred different speakers.

Using the search function in Word, all utterances containing nouns inflected for number (i.e. nouns with the plural morpheme *men*) were extracted from the corpus. Since the focus of this research was specifically on nouns, the plural pronouns 我们 *wǒmen* 1PL, 咱们 *zánmen* 1PL, 你们 *nǐmen* 2PL and 他们/她们/它们 *tāmen* 3PL were excluded from the analysis. In analysing the example utterances, native speakers were in some cases consulted for their grammaticality judgements.

For reasons relating to copyright and bureaucratic procedures, it was not possible within the confines of this study to obtain audio-visual recordings of the original broadcasts. This unfortunately precluded the use of random checks to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. However, previous studies comparing Chinese language television broadcasts with their transcripts and/or captions have found a high degree of correspondence between the spoken and written word. In a study comparing captions from two different television genres with the audio recordings, Biq (1993) found two main kinds of deletions: omissions of incomplete phrases, repetitions, backchannelling and overlapping speech if these were not essential to the flow of conversation, and omissions of some discourse markers such as connectives and modal particles. Occasional substitutions of synonymous expressions were also noted, as well as occasional discrepancies in word order, most of which involved the

altered position of adverbials. In an investigation of language use in Taiwanese variety shows, Cook (2004) likewise found omissions of repetitions, self-corrections and backchannelling, as well as occasional substitutions of a slang or borrowed expression with a more standard one. None of the discrepancies noted in previous studies had an impact on the grammatical morphology of the transcribed utterances. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the transcriptions that comprise the current language corpora are reliable sources of data for an investigation into a morphological feature of spoken language use.

4 Research findings

This section starts by presenting an overview of the frequency of the noun types that appeared in the plural form in the corpus, highlighting certain points of interest (Section 4.1). There follows one subsection discussing speech examples that clearly contradict previous observations on the use of the plural marker *men* (Section 4.2). Each of the next four subsections (Sections 4.2 to 4.6) focuses on a particular factor that seems to contribute to the likelihood of a given speaker choosing to explicitly mark a noun phrase denoting a plural entity with the grammatical inflexion for number. All of these four subsections elucidate various roles of the plural marker, with the sequence of these subsections being arranged roughly in order from most common to least common function.

4.1. Frequency analysis

The data from mainland China are in some respects similar to the data from mainland Chinese chat shows (cf. Cook 2009) and Taiwanese variety shows (cf. Cook 2011) analysed previously and outlined in the Introduction to this article, but they also offer some new insights. The use of the plural marker *men* in the database comprising more than 80 episodes of ‘A Date with Luyu’ from 2011 is summarized in Table 1. Types are listed in decreasing order of frequency.

Mandarin Chinese word	Morpheme by morpheme gloss	English translation in context	Tokens
zhànshì-men 战士们	soldier-PL	soldiers; warriors	22
rén-men 人们	person-PL	people	20
háizi-men 孩子们	child-PL	children	11
tóngxué-men 同学们	classmate-PL	classmates; fellow students	11
péngyou-men 朋友们	friend-PL	friends	10
tóngzhì-men 同志们	comrade-PL	comrades	8
guānzhòng-péngyou-men 观众朋友们	audience-friend-PL	audience members; viewers	4
háier-men 孩儿们	child-PL	children	4
jiě-mèi-men 姐妹们	older.sister-younger.sister-PL	sisters	4
zhànyǒu-men 战友们	comrade.in.arm-PL	comrades-in-arms	4
māma-men 妈妈们	mother-PL	mothers; mums	3
dì-xiōng-men 弟兄们	younger.brother-older.brother-PL	brothers; mates	2
fěnsī-men 粉丝们	fans[tr.]-PL	fans	2
gēge-men 哥哥们	older.brother-PL	older brothers	2
gē-mí-men 歌迷们	song-fan-PL	fans	2
lǎoshī-men 老师们	teacher-PL	teachers	2
tóngshì-men 同事们	colleague-PL	colleagues	2
xiǎo-péngyou-men 小朋友们	little-friend-PL	children	2

Mandarin Chinese word	Morpheme by morpheme gloss	English translation in context	Tokens
xuéyuán-men 学员们	student-PL	students	2
bàba-māma-men 爸爸妈妈们	dad-mum-PL	mums and dads	1
chéngkè-men 乘客们	passenger-PL	passengers	1
dà-jiejie-men 大姐姐们	big-older.sister-PL	older girls; older friends	1
ér-nǚ-men 儿女们	son-daughter-PL	children; sons and daughters	1
gānbù-men 干部们	cadre-PL	cadres	1
Gǎng-Tái-jù-xīng-men 港台巨星们	Hong.Kong-Taiwan-mega-star-PL	megastars from HK and Taiwan	1
gūniang-men 姑娘们	girl-PL	girls	1
huǒbàn-men 伙伴们	partner-PL	partners	1
jiějie-gēge-men 姐姐哥哥们	older.sister-older.brother-PL	older sisters and brothers	1
jiějie-men 姐姐们	older.sister-PL	older sisters	1
jīngyīng-men 精英们	elite-PL	the elite	1
jūnrén-men 军人们	soldier-PL	soldiers	1
lǎoshī-tóngxué-men 老师同学们	teacher-classmate-PL	teachers and classmates	1
línjū-men 邻居们	neighbour-PL	neighbours	1
mùmín-men 牧民们	herdsman-PL	herdsmen	1
nǚ-háizi-men 女孩子们	female-child-PL	girls	1
nǚ-rén-men 女人们	female-person-PL	women	1
nǚ-tóngxué-men 女同学们	female-classmate-PL	female classmates	1
píngwěi-men 评委们	judge-PL	judges	1
qiánbèi-men 前辈们	older.generation-PL	elders	1
qīnshǔ-men 亲属们	relatives-PL	relatives	1
shàonián-rén-men 少年人们	adolescent-person-PL	adolescents	1
shào-nǚ-men 少女们	adolescent-female-PL	adolescent girls	1
shī-jiě-men 师姐们	teacher-older.sister-PL	more senior female students taught by the same teacher	1
shǒuzhǎng-men 首长们	senior.officer-PL	senior officers	1
shūshu-āyí-men 叔叔阿姨们	uncle-aunt-PL	aunts and uncles	1
tàitai-men 太太们	married.woman-PL	married women	1
wāwa-men 娃娃们	baby-PL	children	1
xuéjiā-men 学家们	scholar-PL	scholars	1
xuésheng-men 学生们	student-PL	students	1
yǎnyuán-men 演员们	actor-PL	actors	1
yíngjiè-gāozhōng-bìyèshēng-men 应届高中毕业生们	next.round-high.school-graduate-PL	high school graduates-in-waiting; high school seniors	1

Table 1: Use of the Plural marker *men* in Episodes of ‘A Date with Luyu’ from 2011
(Total = 153)

In all, the 80-odd episodes studied elicited 149 tokens of 51 different types.² The nouns and noun phrases to which the plural morpheme was appended ranged in length from one to seven syllables, with the vast majority of noun phrases being two to four syllables in length and

² Types such as 哥们(儿) *gēmen(r)* ‘mate; dude; bro’ and 爷们(儿) *yémen(r)* ‘dude; real man’ were excluded from the analysis as they differ from normal plural forms in a number of ways (An 2006; Zhu 2004), including the fact that they can have singular reference.

disyllabic nouns being the most popular candidates for morphological pluralization.³ The morpheme *men* appeared in conjunction with only one monosyllabic noun type: 人 *rén* ‘person’. The resulting noun, 人们 *rénmen* ‘people’, while undeniably originally a plural form, is slightly atypical and is discussed further in Section 4.6.

