

Article

Revisiting the Modal Verb *huì* with an Interactional Linguistic Approach

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Abstract: This study takes an interactional linguistics and conversation analysis-based approach to analyze the modal verb *huì* ‘will’ in the recurrent formulaic of commissive actions, [*wǒ huì* X (*de*)] ‘I will X.’ Data analyses show that this format has two variations differentiated by the prosodic stress on *huì*. The format with the unstressed *huì* is often observed in turn-initiating position where the speaker offers to perform a future action or informs the recipient of their arrangement of an established activity. The format with the stressed *huì* appears in both initiating and responding positions although it is less frequently observed. Stressed *huì* is often used to reassure the recipient of an existing commitment to performing a future action. This study highlights the significance of prosody in the study of modal verbs and the benefits of studying individual words in a linguistic formula situated in specific interactional contexts.

Keywords: modal verb; prosodic stress; interactional linguistics; formulaic language



Citation: Zhou, Yan. 2022. Revisiting the Modal Verb *huì* with an Interactional Linguistic Approach. *Languages* 7: 294. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages7040294>

Academic Editors: Jidong Chen and Hongyin Tao

Received: 1 April 2022

Accepted: 27 October 2022

Published: 21 November 2022

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1. Introduction

Social interaction is a multimodal process where participants utilize multiple layers of semiotic resources including verbal, vocal, visual behaviors; sequential location; and even physical environments, to interact with each other and at the same time accomplish social actions such as making a request or a proposal (Goodwin 2000, 2013; Kendon 2004; Enfield 2009). Traditional approaches in linguistics have progressed the understanding of human languages and social interaction tremendously, but many results were based on constructed sentences, written discourse, or spoken language generated in a lab environment that is highly conceptualized and context-free (Tao 1996; Ford and Thompson 1996; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2017). Given the complexity of multimodality and sequential context, findings in these traditional studies might not be applicable to natural conversations. Without considering other aspects of social interaction, it is also difficult to answer questions such as how social interaction is achieved with limited verbal resources, how participants know the timing of turn-taking, and how stances and emotions are displayed through non-verbal channels.

Informed by discourse-functional grammar (Chafe 1980; Du Bois 1980; Hopper and Thompson 1980) and conversation analysis (Schegloff 2007; Sidnell and Stivers 2012), interactional linguistic researchers study linguistic resources in the context of conversation sequences and social actions, or “grammar in interaction” (Ford and Thompson 1996; Thompson et al. 2015). One of the prominent topics that attracts a growing interest is prosody in natural conversations. Suprasegmental prosodic features including pitch, loudness, and duration are observed to perform crucial interactional functions such as turn-taking and sequence organization (See Couper-Kuhlen and Selting’s (2017) online chapter E, Prosody and Phonetics). Regarding Mandarin conversations, Tao (1996) challenges the traditional view on grammatical structures in Mandarin and argues that intonation unit is the basic unit in Mandarin conversation.

This study applies an interactional linguistic methodology to investigate how prosodic stress and morphosyntactic forms co-construct social actions in naturally occurring Mandarin conversations. Specifically, I study what type of commissive actions are performed when the modal verb *huì* is stressed and unstressed in the format [*wǒ huì* X (*de*)]¹. In what follows, Section 2 reviews previous research on the modal verb *huì*, social action format, commissive actions, and prosody in conversation. Section 3 introduces data and methodology of this study. Section 4 presents the result of the analysis. Section 5 provides a discussion on social interaction, followed by a concluding remark.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Modal Verb *Huì*

Huì is a common modal verb in Mandarin Chinese with two widely recognized usages: expressing ability (Ex 1) and indicating possibility (Ex 2). Following Palmer's (2001) modality system, previous studies in Chinese linguistics have categorized the former as dynamic modality and the latter as epistemic modality (Lv 1979; Zhou 1989; Tang 1979; Tiee 1985; Ding 1979; Tsang 1981; Hsieh 2002; Peng 2007). In addition to the two widely recognized usages, there are discussions concerning other meanings of *huì*, including its function as a marker of future tense (Chen 2020; Wang 1947), its habitual use in sentences where an event happens habitually as the consequence of certain conditions (Lamarre 2016; Fan 2016), and its promising use that conveys the speaker's voluntary commitment to perform a future action (Hsieh 2002; Peng 2007; Ma 2014; Chen 2020). The discussion is especially heated regarding the promise use of *huì*. Huang (1999) and Peng (2007) argue that statements such as Ex 3 place the speaker under an obligation to perform the named future action. They believe that when the speaker and the agent of the future action is also the subject of the sentence, *huì* should be considered a marker of "personal deontic." Ma (2014) agrees on the promise meaning of *huì* but classifies *huì* as a dynamic modality marker that indicates the subject's willingness to perform the named future action. Hsieh (2002) considers *huì* as a subtype of epistemic modality because *huì* expresses the speaker's assertion about the future action that they will perform. Some scholars claim that the promise sense of *huì* stems from the first-person pronoun subject and the agentive verb rather than being the function of *huì* itself (Xu 1992; Lu 2002).