Apart from 战士们 *zhànshìmen* ‘soldiers’, all 22 tokens of which were uttered during the course of a single interview, the most common plural form was 人们 *rénmen* ‘people’, which occurred 20 times. This was roughly twice as common the next most popular plural noun forms, 孩子们 *háizimen* ‘children’ (11 occurrences), 同学们 *tóngxuémen* ‘classmates’ (11 occurrences) and 朋友们 *péngyoumen* ‘friends’ (10 occurrences). If we consider semantic groupings, it can be seen that pluralized compounds containing the element 同 *tóng* ‘same; fellow’ (including 同学们 *tóngxuémen* ‘classmates’, 同志们 *tóngzhìmen* ‘comrades’, 同事们 *tóngshìmen* ‘colleagues’ and 女同学们 *nǚtóngxuémen* ‘female classmates’) taken together made up the most significant group with a total of 22 occurrences, while ‘children’ (孩子们 *háizimen*, 孩儿们 *hái’ermen* and 小朋友们 *xiǎopéngyoumen*) were mentioned 17 times with the morphological plural ending.⁴

As expected, most nouns and noun phrases that appeared with *men* were count or individuated nouns. Interestingly, however, three mass or collective nouns also underwent morphological pluralization, occurring once each in the database: 亲属们 *qīnshǔmen* (relatives-PL) ‘relatives’, 前辈们 *qiánbèi-men* (older.generation-PL) ‘elders’ and 精英们 *jīngyīng-men* (elite-PL) ‘the elite’ (cf. discussion in Section 4.5.2). Three other noun phrases of interest because of their internal structure are 弟兄 *dì-xiōng* (younger.brother-older.brother) ‘brothers; mates’, 儿女 *ér-nǚ* (son-daughter) ‘children; sons and daughters’ and 叔叔阿姨 *shūshu-āyí* (uncle-aunt) ‘aunts and uncles’. These three, made up as they are of a combination of two nouns, can *ipso facto* refer only to a plural entity, but occurred in the database with *men* once or twice each.

4.2. Collective marker

In more than half the utterances the plural morpheme seems merely to be underlining the plurality and/or group feeling of the noun, as described in the standard literature on *men* and discussed in Section 2 above. This function is particularly common in imperatives and direct addresses. This usage is exemplified in (1) and (2) below, in which particular groups of people are addressed directly. Note that sentence (2) also illustrates the well-known fact that a single occurrence of the plural marker can apply simultaneously to two nouns.

- (1) 但是，观众朋友们，你不要觉得说，潘长江特别溺爱他的女儿。

(Pan Changjiang, 22/04/11)

Dànshì, __guānzhòng-péngyǒu-

men, __nǐ __bù __yào __juéde __shuō, __Pān __Chángjiāng __tèbié __nǐ’ài __tā __de __nǚ’ér.

³ The fact that some of the constituents to which 们 *men* was added are noun phrases rather than simple nouns suggests that 们 *men* may be more appropriately analysed as a clitic than as a suffix in at least some of its uses. The issue of the classification of 们 *men*, while not of direct relevance to the current study, has been raised by previous researchers (e.g. Yang 2015).

⁴ In fact, nouns referring to soldiers achieved a greater overall frequency; however, as explained above, this figure was distorted by the inordinately high token count of a single type during a single interview.

But **audience-friend-**

PL, 2SG NEG want feel say, Pan Changjiang especially spoil 3SG ATT daughter.

But, viewers, don't think that Pan Changjiang spoils his daughter rotten.

- (2) 谢谢今天所有台前幕后的**老师同学们**，你们会支持我吗？ (Li Yuchun, 09/06/11)

Xièxie jīntiān suǒyǒu tái-qíán-mù-hòu de **lǎoshī-tóngxué-men**, nǐmen huì zhīchí wǒ ma?

Thanks today all stage-in.front-screen-behind ATT **teacher-classmate-PL**, 2PL will support 1SG Q?

Thanks today to all the teachers and students in front of the stage and behind the scenes, will you support me?

Of course, a noun phrase with the structure N_1 - N_2 -*men* may not be exactly equivalent to N_1 -*men* (and) N_2 -*men*. Specifically, 老师同学们 *lǎoshī-tóngxué-men* ‘the teachers and students’ seems to emphasize the collectivity of the teachers and students as a single group, whereas 老师们同学们 *lǎoshī-men tóngxué-men* ‘the teachers and the students’ sounds more as though the two are being treated as separate groups.

Be that as it may, the usage demonstrated in the examples above conforms to the standard explanation for the use of *men*, as discussed in Section 2, where we noted that *men* is understood to pluralize both preceding nouns when appended to two coordinated nouns. Similar examples are provided by several previous analyses (e.g. Maury 1992; Ross and Ma 2006; Yip and Rimmington 2006). On the other hand, quite a few instances in the present database lend themselves to alternative or supplementary explanations, as will be discussed in the following sections.

4.3. Use with explicit number

The unacceptability of the use of the plural marker *men* in conjunction with an explicit number is one of the most strongly worded constraints in the literature.⁵ A significant number of researchers (e.g. Chao 1968; DeFrancis 1963; Kubler 1985; Li 1999; Li and Cheng 李德津, 程美珍 2008; Lin 2001; Maury 1992; Ross and Ma 2006; Yip and Rimmington 2006), in analysing both the written and the spoken language, have stated categorically that noun phrases like *三个学生们 *sān ge xuésheng-men* three CL student-PL ‘three students’ and *几个朋友们 *jǐ ge péngyou-men* several CL friend-PL ‘several friends’ are ungrammatical. Although previous studies (Cook 2009, 2011; Guo and Zhou 郭鸿杰, 周国强 2003; Iljic 1994, 2001; Li 1999; Maury 1992) have failed to discover any noun phrases of this structure in the databases consulted, two examples of this kind of usage were found in the corpus for the present study. These are given below.

- (3) 我跟**几个孩子们**和隔辈人都说过我这话。 (Li Moran, 12/04/11)

Wǒ gēn jǐ ge **háizi-men** hé gé-bèi-rén dōu shuō-guò wǒ zhè huà.

⁵ The most strongly worded is the claim that only nouns denoting humans can undergo morphological pluralization (cf. discussion in Section 2).

1SG __with__ **several** __CL__ **child-PL** __and__ remove-generation-person __all__ say-
EXP __1SG__ DEM __words.

*I've said that to **several children** and grandchildren.*⁶

- (4) 我光干活了，没有啦，没编呢，但是连长说了我就发晕了，五百多个战士们哗啦
哗啦鼓掌。
(Li Shuangjiang, 09/08/11)

Wǒ __guāng__ gànhuó-
le, __méi__ yǒu __la__, __méi__ biān __ne__, dànshì liánzhǎng __shuō-
le __wǒ__ jiù fāyūn-le, **wǔ-bǎi duō gè zhànshì-men** huālā~huālā gǔzhǎng.

1SG __only__ work-
PFV, __NEG__ PFV __MP, __NEG__ organize __MP, __but__ company.commander __say-
PFV __1SG __then__ dizzy-PFV, **five-hundred more CL soldier-
PL** crash~REDUP __applaud.

*All I did was work, I didn't do anything, I didn't organize it, but when the company
commander said that, I felt dizzy, and there was thunderous applause from **500-odd
soldiers**.*

The plural noun phrase in (3) is modified by the quantifier 几 *jǐ* 'several', and in (4) by 五百多个 *wǔ-bǎi duō ge* '500-odd'. Thus, the two examples above are clear contraventions of the prohibition on the use of the plural marker with an explicit number, which could be an indication that the use of *men* is broadening, possibly as a result of contact with European languages (cf. Guo and Zhou 郭鸿杰, 周国强 2003). The two examples above demonstrate that the noun phrase undergoing morphological pluralization can be either an argument or an adjunct. In example (3), it is interesting that the first of the two coordinated noun phrases is explicitly marked as plural, but not the second. Since the number of syllables in the two noun phrases is equalized through the addition of the plural marker, it is possible that prosodic constraints and considerations of parallel structures play a role here (see also discussion in Section 4.5.2).

4.4. Diminutive connotations

As with previous data from mainland Chinese chat shows (Cook 2009) and Taiwanese variety shows (Cook 2011), there is some indication in the data used for this study of pragmatic overtones typically associated with diminutive suffixes. Diminutives generally convey the meaning of smallness or unimportance and, by semantic extension, express qualities (of the object denoted) or attitudes (of the speaker towards said object) such as youthfulness, familiarity, intimacy, affection, tenderness, endearment, and even contempt or derogation (Bakema and Geeraerts 2000). In fact, this ties in quite nicely with Yip and Rimmington's (2006) observation that pluralized nouns often imply a degree of familiarity. This function of the plural marker *men* is demonstrated in sentences (5) and (6) below.

⁶ Literally: '... and people of my grandchildren's generation.' In this and subsequent example utterances, the noun(s) undergoing plural inflexion, as well as any other elements of interest, are highlighted in bold.

- (5) 朋友这都是我的儿女们，每到逢年过节的时候，哎呀，问候，电话，真的，他们一这这么说我，我心里感到高兴，幸福的笑啊。

(Peng Yu, 24/03/11)

Péngyǒu zhè dōu shì wǒ de ér-nǚ-

men, měi dào féngnián guò jié de shíhòu, āiyā, wèn hòu, diànhuà, z
hēn de, tāmen yī zhème shuō wǒ, wǒ xīnlǐ gǎndào gāoxìng, xìngfú
de xiào a.

Friend DEM all COP 1SG ATT son-daughter-

PL, every arrive New.Year's.Day celebrate festival ATT time, oh, greet
ing, telephone, really, 3PL as.soon.as thus speak 1SG, 1SG at.heart fe
el glad, happy ADV smile MP.

*My friends are all my **children**. At every festival and at Chinese New Year, oh, greetings, phone calls, really... Whenever they talk about me like that, it makes me happy inside, and I smile for joy.*

- (6) 其实不仅是女演员，几乎各行各业所有的妈妈们，都要面临生活和工作的压力，多少对孩子都会感到有一些歉疚，因为不能时时刻刻陪伴在孩子身边。

(Chen Luyu, 24/03/11)

Qíshí bùjǐn shì nǚ-yǎnyuán, jīhū gè-háng-gè-yè suǒyǒu de māmā-

men, dōu yào miànlín shēnghuó hé gōngzuò de yǎli, duōshǎo duì h
áizi dōu huì gǎndào yǒu yīxiē qiànjù, yīnwéi bù néng shí~shí-
kè~kè péibàn zài háizi shēnbiān.

Actually not.only COP female-

actor, almost all.walks.of.life all ATT mum-

PL, all must confront life and work ATT pressure, somewhat towards
child all will feel have some guilt, because NEG can time~REDUP-
moment~REDUP accompany LOC child beside.

*Actually it's not only actresses, almost all **mun**s from all walks of life, they all have to confront the pressure of private life and work, and they all tend to feel a degree of guilt towards their children, because they can't be at their children's side every moment of every day.*

Note that in Mandarin compounds consisting of two juxtaposed nouns with opposite meaning, such as 父母 *fù-mǔ* father-mother 'parents', 男女 *nán-nǚ* male-female 'men and women; boys and girls' and 儿女 *ér-nǚ* son-daughter 'sons and daughters; children', can only be understood in the plural sense. Obviously the plural marker in (5) does not provide any new semantic information. Likewise, 妈妈 *māmā* 'mum' in example (6) is already modified by 所有 *suǒyǒu* 'all' and thus does not require the suffix *men* to clarify its plural reference. Indeed, the native speakers consulted agreed that both these sentences would be just as grammatically acceptable without the plural marker. At the same time, the tone with respect to the children in (5) and the mothers in (6) is familiar and affectionate. Of course, the mere use of 儿女 *ér-nǚ* 'children' (without the plural marker) itself could convey the same overtones in the context of example (5), since the speaker is clearly referring to adults, while the choice of *mama* 'mum' in preference to 母亲 *mǔqīn* 'mother' likewise contributes to the flavour of the sentence in

example (6). On the other hand, the native speakers consulted generally agreed that without *men* the intimate and endearing tone of the above examples would be less pronounced. Thus, we can conclude that the affection, intimacy and tenderness of both utterances is underscored by the plural marker.

It is a well-known fact that diminutives can convey a range of pragmatic overtones. Thus, it is perhaps worth considering at this juncture another example of the use of the plural marker which, however little it may appear at first sight to be related to the use in sentences (5) and (6) above, on closer inspection benefits from comparative analysis with the preceding two examples. It provides an example of *men* contributing to the pragmatic flavour of the utterance in a more negative way.

- (7) 别紧张，你们这些没煮过饭的少女们。 (Luo Zhixiang, 26/07/11)
 Bié jǐnzhāng, nǐmen zhè xiē méi zhǔ-guò fàn de shàonǚ-men.
 Don't nervous, 2PL DEM CL.PL NEG cook-EXP rice ATT young.girl-PL.
Don't be nervous, you young things who've never cooked a meal before.

In contrast to the affectionate tone of examples (5) and (6), the style of addressing the listeners in sentence (7) as 'young girls', while also familiar, is more jocular than affectionate, and even has belittling and pejorative overtones. Although the tone of the utterance would be slightly derogatory even without the addition of the plural marker, the pragmatic affect is enhanced by the plural marker. This is of course also a function of diminutives in other languages. For example, the German words *Büb-chen* boy-DMN '(little) boy' and *Jung-chen* boy-DMN 'laddie; boychick', both formed with the diminutive suffix *-chen*, are often used to refer pejoratively to grown men behaving in a childish way. Similarly, when the word *suffragette* was first coined by the British newspaper the *Daily Mail*, its intended use as a term of belittlement was underscored by the borrowed French diminutive suffix *-ette*.

Although the data in this study are not of themselves sufficient to make conclusive claims about the diminutive function of the plural marker, examples (5) to (7) all corroborate previous findings regarding the grammaticalization of *men* (Cook 2009, 2011) and lend support to previous observations that the plural marker *men* can sometimes perform the functions of a diminutive affix. Note that Yip and Rimmington's (2006) claim regarding familiarity has less explanatory power than the diminutive hypothesis since it not only fails to explain the secondary function of the plural marker in sentence (7), but also fails to capture the similarities underlying its use in that and the preceding two examples.

4.5. Information structure

Ways in which the morpheme *men* can be employed to signal the organization of discourse and information structure are discussed in two separate subsections. While it is certainly possible, perhaps even probable, that other factors play a role in constraining or favouring the use of the plural morpheme, these two were the ones that were most obvious from the data in the current research. The first deals with structures involving rather long modifiers of noun phrases, these modifiers being of the type commonly described as relative clauses in grammatical analyses of Mandarin. The second deals with stylistic and prosodic issues of balance and parallelism.

4.5.1. Relative clauses

As mentioned in Section 2 above, it is commonly stated that Chinese nouns are not generally inflected for number and do not systematically encode a number distinction (DeFrancis 1963; Li 1999; Li and Thompson 1981; Ross and Ma 2006; Yip and Rimmington 2006). Where the plural number is grammatically marked, some references claim that it is as a rule sufficient to mark it once only (cf. Kubler 1985; Li and Cheng 李德津, 程美珍 2008; Si 1994). However, double marking of the plural, as in sentence (7), where the plural marker occurred in combination with the plural demonstrative 这些 *zhè xiē* DEM CLF.PL ‘these’, was found several times in the data. A similar construction appears below in sentence (8).

- (8) 采访郭晓冬是在 2007 年, 因为一期有关艺术类考生的节目, 当时郭晓冬作为一个过来人给那些醉心于要投身演艺圈的应届高中毕业生们一些经验和意见。

(Chen Luyu, 09/09/11)

Cǎifǎng Guō Xiǎodōng shì zài 2007 nián, yīnwéi yī qī yǒuguān yìshù hù lèi kǎoshēng de jiémù, dāngshí Guō Xiǎodōng zuòwéi yī gè guò lǎirén gěi nà xiē zuìxīn yú yào tóushēn yǎnyì-quān de yīngjiè-gāozhōng-bìyèshēng-men yīxiē jīngyàn hé yìjiàn.

Interview Guo Xiaodong COP LOC 2007 year, because one CL relate art_type examinee ATT program, at.that.time Guo Xiaodong as one CL guest give DEM CL.PL be.bent.on to want throw.oneself.into performing.arts-circle ATT **next.round-high.school-graduate-PL** some experience and advice.