Ex 1 Ability (dynamic modality) (Lv 1979)

你	会不会	唱	这	个	歌
nǐ	huìbùhuì	chàng	zhè	ge	gē
2sg	can-not-can	sing	this	CL	song
'Can you sing this song?'					

Ex 2 Possibility (epistemic modality) (Peng 2007)

将来	总厂	选拔	肯定	会	有	你
jiānglái	zōngchǎng	xuǎnbá,	kěndìng	huì	yǒu	nǐ
future	general	selection,	definitely	will	exist	2sg
'You will be selected in the future general selection for sure.'						

Ex 3 Promise use (Huang 1999; as cited in Peng 2007)

你	等	着	吧,	我们	会	考	第一名	的
nǐ	děng	zhe	ba,	wǒmen	huì	kǎo	dìyī míng	de
2sg	wait	PRG	PRT	1pl	will	test	the first	PRT
'Just wait. We will get the first rank in the exam.'								

Categorizing and disambiguating different meanings of modal verbs, like the studies above, has been the typical line of research in modality systems across languages. However, this approach overlooks the intertwined relationship among the different modalities at diachronic and synchronic levels. Cognitive linguistic studies have found that different meanings of the same modal verb tend to be closely associated due to their diachronic grammaticalization process. Most languages follow the path of grammaticalization from root modality (deontic and dynamic) to epistemic modality (e.g., Coates 1983; Bybee et al. 1994; van der Auwera and Plungian 1998). For example, the modern-day English modal

verb *will* developed from its Early Modern English usage of first-person intentions, willingness, and promises, to its current meaning of future and prediction (Bybee 1988; Coates 1983; Bybee et al. 1994). As a result of the diachronic development, multiple meanings of the same modal verb often co-exist in a synchronous environment, especially in natural conversations where various linguistic and contextual factors interact with each other. Regardless of the disagreement on its grammaticalization path (Zhou 1989; Jiang 2007; Fan 2016; Chen 2020), *huì* can display multiple modality meanings in the same utterance, such as intention and volition (dynamic modality), commissive and obligations (deontic modality), and agentivity and future tense (Chen 2020). Therefore, in natural conversation, it is problematic to categorize *huì* into a single modality category as such categorization inevitably neglects the possibility of other modal meanings.

This study investigates the modal verb *huì* in the context of social action format, explores the sequential environments where the format [*wǒ huì X (de)*] occurs recurrently and the social actions performed in those environments, including not only promising but also other actions that indicate the speaker's commitment to accomplishing a future action.

2.2. Social Action Format and Commissive Actions

Since the proposal of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), researchers in various fields have been exploring how speakers “do things” with language (Austin 1962). Interactional linguists and conversation analysts approach this issue by investigating how speech acts, also termed as social actions, such as requests and assessments are formulated and ascribed by interlocutors in natural conversation (Schegloff 2007; Levinson 2012). Primary factors considered in this line of research include sequence organization—whether it's an initiative action or a response to a previously initiated action (Stivers 2012); designs of conversation turns—including linguistic formats of individual turn constructional units (TCU) and nonverbal resources such as gaze and gestures; and social relationship dynamics such as epistemic authority (who has the right to know and knows more, see Heritage and Raymond (2005)), beneficiary relationships (who is the agent and who is the beneficiary of the action, see Clayman and Heritage (2014) and Couper-Kuhlen (2014)), entitlement and deontic relationships (who has the right to determine the future event either through requests or commitment, see Curl and Drew (2008); Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012)). Among these aspects, linguistic formats of social actions and their interaction with other factors in action formation and ascription are attracting increasing interest among interactional linguists whose studies have also contributed to the understanding of typology and universals of actions in world languages (Floyd et al. 2014).

Social action format is a recent innovation in studying grammar in social interaction (Goodwin and Goodwin 1992; Fox 2007). It is recognized that some language formats are recurrently used to perform a certain type of action as opposed to other action types, and recipients of such utterances can recognize and respond to these actions accordingly (Couper-Kuhlen 2014). The idea of recurrent formats in action formation aligns with previous linguistic notions such as constructions in construction grammar (Fillmore 1988) and formulaic expressions in usage-based functional grammar (Bybee and Hopper 2001). What distinguishes social action format from others is that it sees grammar as contingent on the sequential environment and simultaneously sets constraints for the subsequent turn of talk (Sacks et al. 1974). For example, Curl and Drew (2008) find that request formats with modal verbs such as *Can you* and *Could I* show the speaker's high entitlement to make the request and little consideration of contingencies on the requestee's end; by contrast, *I wonder if* prefaced requests orient to contingencies and show a low entitlement to make the request. Thompson et al.'s (2021) recent study finds that speakers of English use recurrent grammatical formats—*let's*, *why don't we*, modal declaratives, and modal interrogatives—for proposals in joint activities based on the recipient's disposition to accept the proposal in the conversation.

Commissive actions refer to those that commit the speaker to a future course of action in various degrees (Searle 1969, 1976), such as promising and offering. The combination

of first person-pronoun and modal verbs (e.g., Ex 4, *I will, I shall*) has been observed as a common format used to display the speaker's commitment to performing a future action (Houtkoop-Steenstra 1987; Maynard 1990; Lindström 1999, 2017; Thompson et al. 2015), which is consistent with findings in speech act theory and functional linguistics (Austin 1962; Coates 1983; Bybee et al. 1994). Couper-Kuhlen's (2014) study on directive-commissive actions (e.g., proposal, offer, request, and suggestion) in English especially provides a framework to analyze various factors in social action formats, including subjecthood, interrogativity, conditionality, modality, and imperativity.

In Mandarin Chinese, observations made on commissive actions mainly focus on the morphosyntactic resources of promising (Peng 2007; Dong 2010), such as performative verbs (e.g., Ex 7), time references (e.g., Ex 6), modal verbs (e.g., Ex 4), and adverbs (e.g., Ex 5). Among these, implicit forms, such as time references and adverbs are more common than explicit forms, such as performative verbs in Mandarin (Dong 2010; also see Searle's (1969) discussion on implicit and explicit commissive speech acts).

Ex 4 Modal verb

我 会 帮助 你 的 (Dong 2010)
 wǒ huì bāngzhù nǐ de
 1sg will help 2sg PRT
 'I will help you.'

Ex 5 Adverb

我 一定 帮 你 (Peng 2007, p. 23)
 wǒ yídìng bāng nǐ
 1sg definitely help 2sg
 'I will definitely help you.'

Ex 6 A combination of an adverb and a time reference

我 明天 一定 来 (Dong 2010)
 wǒ míngtiān yídìng lái
 1sg tomorrow definitely come
 'I'll definitely come tomorrow.'

Ex 7 A combination of a performative verb and an adverb

我 保证 决 不 再 犯 (Dong 2010)
 wǒ bǎozhèng jué bú zài fàn
 'I promise that I will not make the same mistake anymore.'

Some scholars argue that the first-person pronoun, action verbs/verb phrases, and the particle *de* collaboratively contribute to the expression of commitment (or promises) when used with the modal verb *huì* (Xu 1992; Shi 1994; Lu 2002). In other words, [*wǒ huì X (de)*] might be a recurrent social action format of commissive actions in Mandarin conversations. A systematic analysis, therefore, is necessary to understand not only the modal verb *huì* but also the commissive actions in Mandarin conversations.

2.3. Prosody, Intensifying Emphasis, and Informational Focus

Prosody is a crucial component of social interaction and is found to contribute to various aspects of conversations. For example, stress-signaled beats are considered useful metrics for English speakers to manage turn-taking and turn organization (Couper-Kuhlen 2004; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2017; Local and Walker 2004); topic-shifting is often projected by a high-pitch onset (Couper-Kuhlen 2003; see Wang and Xu (2011) for observations in Mandarin)); and an increased pitch and loudness often signals surprise and astonishment in German (Selting 1996).

Although there is no direct correlation between prosody and social actions, researchers find that prosodic designs can affect action formation and ascription through interacting with lexical-syntactic designs (Selting 1996; Walker 2010; Local and Walker 2004) and other contextual factors in conversation (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2017). Couper-Kuhlen (2012), for instance, points out that polar questions that are usually produced with a rising intonation can function as news receipts when designed with a falling intonation. Another

example is the responsive token *oh*. Heritage (1984) refers to *oh* as a “change-of-state” token that acknowledges the receipt of new information. Later studies report *oh* does more than “change-of-state”: when produced with a rising-falling contour, an extra high pitch, and longer duration, *oh* displays “surprise” (Reber 2012); when delivered with a reduced pitch and loudness, *oh* displays “disappointment” (Couper-Kuhlen 2009).