*The time I interviewed Guo Xiaodong was in 2007, because one episode of the show featured students applying to get into fine arts. At that time, Guo Xiaodong put in a guest appearance and shared a few experiences and suggestions with those **high school seniors** who were bent on dedicating their life to performing arts.*

The structural context of 应届高中毕业生们 *yìngjiègāozhōngbìyèshēngmen* ‘high school seniors’ is interesting, not only because it is preceded by the plural demonstrative 那些 *nà xiē* ‘those’, but also because there is a rather long attribute separating the demonstrative and the plural noun. Interestingly, the noun 应届高中毕业生 *yìngjiègāozhōngbìyèshēng* ‘high school senior’, consisting, as it does, of seven syllables, would not normally be a favoured environment for adding the plural marker (refer to discussion in Section 4.1 above). Moreover, the phrase 那些应届高中毕业生 *nà xiē yìngjiègāozhōngbìyèshēng* ‘those high school seniors’ (without the plural marker *men*) would be far more acceptable to most native speakers than the same simple construction with the plural marker. However, in the case of a long and complex NP such as the one in sentence (8), adding the plural *men* actually seems to improve the grammaticality of the phrase. In other words, morphological marking of plural number, although apparently preferred in NPs with a long intervening attribute, is not necessarily preferred in shorter NPs without an additional modifier. Further examples of similar constructions are given in sentences (9) and (10).

- (9) 我们这个团队就是踏踏实实地一年做一部戏, 对得起所有支持我们的观众朋友们, 这就是我们最奢侈的一个想法。

(Pan Changjiang, 22/04/11)

Wǒmen zhège tuándù jiùshì tà tàshí shídì yī nián zuò yī bù xì,
duìdéqǐ suǒyǒu zhīchí wǒmen de **guānzhòng-**
péngyǒumen, zhè jiùshì wǒmen zuì shēchǐ de yīgè xiǎngfǎ.

1PL DEM CL troupe just reliable~REDUP ADV one year do one CL
production, be.worthy.of all support 1PL ATT **audience-friend-**
PL, DEM just COP 1PL SUP extravagant ATT one CL thought.

*Our troupe just reliably produces one show per year, so we can do the right thing by all the **viewers** who support us; that's our most extravagant thought.*

- (10) 但是我每当又看到，我毕竟还有这么多人在爱我，有这么多我的歌迷，……还有那些喜欢我的叔叔阿姨们，我身上又还有一种责任和动力在，因为我还没有完成我要为这个社会做的事情。
(Han Hong, 08/09/11)

Dànshì wǒ měi dāng yòu kàn-
dào, wǒ bǐjīng hái yǒu zhème duō rén zài ài wǒ, yǒu zhème duō
wǒ de gē-mí,……hái yǒu nà xiē xǐhuān wǒ de **shūshu-āyí-**
men, wǒ shēn-
shàng yòu hái yǒu yī zhǒng zérèn hé dònglì zài, yīnwéi wǒ hái
méi yǒu wánchéng wǒ yào wèi zhè ge shèhuì zuò de shìqíng.

But 1SG every time again see-
RES, 1SG actually still have so many person PROG love 1SG, have
so many 1SG ATT song-
fan, ... also have DEM CL.PL like 1SG ATT **uncle-aunt-**
PL, 1SG body-
on even also have one kind responsibility and impetus exist, because
1SG still NEG PFV complete 1SG want for DEM CL society do
ATT matter.

*But every time I see it again, I actually have that many people who love me, that many fans ... and those **uncles and aunts** who like me, I even have a sense of responsibility and impetus, because I still haven't completed what I want to do for this society.*

It seems that, for many native speakers, adding the plural marker actually improves the grammaticality of one or more of the sentences (8) to (10). By contrast, native speakers are likely to cavil at the use of relatively simple [quantifier + N-PL] constructions like 那些应届高中毕业生们 *nà xiē yìngjiègāozhōngbìyèshēngmen* 'those high school seniors', *suoyou de guanzhongpengyoumen* 'all the viewers' and *na xie shushu-ayi-men* 'those aunts and uncles' (i.e. without the intervening attributes in the original speech examples), deeming them at best optional and at worst grammatically dubious. That is, it appears that with these shorter phrases many native speakers would be more likely to content themselves with single grammatical marking of plural number in the form of the plural quantifier and to omit the plural marker. This corroborates findings of previous studies (Cook 2009, 2011), which on the basis of data from both mainland China and Taiwan revealed a comparative preference for double grammatical marking of plural number in the case of noun phrases modified by a relative clause and a comparative reluctance to use a plural quantifier in conjunction with the plural marker when there was no intervening attribute modifying the noun.

Overall, the present study revealed no obvious reluctance to use the [quantifier + N-PL] construction with a number of the more popular nouns, even in the absence of a lengthy pre-nominal attribute. Corpus data included the following examples: 那些孩子们 *nà xiē háizimen* ‘those children’, 这些朋友们 *zhè xiē péngyoumen* ‘these friends’, 好多同志们 *hǎo duō tóngzhìmen* ‘many comrades’ and 一些同事们 *yīxiē tóngshìmen* ‘some colleagues’.

Nevertheless, it appears that there is indeed a contrast between the preference for the base form of certain nouns immediately preceded by a plural quantifier and the attested occurrence of the inflected form of the same nouns likewise preceded by a plural quantifier but with an intervening additional modifier. This fact points to the influence of distance on native speaker intuitions of grammaticality: that is, the farther a quantifier is placed from the noun it modifies, the more likely the construction is to be deemed grammatical. This difference can manifest itself in two ways. On the one hand, nouns whose inflected form is questionable immediately following a plural demonstrative or quantifier may be considered perfectly acceptable with the plural marker after the same demonstrative or quantifier as long as there is another modifying phrase separating the two. On the other hand, in the case of nouns that are felt to be equally grammatical in the base and inflected forms immediately following a plural demonstrative or quantifier, there may be a strong inclination to append the plural marker if the NP is made longer and more complex by the insertion of an additional modifier, even to the extent that the base form is no longer considered grammatically acceptable by some native speakers.⁷

There are at least three possible explanations for this. Firstly, a collocation that is of questionable grammaticality in a short construction may nevertheless be deemed perfectly acceptable in a longer, more complex construction – and vice versa. Secondly, even if there is general consensus that a particular combination of structural elements is infelicitous, this ungrammaticality may be more likely to strike listeners (and, indeed, speakers) when the elements are in close proximity with one another. Thirdly, the plural marker *men* could conceivably serve a bracketing function with the quantifier or demonstrative (i.e. closing the bracket opened by the plural quantifier or demonstrative) when the noun is modified by a long attribute, the purpose of this being to signal to the listener that the head noun has been reached and that this particular structural segment is completed. Interestingly, a similar kind of bracketing structure has also been observed in the use of the affectedness marker 所 *suǒ*, particularly when translating passive structures with a long and complex agent NP from English into Chinese (Cook under review).

Of these three hypotheses, the third seems to have the greatest explanatory value. The first hypothesis is too ad hoc to be entirely satisfactory, and overlooks an important correlation captured by the third hypothesis. The second, while it explains half of the phenomenon (the group of nouns strongly favouring the base form immediately after a plural demonstrative or quantifier but considered equally acceptable in the inflected form after an intervening attribute), fails to shed any light on the other half (the group of nouns strongly favouring the inflected form after a long modifier even though both inflected and uninflected forms are acceptable immediately after a plural demonstrative or quantifier). The third hypothesis, on the other hand, does seem to offer a plausible and enlightening explanation for the behaviour of both groups of nouns, assuming it is taken not as a hard-and-fast rule, but as one of a number of factors determining native speaker judgments of grammaticality. Thus, if we suppose that for any

⁷ For descriptive brevity the manifestation of the phenomenon is here depicted in a somewhat simplified way, as though there were only two groups of nouns, as though these groups were clearly delineated, and as though the particular demonstrative or quantifier in question had no bearing on the matter. In fact, of course, there seems to be an array of possible constellations.

given noun there is a certain level of resistance to inflexion for number immediately after a plural demonstrative or quantifier, then the third hypothesis explains why the resistance to pluralization will be lower in a construction containing the same head noun and introduced by the same demonstrative or quantifier but with an intervening modifier. That is, the third hypothesis explains why, all other things being equal, the plural marker *men* would be expected to occur more often in longer, more complex NPs. More specifically, it goes some way to explaining why in certain contexts, such as sentence (9), a noun like 观众朋友 *guānzhòngpéngyǒu* ‘viewer’, containing as it does the element *pengyou* ‘friend’ with a naturally low resistance to pluralization, might feel to some native speakers as though it required the addition of the plural marker *men* to make the sentence grammatical. What the third hypothesis does not explain is why some nouns have a naturally lower resistance to inflexion for number in the first place, nor which nouns are likely to fall into that category. That will be discussed in further detail in the Discussion section.