Intensifying emphasis (IE) is an example of how prosody operates on the lexical level. It features longer duration, greater intensity, pitch prominence, and longer voice onset time for plosives (Niebuhr 2010; Ogden 2012). It is frequently found on numbers, quantifiers, and extreme case designs to present noteworthy information in upgraded assessments and other actions such as complaining and storytelling (Niebuhr 2010; Ogden 2012).

Another related concept is informational focus from information structure theory. Informational focus is a type of focus—the prominent part of a sentence compared to other elements (Bolinger 1958; Lambrecht 1994) that is used to mark the message that the speaker wants to be interpreted as new information (Halliday 1967; Chafe 1976; Xu 2004). Informational focus operates on information structure, which represents the speaker’s assumptions about the hearer’s state of knowledge (see more discussions on information structure and different types of focus in Lambrecht (1994) and Li (2009)). Information focus can be classified into broad informational focus and narrow informational focus (Li 2009). Focuses can be realized by prosodic prominence, syntactic constructions (e.g., cleft construction), and morphological markers (Féry and Ishihara 2016) in different languages. In Mandarin, the cleft constructions [*shì* ... *dōu*] ‘is’ and [*lián* ... *yě* ...] ‘including ... all/also’ (Shyu 2014) are common syntactic devices used to mark focus. Prosodic means of focused syllables in Mandarin include longer duration, higher mean intensity, and magnified pitch contour (Chao 1968; Shen 1993; Wang and Xu 2011; Chen et al. 2016). The overall intonation pattern of informational focus in Mandarin shows a tri-zone pitch range control that consists of little change before the focus, expansion under the focus, and compression after the focus (Xu and Xu 2005), which is consistent with observations of informational focus in other languages.

3. Data and Methodology

The dataset of this study includes 42 h of telephone conversations in the CALLHOME and CALLFRIEND corpora and 12 h of face-to-face conversations among friends and family. Collected by the Linguistics Data Consortium in the 1990s, the CALLHOME and CALLFRIEND corpora consist of telephone conversations between native speakers of Mandarin Chinese between North America and various locations overseas (Canavan and Zipperlen 1996; MacWhinney and Wagner 2010). The face-to-face conversations were recorded by the researcher during the summer of 2019 in mainland China. The two subsets can represent naturally occurring Mandarin conversations in everyday life.

The current study adopts a two-step procedure to identify the target [*wǒ huì* X(*de*)] format. In the first step, the search command *combo +s* “我^^会^*” **.cha* was used in the corpus processing program Computerized Language ANalysis (CLAN, MacWinney (2000)) to generate an exhaustive list of strings that begin with the first-person singular pronoun *wǒ* and contains the modal verb *huì*. This search command allows the search results to include other elements (such as time references and modal adverbials) between *wǒ* and *huì*, as well as the particle *de*. A total of 121 word strings in the telephone subset and seven strings in the face-to-face subset were matched in the first step.

In the second step, some clear cases of non-commisive string were excluded manually, including fifty-three cases in which *huì* is used as “meeting” or the subject is not a first-person pronoun (e.g., Ex 9 and Ex 8), two cases (from the same conversation) that do not have a predicate following *huì*, eight cases that have first-person pronoun but express the speaker’s ability (all from telephone conversations, e.g., Ex 10), and twenty-seven cases that express the speaker’s epistemic certainty (possibility; all from telephone conversations, e.g., Ex 11).

Cases of ability and epistemic possibility are identified and excluded based on criteria discussed in previous studies, especially by Coates (1983) and Peng (2007). Specifically, the ability cases focus on the speaker's skills (e.g., Ex 1 and Ex 10); and the epistemic possibility cases focus on the speaker's judgment or prediction of a future event. In some cases, the distinction between epistemic and commissive use could be ambiguous, such as in Ex 11. The current study takes modal expressions such as *dàgà* 'probably,' *kěnéng* 'maybe,' and *wǒ juéde* 'I think' as major indicators of epistemic possibility and treats the utterances as a whole unit expressing how certain the speaker is toward the possible occurrence of the future event. For example, Ex 11 focuses on the speaker's judgment of the possibility that he works "there." The epistemic modals 'I think' and 'probably' downgrade his certainty of the future event.

Ex 8 Second-person pronoun

你	可能	过几天	就	会	收到	我	的	信
<i>nǐ</i>	<i>kěnéng</i>	<i>guòjǐtiān</i>	<i>jiù</i>	<i>huì</i>	<i>shōudào</i>	<i>wǒ</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>xìn</i> .
2sg	maybe	in.a.few.days	as.soon.as	will	receive	1sg	NOM	letter

'You may receive my letter in a few days.' (Callhome_0110)

Ex 9 "meeting"

我	星期五	开完	会	我	再	去.
<i>wǒ</i>	<i>xīngqīwǔ</i>	<i>kāiwán</i>	<i>huì</i>	<i>wǒ</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>qù</i> .
1sg	Friday	complete	meeting	1sg	not.until	go

'I will go after having my meeting on Friday.' (Callhome_1359)

Ex 10 Ability

我	还	会	说	英语	呢.
<i>wǒ</i>	<i>hái</i>	<i>huì</i>	<i>shuō</i>	<i>yīngyǔ</i>	<i>ne</i> .
1sg	even	can	speak	English	PRT

'I can even speak English! (Callhome_0667)

Ex 11 Possibility

我	想	大概	会	在	那里	工作.
<i>wǒ</i>	<i>xiǎng</i>	<i>dàgài</i>	<i>huì</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>nàlǐ</i>	<i>gōngzuò</i> .
1sg	think	probably	will	at	there	work

'I think {} will probably work there.' (Callhome_0754)

The two-step procedure results in thirty-six candidate cases of commissive actions performed by the format [*wǒ huì* X (*de*)]. Note that the goal of the two-step screening procedure is to compile a collection of candidate cases of commissive actions performed by the format. The screening is by no means one hundred percent accurate, given the lack of sequential analysis. Based on the basic-level transcripts provided by CALLHOME and CALLHOME corpora, cases in this collection were transcribed or re-transcribed following CA conventions (Hepburn and Bolden 2012) with some adjustments recommended by Lee et al.'s (2017) for Mandarin data. The transcription symbols can be found in the Appendices A and B.

As a crucial component of this study, prosodic analysis is conducted using the software Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2022). Stressed syllables are identified based on criteria including a wider pitch range, a lengthened duration, and a higher intensity value (Chao 1968; Shen 1990, 1993; Jin 1996; Li 2002), among which pitch range and duration are used as primary indicators (Shen 1990; Li 2002). Statistical analyses are used to test whether the three prosodic parameters differ significantly between the stressed and unstressed cases of *huì*. Informational focus coincides with the prosodic prominence of the utterance signaled by an enlarged pitch range and longer duration on the focused item and a suppressed pitch range on the following words (Gårding 1987; Jin 1996; Xu 1999; Li 2009).

Interactional linguistics and conversation analytical methods, as well as information structure theory, are used to analyze the collected cases. Specifically, I investigate sequential position—whether the commitment is produced as a response to a prior action or an initiating action, the turn design of the commissive actions, and the recipient's next-turn response (Stivers and Sidnell 2012; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2017).

4. Result

4.1. An Overview of the Format with the Stressed and Unstressed *Huì*

A close investigation of the collection reveals that the [*wǒ huì X (de)*] format has two variations based on whether *huì* is stressed or not, and the variations are observed in different sequential environments. This section presents an overview of the prosodic features of stressed *huì* and unstressed *huì*, followed by their distributions in different commissive actions and sequential positions. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 present the sequential analyses of examples from each type.

4.1.1. Prosodic Features of the Stressed and Unstressed *huì*

By measuring the duration, pitch range, and mean intensity of the commissive *huì* and comparing them to those of the surrounding syllables, twenty-eight cases with unstressed *huì* and eight cases with stressed *huì* are identified. Ex 12 and Ex 13 are examples of the two variations of *huì*. Although the two extracts are produced by two speakers with different voice quality and pitch ranges, the prosodic analyses provide evidence for the presence or absence of prosodic prominence on *huì*.

In Ex 12, A and B are talking about her graduation plan. B has mentioned that she is moving to a different state for work. A seeks confirmation about B's graduation time in lines 01 and 02, and B informs her specific plans through lines 03 to 08. The target format [*wǒ huì X (de)*] is used in line 06.