4.5.2. Stylistic concerns: Balance and parallelism

Other occurrences of nouns with plural inflexion that are modified by long attributes may require an alternative explanation that is also related to discourse and information structure. Sentence (11) features the morphologically pluralized form 亲属们 *qīnshǔmen* ‘relatives’.

- (11) 所以有一位山东德州老乡，他呢就把我们《话说运河》里的，德州那一集弄到手了，所以他就要求，也是在世界各地的亲属们，每年在团聚的时候，首先是看德州这一集。
(Chen Duo, 14/02/11)

Suǒyǐ yǒu yī wèi Shāndōng Dézhōu lǎoxiāng, tā ne jiù bǎ wǒmen
“huàshuō yùnhé” lǐ de, Dézhōu nà yī jí nòng-
dào shǒu le, suǒyǐ tā jiù yāoqiú, yě shì zài shìjiè gèdì de qīnshǔ
-men, měi nián zài tuánjù de shíhòu, shǒuxiān shì kàn Dézhōu zhè
yī jí.

So EXST one CL Shandong Dezhou villager, 3SG MP just OBJ 1PL
“Hua shuo yun he” in ATT, Dezhou DEM one episode get-
RES hand CS, so 3SG just demand, also COP LOC world every place
ATT relatives-
PL, every year LOC gather ATT time, first COP have Dezhou DEM
one episode.

So there was this villager from Dezhou in Shandong province, well he managed to get hold of the episode from our show “Hua shuo yun he” that was about Dezhou, so he demanded – and there were relatives from all over the world – that when they got together every year, the first thing they did was to watch that episode about Dezhou.

It is obvious from the context and the fact that the relatives are from all over the world that we must be dealing with several relatives rather than only one. Moreover, the Mandarin word 亲属 *qīnshǔ* ‘relatives’ in its base form is often defined as a collective or mass noun; it used to have only plural reference, although in modern usage the phrase 一个亲属 *yīge qīshǔ* ‘one relative’ is becoming increasingly common (see also Section 4.1 above).

Sentence (11) would thus be perfectly clear without the plural morpheme; nevertheless, it seems that some speakers prefer to add the suffix *men* to balance the phrase. In other words, some speakers apparently feel that a noun phrase preceded by a rather long modifier – in this case 在各地的 *zài shìjiè gèdì de* ‘from all over the world’ – sounds better with an additional syllable appended to it. The justification often given for this stylistic choice is to avoid 头重脚轻 *tóu zhòng jiǎo qīng* ‘imbalance between the beginning and end’ (in this case, of a phrase). Of course, it is often difficult to tease out separate influences operating on speakers’ decisions to formulate their utterances one way in preference to another. In this case, as 亲属们 *qīnshǔmen* ‘relatives’ is preceded by a relative clause, one could argue that the most salient factor here is that of signalling the end of a complex noun phrase (as discussed in Section 4.5.1 above). Nevertheless, it seems that, for some native speakers at least, considerations both of the overt marking of internal syntactic structure and of balance within a phrase are separate (if sometimes related) factors.⁸

Another stylistic consideration – and one which, incidentally, plays an important part in Chinese writing – is that of so-called parallelism, or the use of parallel structures in successive phrases. One example of a context in which this might come into play is example (12) below.

- (12) 《难道》，每一次唱都会有一个理由，这次把《难道》第一次送给台下以外的观众朋友吧，应该送给一直陪伴羽·泉在音乐的道路，辅助我们，然后支撑我们、鼓励我们、帮助我们所有合作过的伙伴们、老师们、前辈们。

(Chen Yufan, 18/04/11)

“Nándào”, měi yī cì chàng dōu huì yǒu yī gè lǐyóu, zhè cì bǎ
 “nándào” dì yī cì sòng gěi tái xià yǐwài de guānzhòng péngyǒu ba,
yīnggāi sòng gěi yīzhí péibàn Yǔ Quán zài yīnyuè de dàolù shàng,
fǔzhù wǒmen, ránhòu zhīchēng wǒmen, gǔlì wǒmen, bāngzhù wǒmen
de suǒyǒu hézuò-guò de huǒbànmen, lǎoshīmen, qiánbèimen.

“Nandao”, every one time sing all will have one CL reason, DEM
time OBJ “Nandao” ORD one time give BEN stage
below outside ATT viewer MP, should give BEN continually accompan
y YuQuan LOC music ATT road on, assist 1PL, then sustain 1PL,
encourage 1PL, help 1PL ATT all cooperate-EXP ATT partner-PL,
teacher-PL, older.generation-PL.

*“Nandao”, whenever we sing it we have a reason, this time for the first time let’s dedicate “Nandao” to the viewers not present in person, we should dedicate it to the partners, teachers and elders who have continually accompanied Yu and Quan on their musical road, who have assisted us, who have sustained, encouraged and helped us, to all those people we’ve worked together with.*⁸

⁸ The expression 难道 *nándào* is used to ask rhetorical questions and can be approximately rendered into English as ‘who would’ve thought; you can’t be serious’.

This sentence, of course, contains three plural noun forms: 伙伴们 *huǒbànmen* ‘partners’, 老师们 *lǎoshīmen* ‘teachers’ and 前辈们 *qiánbèimen* ‘seniors; elders’, all of which are further defined by the extremely long modifying phrase that starts 一直陪伴 *yīzhí péibàn*... ‘[who] have continually accompanied...’ and finishes 合作过 *hézuò-guò* ‘...[with whom we] have worked together’. Although it is not uncommon to find the plural morpheme attached to the nouns 老师 *lǎoshī* ‘teacher’ and 伙伴 *huǒbàn* ‘partner’, the grammatical pluralization of 前辈 *qiánbèi* ‘senior; elder’ is a comparatively rare event. Nevertheless, it appears that the plural form 前辈们 *qiánbèimen* ‘seniors; elders’, rare though it is, is nevertheless preferable to 前辈 *qiánbèi* ‘seniors; elders’ (i.e. without *men*) in this particular context, with the only other acceptable alternative being the likewise trisyllabic 前辈人 *qiánbèiren* ‘seniors; elders’ (cf. example (3) above). Interestingly, the justification for appending *men* does not seem to depend entirely on the modification of the noun in question by an extremely long attribute, as discussed above. Rather, it seems to be underscored by the fact that in this context 前辈们 *qiánbèimen* ‘seniors; elders’ is immediately preceded by two other pluralized nouns. This line of reasoning has less to do with indicating embedded syntactic structures and much more to do with prosodic rhythm and parallelism. In other words, the use of the plural marker *men* with the noun 前辈 *qiánbèi* ‘senior; elder’ in example (12) is considered necessary primarily for stylistic reasons.