Ex 12 Callfriend_4227 Graduation

- 01 A: 你 不是 说- 到 十月份(.) 几 月份 毕业.
nǐ búshì shuō- dào shíyuèfēn(.) jǐ yuèfēn bìyè.
 2sg NEG-is say till October which month graduate
 'Didn't you say that you will {graduate} in October? Which month {will you} graduate?'
- 02 十月份 吗.
shíyuèfēn ma.
 October Q
 '[Is it] October?'
- 03 B: 但是 我- 我 现在 是 在 写 论文,
dànshì wǒ- wǒ xiànzài shì zài xiě lùnwén,
 but 1sg 1sg now is PROG write dissertation
 'But I am currently writing my dissertation,'
- 04 然后 我:
ránhòu wǒ:
 then 1sg
 'and then I'
- 05 B: .h 啊:.
.h a:.
 INT
 'Mm.'
- 06 → 八月 中旬 我 会 过去 上班:
bāyuè zhōngxùn wǒ huì guòqù shàngbān:
 August mid 1sg will go.over go.to.work
 In mid-August, I will go there and start working.
- 07 然后 我 再 回来 答辩 就对了.
ránhòu wǒ zài huílai dábiàn jiùduìle.
 then 1sg again return defend PRT
 'And then I will come back to defend {my dissertation}.'
- 08 然后 我 就是说(.) 十二月份 应该 可以 毕业.
ránhòu wǒ jiùshìshuō(.) shíèryuèfēn yīnggāi kěyǐ bìyè.
 then 1sg DM December should can graduate
 'And then I mean, I should be able to graduate in December.'

- 09 A: ^哇:: 你 太 棒 了. (x)
 ^wa:: nǐ tài bang le. (x)
 INT 2sg too awesome CRS
 'Wow! You are awesome!'
- 10 B: yeah, yeah.
- 11 不 知道 啦,
 bù zhīdào la.
 NEG know PRT
 '[I] don't know.'
- 12 我们 看着办 就对了.
 wǒmen kànzhebàn jiùduìle.
 1pl figure.out PRT
 'We will figure it out.'

Figure 1 shows the waveform, spectrogram, pitch contour, and intensity of line 06 in Ex 12 where *huì* is produced without stress.

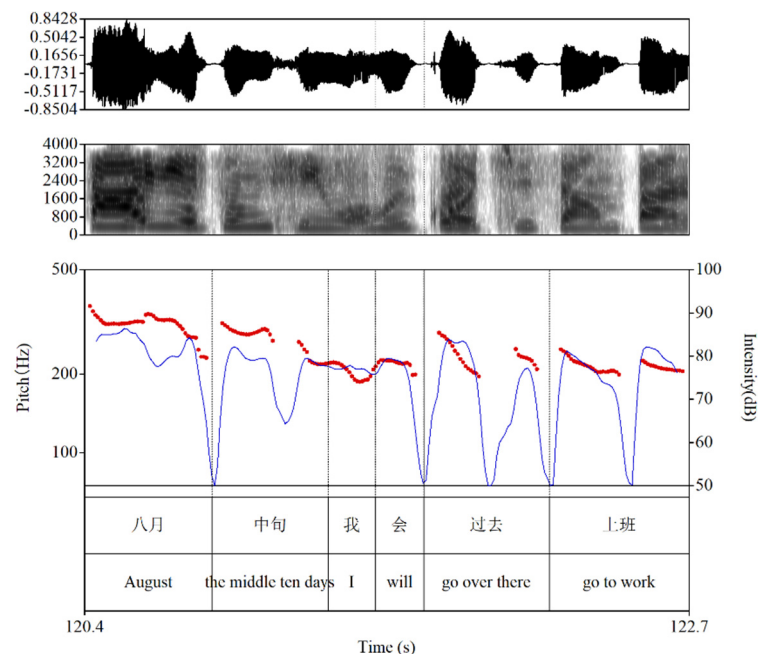


Figure 1. Waveform, spectrogram, pitch contour, and intensity of line 07. The red line represents the pitch contour, and the blue line represents the intensity contour.

As shown in Figure 1, the time phrase *bāyuè zhōngxùn* 'mid-August' has the highest pitch and longest duration, which is consistent with the previous findings that a new topic or sequence tends to be produced with a high onset (Couper-Kuhlen 2003). This expression of time is also the narrow informational focus of the utterance that the speaker orients to deliver to the recipient. The next pitch peak of the utterance is noticeably on *guò*, the first syllable of *guòqù* 'go over there' (286 Hz), which also has the largest pitch range of 91 Hz, the highest intensity of 77.9 dB, and the duration of 240 ms. In contrast, the modal verb *huì* is produced with a relatively lower mean intensity (70.9 dB, compared to the mean intensity of the utterance 73.2), shorter duration (183 ms, compared to the 229 ms average duration of a syllable in this utterance), and more importantly a reduced pitch range (27.5 Hz). Considering that both *huì* and *guò* are falling tones produced adjacently in the same utterance, *huì* is noticeably unstressed with lower values of pitch range, duration, and intensity.