4.6. Semantic distinction

The argument for retaining the plural inflexion in 人们 *rénmen* ‘people’ in sentences (13) and (14) below is a different one: namely, that the plural marker here is necessary for semantic reasons other than those of specifying grammatical number. Note that the distinction between 人们 *rénmen* ‘people’ and 人 *ren* ‘person’ is slightly different from that between other singular and plural forms of the same noun. Although etymologically 人们 *rénmen* ‘people’ obviously had its origins in the plural form of 人 *ren* ‘person’, it has evolved to mean something slightly different from merely ‘two or more persons’ to the extent that it is deemed to deserve its own separate dictionary entry. The uninflected form, 人 *rén* ‘person; people’, if used in the following contexts, would be interpreted as a general designation applying to all human beings without exception, whereas in fact the speaker in each case clearly wishes to include many (but by no means all) people within the referential scope of the noun phrase.

- (13) 这时候不是光欣赏他的歌，还有看到他的精神可嘉，这捐款我认为这不是对他的一个施舍，而是对他们的感谢，对吧，感谢叫人们的精神得到升华。⁹

(Audience member, 07/07/11)

Zhè shíhòu bù shì guāng xīnshǎng tā de gē, hái yǒu kàn-
dào tā de jīngshén kějiā, zhè juānkuǎn wǒ rènwéi zhè bù shì duì
tā de yī gè shīshě, ér shì duì tāmen de gǎnxiè, duì ba, gǎnxiè
jiào **rénmen** de jīngshén dédào shēnghuá.

DEM_time_NEG_COP_only_enjoy_3SG_ATT_song,also_PFV_see-
RES_3SG_ATT_enthusiasm_praiseworthy,DEM_donation_1SG_think_DE
M_NEG_COP_for_3SG_ATT_one_CL_charity,but_COP_for_3PL_ATT

⁹ The original transcript contained the character 教 *jiāo* ‘teach’. As it was suspected that this was a typo, it was replaced with 叫 *jiào* ‘tell; make’.

__thanks,__right__MP,__thank__make__**people**__ATT__enthusiasm__receive__raise.a
.level.

*At that time it wasn't just a case of enjoying his songs, I also noticed his praiseworthy enthusiasm, so that donation, I didn't view that as offering him charity, but rather as a way of thanking them, yeah, thanking them for taking **people**'s enthusiasm to a different level.*

- (14) 拉登的死也造成了另外一方面的恐慌, 从这个角度上来讲, 恐怖主义真的是已经到了一个空前绝后, 达到了某种高度, 他活着制造恐慌, 他死了依然会引发人们更多的想象。
(Zhang Xiaodong, 02/05/11)

Lādēng de sǐ yě zàochéng-
le língwài yī fāngmiàn de kǒnghuāng, cóng zhè ge jiǎodù shàng lái
jiǎng, kǒngbù zhùyì zhēnde shì yǐjīng dào-le yī gè kōngqián-
juéhòu, dádào-le mǒu zhǒng gāodù, tā huó-
zhe zhìzào kǒnghuāng, tā sǐ-
le yīrán huì yǐnfā **rénmen** gèng duō de xiǎngxiàng.

Laden ATT death also cause-
PFV other one aspect ATT terror, from DEM CL angle on come speak,
terrorism really COP already reach-PFV one CL unprecedented-
not.recurring, reach-PFV certain kind height, 3SG live-
PROG create terror, 3SG die-
PFV still can stimulate **people** more much ATT imagination.

*Bin Laden's death also resulted in a different kind of terror. From that perspective, terrorism really has already reached an unprecedented... it's reached a certain level. While he lived he created terror, in death he can still stimulate **people**'s heightened imagination.*

Although examples of this kind of semantic distinction were not found with other nouns in the present corpus, sentences in which the plural marker clearly resolves a semantic ambiguity of a different kind have been found in other contexts. Consider example (15) below featuring the pluralized noun 烤鸭们 *kǎoyā-men*, which on the face of it would appear to mean 'roast ducks' but which in fact has quite a different meaning in context:

- (15) 很多烤鸭们现在都知道重点靠后原则。¹⁰

Hěn duō kǎoyā-men xiànzài dōu zhīdào zhòngdiǎn kào hòu yuánzé.
Very many **roast-duck-PL** now all know focus be.near end
principle.

A lot of IELTS candidates now know the principle of the important information being towards the end.

¹⁰ The source of the example is: <https://m.hujiang.com/en/p118678/>. Accessed 16 February 2019.

The etymology of the highlighted Chinese expression possibly requires some elucidation, since the link between a term generally reserved for a culinary delicacy and a reference to examinees may not be immediately obvious to non-Mandarin speakers. The IELTS examination is known in Mandarin Chinese as 雅思 *yǎ-sī* refined-thought ‘IELTS’, which is a transliteration of the English expression.¹¹ The expression 考雅思 *kǎo yǎsī* ‘sit the IELTS test’ can be abbreviated by means of clipping to 考雅 *kǎo yǎ* ‘sit the IELTS test’, which is homophonous with 烤鸭 *kǎoyā* ‘roast duck’. This pun has such widespread appeal that it is now possible to find many IELTS training centres and websites making use of the expression in this sense. Partly in order to clarify the fact that 烤鸭 *kǎoyā* is being used to refer to humans, not a specialty dish, it is very common to find it modified by the plural marker *men* when used in this sense.

Sentence (15) suggests that *men* sometimes has the function of adding the feature [+HUMAN] to an otherwise nonhuman noun. One genre that provides more examples of the plural suffix used with nonhuman referents is children’s books, in which animal protagonists are frequently portrayed as having human characteristics. Similarly, the CCTV television production 动物世界 *Dòngwù Shìjiè* ‘World of Animals’, hosted by Zhao Zhongxiang, is said to contain examples of this kind of usage. The reasons for this may be related to the humanizing effect of the plural morphological ending and the desire on the part of presenters to arouse increased interest in the topic.

4.7. Metalinguistic commentary

Against the background of the semantic distinction between 人们 *rénmen* ‘people’ and 人 *ren* ‘person’ discussed in the previous section, it is particularly interesting that one speaker commented explicitly on his own use of the plural suffix with this word and his reason for doing so.

- (16) 然后我说但愿在未来的日子里，让抛弃了我的人们，注意很多人抛弃过我，所以用了复数的人们。
(Luo Yonghao, 20/01/11)

Ránhòu__wǒ__shuō__dànyuàn__zài__wèilái__de__rìzi__lǐ,__ràng__pàiqì-
le__wǒ__de__**rén-men**,__zhùyì__hěn__duō__rén__pàiqì-guò__wǒ,__suǒyǐ__yòng-
le__fùshù__de__**rén-men**.

Then__1SG__say__if.only__LOC__future__ATT__date__in,__let__reject-
PFV__1SG__ATT__**person-PL**,__note__very__many__person__reject-
EXP__1SG,__so__use-PFV__plural__ATT__**person-PL**. principle.

*Then I said I hope that some day in the future the **people** who have rejected me ... note there are lots of people who’ve rejected me, that’s why I used the plural “**people**”...*

This example demonstrates that speakers sometimes consciously choose to add the plural marker *men* to emphasize plurality, particularly if they wish to point out to the listener the unexpectedly large number referred to. It also shows that for some speakers 人们 *rénmen*

¹¹ The reader will notice that the transliteration has been cleverly chosen such that its Chinese characters happen also to have a relevant meaning. This type of transliteration, in which the characters are not only pronounced with a similar sound to the model word in the donor language but also have a similar semantic denotation, has been referred to in the literature as a ‘phonosemantic match’ (Zuckermann 2003 and Zuckermann 2004).

‘people’ may function as a straightforward plural form of 人 *ren* ‘person’, rather than necessarily carrying the different denotation defined by dictionaries.

5 Discussion

Most standard grammar references and existing linguistic studies imply or state explicitly that the use of the plural marker *men* in Modern Standard Chinese (a) is subject to certain structural and semantic constraints, (b) serves primarily, if not solely, to emphasize the plural number, collective meaning and inclusiveness of the noun and (c) is essentially optional. The data presented in this paper, by contrast, indicate that the use of the plural morpheme (a) is subject to fewer constraints than has been suggested, (b) can perform many functions, only one of which is to highlight the collective meaning of the noun and (c) is often strongly preferred and occasionally even obligatory. One of the most intriguing questions is why and under what circumstances plural morphology co-occurs with a noun that already has plural denotation in a language that is characterized as not having obligatory plural marking.