In Ex 13, the son (SON) promises his father (DAD) that he will go back home. *Huì* is stressed in both line 01 and line 03.

Ex 13 Callhome_0848 “I will go back (for you)”

01 SON:→	反正	我:	尽快	会:	回去	一趟.
	<i>fǎn</i>	<i>wǒ:</i>	<i>jǐnkuaì</i>	<i>HUI:</i>	<i>huíqu</i>	<i>yìtàng.</i>
	anyway	1sg	as.soon.as.possible	will	return	once
	‘Anyway, I will go back as soon as possible.’					
02	你们	放心	吧.			
	<i>nǐmen</i>	<i>fāngxīn</i>	<i>ba.</i>			
	2pl	no.worry	PRT			
	‘You should not worry.’					
03	[我 尽]	快	给 您	[会 回]	去 的.	
	[<i>wǒ jǐn</i>]	<i>kuài</i>	<i>gěi nín</i>	[<i>HUI huí</i>]	<i>qu de.</i>	
	1 st	as.soon.as.possible	for 2sg	will	return	PRT
	‘I will go back {for you} as soon as possible.’					
04 DAD:	[哎.]			[对 对.]		
	[<i>ai.</i>]			[<i>duì duì.</i>]		
	INT			right	right	
	‘Okay. Right, right.’					

Figure 2 shows the prosodic features of line 01. *Huì* is produced with an audibly extended duration (258 ms) compared to other syllables in the sentence (140 ms per syllable). *Huì* is also produced with an expanded pitch range (45.05 Hz). In terms of intensity, *huì* is produced louder with a peak intensity measure of 77 dB and a mean intensity measure of 72.52 dB, which is slightly higher than the mean intensity of the sentence (71.27 dB).

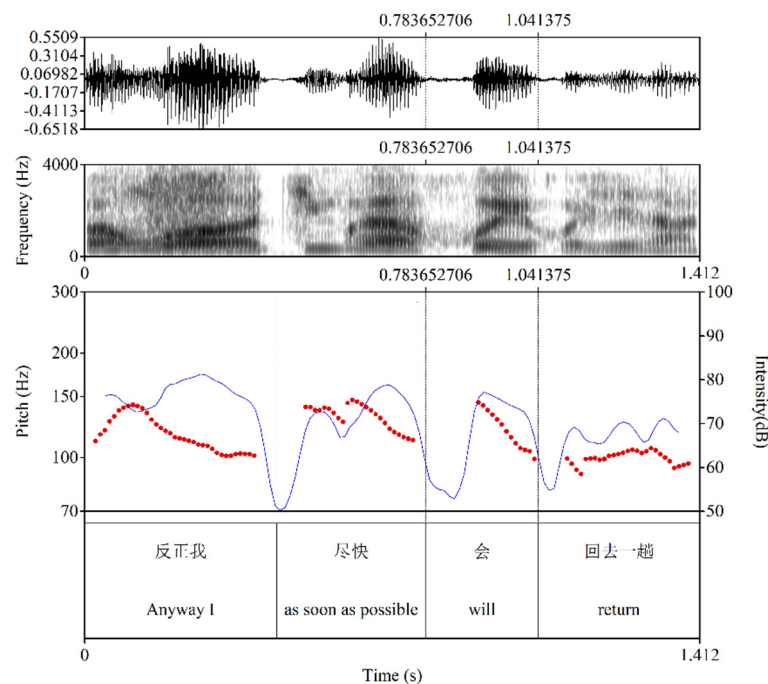


Figure 2. Waveform, spectrogram, pitch contour, and intensity of line 01 in Ex 13.

A comparison of pitch range, duration, and mean intensity of the two tokens of *huì* in Ex 12 and Ex 13, and the values of these indicators of the surrounding falling syllables are shown in Table 1. In Ex 13, *huì* is produced with a noticeable expanded pitch range and longer duration, compared to the preceding syllable *kuài*. In contrast, *huì* in Ex 12 is produced with reduced pitch range, duration, and mean intensity compared to the succeeding falling syllable *guò*.

Table 1. Duration, mean intensity, and pitch range of *huì* in Ex 12 and Ex 13.