The standard analysis appears to account for roughly two thirds of the occurrences of the plural marker in this study. In other words, there are a multitude of factors – structural, semantic and pragmatic – influencing the use of the plural marker, many of which have not previously received sufficient attention in the literature. These factors are discussed separately below.

5.1. Syntactic and semantic constraints on the plural marker *men*

The data examined in this study point to the conclusion that there are fewer structural restrictions governing the use of the plural marker than linguists and grammarians have proposed. The stipulation that nouns modified in any other way cannot simultaneously take inflection for number (Ross and Ma 2006) clearly does not hold up under investigation. The constraint (implied or explicit) that *men* should not be used with quantifiers like 所有 *suǒyǒu* ‘all’, 很多 *hěnduō* ‘many’ and 一些 *yīxiē* ‘some’ that already have an inherent plural meaning (cf. Kubler 1985; Li and Cheng 李德津, 程美珍 2008; Si 思果 1994) was contravened repeatedly. Even the structural restriction that nouns modified by an explicit number expression (such as 几个 *jǐ ge* ‘several’ or 三个 *sān ge* ‘three’) cannot take the plural marker was violated more than once, suggesting that structures of the form [Number + CLF + N-PL] (e.g. 三个孩子们 *sān ge hái zǐ men* three CL child-PL ‘three children’) might be becoming grammatically more acceptable.

Previous written data from mainland China have revealed that the semantic restriction prohibiting the use of the plural marker *men* with nonhuman nouns is occasionally violated (Guo and Zhou 郭鸿杰, 周国强 2003). By contrast, the data in this study did not include any such usage. In view of the fact that the use of the plural marker *men* with animate nonhuman and inanimate nouns was exceedingly rare even in the studies which found isolated examples of this kind, it is possible that this difference is merely a function of the statistical infrequency of this usage. On the other hand, it is equally possible that there are regional and/or register variations in the use of the plural marker.

5.2. The many and varied functions of the plural marker *men*

Two factors influencing the use of the plural marker that are posited in the literature are the desire to give particular weight to the plurality of a noun and the sense conveyed of the group as a whole rather than the individuals in it. While it is certainly true that these factors play a role in a large number, perhaps even the majority, of occurrences of the plural marker *men*, it is nevertheless worth observing that a number of other constraints (semantic, pragmatic and

structural) also seem to operate, constraints which appear to have been largely overlooked in the literature to date.

Firstly, there are indications that the plural marker *men* may be adopting some of the characteristics of a diminutive suffix, including pragmatic connotations of intimacy, affection, endearment and even deprecation. It would be worthwhile testing this hypothesis further, as cross-linguistically this appears to be a rather unusual process of development. Numerous other studies of diminutives in a variety of languages mention the grammaticalization of nouns to diminutive suffixes (e.g. Bakema and Geeraerts 2000) – which, indeed, has been the process undergone by the two well established diminutive suffixes in Mandarin Chinese, *er* ‘son’ and *zi* ‘child; son’. Few, if any, document the development of the functions of a diminutive by a plural marker. Corroborating evidence for the morpheme *men* contributing to pragmatic nuances of intimacy, affection and endearment is provided by the relatively high frequency of occurrence in the data for this study of pluralized compounds containing the element 同 *tóng* ‘same’, including 同学们 *tóngxuémen* ‘classmates’, 同窗们 *tóngchuāngmen* ‘classmates’ and 同事们 *tóngshìmen* ‘colleagues’.

Secondly, the plural marker sometimes contributes to the organization of discourse and information structure. Some speakers seem to feel that considerations of balance and parallelism play a role in determining whether or not a NP requires the addition of the plural marker. Similarly, the plural marker *men* may be adopting an additional structural function, namely that of signalling the close of longer NPs. This can be seen particularly in NPs containing a long attribute modifying the head noun, which finally appears at the end of the phrase. Relevant to this is the fact that a number of Chinese linguists have made the observation that Chinese sentences are becoming longer (Guo 郭鸿杰 2007; He 何焯 2004; Hu 2006; Wang 王力 1984, 1985; Xie 谢耀基 2001), and that this is especially due to the increasing length and grammatical complexity of attributes preceding noun phrases (He 何焯 2004; Hu 胡开宝 2006; Wang 王力 1985). It seems feasible, therefore, that the use of the plural marker *men* appended to nouns modified by complex attributes to signal the close of the NP may be one strategy for facilitating the processing of information.

Finally, there appears to be a clear semantic distinction between the singular and plural forms of a noun in certain contexts. One semantic function of the singular form is its use as a general designation with exceptionless application; therefore, the plural inflexion tends to be used to avoid this implication in situations where that is not the intended meaning. Attested examples in the data of this particular function of the plural marker have to date been found only with the noun *ren* ‘person’.

5.3. Lexical diffusion

Previous researchers have observed that the use of the plural marker *men* is increasing in frequency, possibly owing to the influence of European languages, in particular English (Guo and Zhou 郭鸿杰, 周国强 2003; Kubler 1985). It has further been suggested that the use of *men* may be spreading by lexical diffusion and that this may play a role in determining when the plural marker is used to explicitly mark the grammatical number of a noun with plural reference (Cook 2009). A popular explanation for the spread of linguistic developments, lexical diffusion has been used to explain the transmission of both phonological and morpho-syntactic change (e.g. Aitchison 2001; Chen and Wang 1975; cf. McMahon 1994). The lexical diffusion model essentially claims that a linguistic innovation is initially associated with one or two isolated words or expressions and gradually expands its area of application by attaching itself to more and more lexical items. That this might hold true for sound change is relatively easy

to imagine. But grammatical change too, it is claimed, is frequently associated with – or triggered by – particular lexical items (Aitchison 2001). The theory is that speakers grow accustomed to a certain new, reinterpreted or extended syntactic structure by hearing it often in conjunction with a few common words and that later it spreads to new contexts (Aitchison 2001).

One example of the spread of morpho-syntactic change by lexical diffusion comes from Tok Pisin, a creole spoken in Papua New Guinea. The morpheme *ol*, analysed as a plural quantifier or determiner, is attached to plural nouns in what amounts to double marking of the plural form. It first appeared with names of tribes, nations and places; progressed to nouns denoting humans; and finally appeared with inanimate nouns (Aitchison 2001). Interestingly, this has some parallels both with the historically documented spread of the plural morpheme 诸 *zhū* Chinese (Meisterernst 2012) and with the current development of the plural marker *men*. The plural morpheme *men* was originally used only with pronouns, later spreading to nouns denoting humans. Recent years have seen the Chinese plural marker *men* used with nonhuman and even inanimate nouns (Guo and Zhou 郭鸿杰, 周国强 2003).

If we accept that the popularity of the suffix *men* is on the rise and if we likewise accept that lexical diffusion may be the mechanism by which its use is spreading, then we would expect to find a marked difference in the frequency with which various nouns undergo morphological pluralization.

In order to test this hypothesis, it was necessary first to select the nouns to be included in the scope of comparison. Rather than try to rely on guesswork, it was decided to include all human nouns appearing on page 3 of each of the transcripts numbered 1, 11, 21, 31, 41, 51, 61 and 71.¹² Bearing in mind that the lower the token count is, the less reliable the frequency percentage is likely to be, it was decided to retain for comparison only the nouns that were used in a plural sense more than 20 times in the corpus. Of course, it was not always possible with every base form occurrence of every noun type to determine conclusively if the speaker had intended it to be understood as having plural reference; therefore, in line with a cautious approach to data analysis, only those tokens where the plural reference was reasonably certain were counted. The relevant data for the nouns satisfying these criteria are summarized in Table 2 below, with types listed in decreasing order of frequency of occurrence with plural meaning.

The table is organized in order of frequency of occurrence and reveals that, as a general tendency, nouns that are used more frequently overall are also more likely to attract the plural ending. Note that this is an important aspect of the lexical diffusion model, which states that linguistic change is likely to attach itself first to the most popular lexical items and spread by degrees to less popular lexical items.

The table also reveals quite a stark contrast between the frequency of morphological pluralization for the three nouns occurring most commonly with the plural ending, 孩子 *háizi* ‘child’, 朋友 *péngyou* ‘friend’ and 同学 *tóngxué* ‘classmate’ (refer also to discussion in Section 4.1 above), and the equivalent frequency for the rest of the nouns in Table 2, taken as a whole.

¹² The following expressions were excluded from data collection for this exercise as they were deemed to be too similar to pronouns in their behaviour and semantic designation: 别人 *biérén* ‘other person; other people; others’, 大家 *dàjiā* ‘everyone’, 人家 *rénjiā* ‘other people; they; someone’. The noun 人 *rén* ‘person’ was also excluded on the grounds of the contrast between its base form and plural form being of a different nature from that pertaining to other human nouns (refer also to Section 4.6).

Mandarin Chinese word	English gloss	Tokens with plural meaning	Tokens with plural marker	Percentage
péngyou 朋友	friend	130	10	7.7%
háizi 孩子	child	101	11	11.0%
tóngxué 同学	classmate	76	11	14.5%
guānzhòng 观众 ¹³	viewer	74 ¹⁴	0	0.0%
yǎnyuán 演员	actor	60	1	1.7%
xiǎohái 小孩	child	42	0	0.0%
gēmí 歌迷	song fan	39	1	2.6%
lǎoshī 老师	teacher	24	2	8.3%
gēshǒu 歌手	singer	22	0	0.0%
xiōngdì 兄弟	brothers	22	0	0.0%
yǐngmí 影迷	movie fan	22	0	0.0%
xuésheng 学生	student	21	1	4.8%

Table 2: Proportion of times plural meaning is signalled by plural marker with selected human nouns in episodes of ‘A Date with Luyu’ from 2011

perhaps relating to the different internal compositions of the two words – that can account for this difference satisfactorily. Likewise, a more substantial database and a higher token count are needed to determine whether nouns like 老师 *lǎoshī* ‘teacher’ and 学生 *xuésheng* ‘student’ should be categorized as favouring or disfavouring morphological pluralization. One suspects that, all other things being equal, nouns like 冠军 *guànjūn* ‘champion’, 人才 *réncái* ‘talented person’ and 主持人 *zhǔchí rén* ‘host’ – all of which were included in the initial terms of reference for the comparative exercise above but discarded because of their low token count – would be even less likely than most of the nouns appearing in Table 2 to occur in the plural form.

Overall, the corpus data indicate that some human nouns when used in a plural sense may be more likely to attract the plural marker than others. It can thus be seen that the analysis in this subsection provides tentative support for the hypothesis that the use of the plural marker may be spreading by lexical diffusion. This is an interesting claim, as it seems that few researchers have to date drawn upon the lexical diffusion model to explain morphological phenomena. Lexical diffusion is widely accepted as a model for phonological change and has also been used to help explain syntactic change. Although lexical diffusion has been proposed more generally as a model for morpho-syntactic change, few studies have as yet satisfactorily demonstrated its application specifically to morphological change. The data in this study, although by no means conclusive, do at least suggest that it is worth investigating this question further.

¹³ The noun 观众 *guānzhòng* ‘audience; viewers’ tends to be used in the plural or collective sense, presumably on account of containing the morpheme 众 *zhòng* ‘throng; crowd’. However, it can also be used in the singular sense, as demonstrated by the fact that the phrase 一个观众 *yige guanzhong* ‘one/a viewer’ appeared in the corpus four times in three different episodes.

¹⁴ In order to facilitate comparison of nouns used in similar ways, it was decided to include only occurrences of this type that seemed to be referring to viewers as multiple individuals rather than the audience en masse. Applying this distinction as carefully as possible yielded 74 tokens of 观众 *guanzhong* in the sense of ‘viewers’ and 68 tokens of 观众 *guanzhong* in the sense of ‘audience’. In fact, however, this distinction made no difference to the overall percentage count.

5.4. Optional or obligatory?

The claim in the literature that Chinese nouns are unmarked for number (Ross and Ma 2006; Yip and Rimmington 2006) and that the use of the plural marker *men* is “entirely optional” (Li and Thompson 1981: 40) or “not obligatory in any context” (Norman 1988: 159) does not seem to stand up to investigation. In some contexts explicit marking of the plural sense is quite definitely preferred, whether for pragmatic or structural reasons. In a very small number of situations we have seen that it may even be obligatory for semantic reasons. There are also suggestions that for a small number of nouns used in certain reasonably clearly defined constructions and/or with particular pragmatic emphasis, it no longer seems to be the case that inflexion for number is optional when the plural meaning is intended.

As discussed in the preceding section, the fact that the plural marker seems to occur more frequently with certain nouns, or that certain nouns appear to lend themselves readily to plural inflexion, points to the conclusion that the use of *men* may be spreading via lexical diffusion. It is suggested that this process is relatively advanced in the case of words like 孩子 *háizi* ‘child’, 朋友 *péngyou* ‘friend’ and 同学 *tóngxué* ‘classmate’. It may be that as a noun is used increasingly frequently with the plural inflexion, it then progresses to a stage in which inflexional marking for number becomes preferred. If a noun favouring pluralization occurs in a syntactic context (e.g. after a long attribute, cf. Section 4.5.1) and/or a pragmatic context (e.g. expressing overtones of affection, endearment etc., cf. Section 4.4) that likewise favours explicit marking of plural number, the preference for appending the plural marker *men* induced by a congruence of factors may become so strong that it feels almost obligatory to some native speakers. This is interesting because it concurs with earlier research into the use of the structural particle *de*, which likewise found that several factors converge to determine the likelihood of *de* being used in a syntactically optional environment to connect two noun phrases (Chappell and Thompson 1992).

6 Conclusion

There is clearly a contrast between the findings of this study, based on spoken data, and conventional analyses of the plural marker *men*, most of which have focussed on the written language. This study has highlighted a number of interesting observations. These include the findings that morphological pluralization in Mandarin Chinese using the plural marker *men* is apparently influenced by a range of semantic, pragmatic and structural factors and that *men* is sometimes capable of performing multiple roles simultaneously. Moreover, depending on how many considerations come into play in a given sentence and how binding they are, the use of the plural marker is not always entirely optional. Not surprisingly, the results of this analysis also reflect the well-known fact that so-called native speaker “grammaticality” judgements are sensitive to the complex interplay of a range of factors. That is, in assessing the grammatical felicity or otherwise of a sentence, native speakers take into consideration not only morpho-syntactic well-formedness, but also their sense of the “naturalness” of the utterance, which encompasses aspects such as prosody, phrasal balance, information flow and overall comprehensibility. It would be interesting to investigate the possible impact of the findings presented here on other hypotheses current in Chinese morpho-syntax, for example the mass noun hypothesis. It would also be interesting to analyse the syntactic positions in which noun phrases with plural morphology appear, as well as features such as determinacy and indeterminacy; such approaches could offer further insights into the constraints operating on

men, as well as perceptions of its grammaticality. As is often the case in studies of this sort, although the present database of over half a million characters is of a reasonable size for a corpus of spoken data, there are still questions that have yet to be answered conclusively. It is hoped that this may be achieved in the future with recourse to larger data sets and/or diachronic comparisons.

7 List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations were used in the word-for-word / morpheme-for-morpheme translations of the examples of Mandarin Chinese provided in this paper to indicate meanings and grammatical functions:

1PL	first person plural pronoun
2PL	second person plural pronoun
3PL	third person plural pronoun
1SG	first person singular pronoun
2SG	second person singular pronoun
3SG	third person singular pronoun
ADV	adverbial
ATT	attributive
BEN	benefactive
CL	classifier
COM	comitative
COMP	complement
COP	copula
CS	change of state
DEM	demonstrative pronoun
DMN	diminutive
EXP	experiential
EXST	existential

LOC	locative
MP	modal particle
NEG	negation
OBJ	object
ORD	ordinal
PASS	passive
PFV	perfective
PL	plural
Q	question
PROG	progressive
REDUP	reduplication
RES	resultative
SUP	superlative

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