Prosodic Features	<i>huì</i> in Ex 12	<i>guò</i> in Ex 12	<i>huì</i> in Ex 13	<i>kuài</i> in Ex 13
Pitch range (Hz, logarithmic frequency)	27.5	91	45.7	28.8
Duration (ms)	183	240	245	161
Mean intensity (dB)	70.9	77.9	72.5	75.8 ²

Descriptive and analytical statistic tests are conducted to test whether the acoustic parameters of stressed and unstressed *huì* are significantly different across the collected cases.

As the first step, boxplot, the Shapiro–Wilk normality test, and the F-test are used to identify the distribution of the two categories of *huì*. Results of the Shapiro–Wilk normality test show that the two samples are not normally distributed in terms of pitch range (p -value = 0.4426 for the stressed group and p -value = 0.004802 for the unstressed group), therefore the non-parametric two-sample Wilcoxon rank sum test is used to compare the pitch range parameter. The two samples are normally distributed in terms of duration (p -value = 0.133 for the stressed group, and p -value = 0.201 for the unstressed group). However, their variances are significantly different (p -value = 0.001119), hence the Walch two-sample t -test is used to compare the duration parameter (Good and Pennebaker 2012; Gries 2021). Lastly, the two groups are both normally distributed (p -value = 0.7693 for the stressed group and 0.359 for the unstressed group) with a similar variance (p -value = 0.4121) in terms of mean intensity³; therefore, Student’s t -test is used to compare the mean intensity parameter.

Figure 3 shows that the distribution of pitch range in the two categories is not normal, and the variances are quite different. The median pitch range of stressed *huì* is 41.8 Hz (IQR = 51.6), whereas the median pitch range of unstressed *huì* is 23.3 Hz (IQR = 33.8). The Wilcoxon test showed that the difference between the two samples was significant with a moderate effect size (p -value < 0.05, effect size $r = 0.35$).

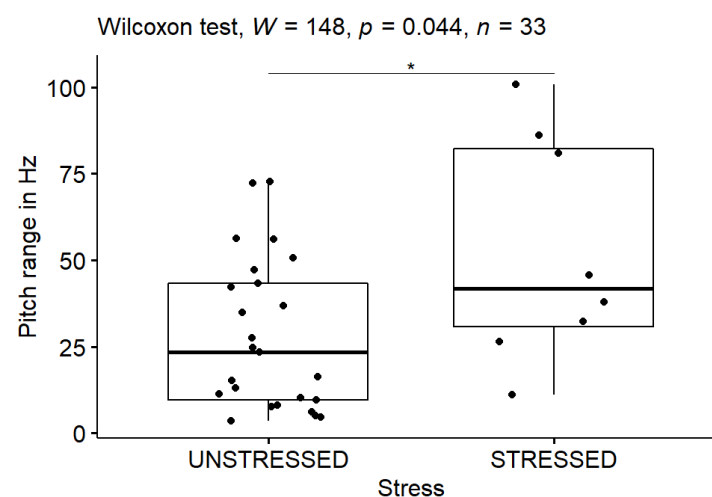
**Figure 3.** Boxplot for pitch range grouped by stress.

Figure 4 shows that the duration of the two categories is more normally distributed but the variances are significantly different. The mean of duration of stressed *huì* is 235 ms (sd = 73.7), whereas the mean duration of unstressed *huì* is 145 ms (sd = 30.8). The two-sample Walch t -test is used since it is more robust to unequal variances and outliers. The result showed that the difference between the two samples was significant (p -value < 0.05).

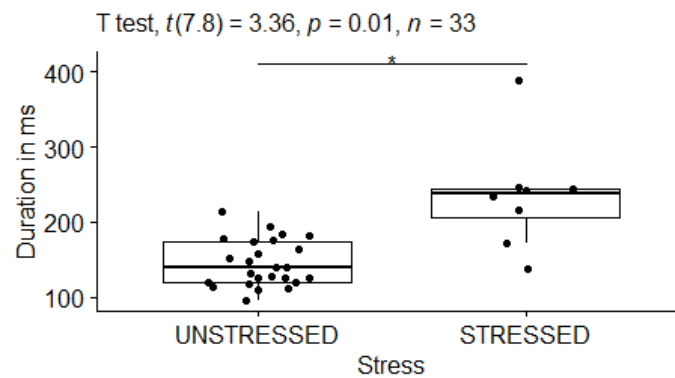


Figure 4. Boxplot for Duration grouped by stress.

Figure 5 shows that the two categories of *hui* have a normal distribution in mean intensity with a similar variance, which meets the assumptions of the Student's *t*-test. The mean of the mean intensity of stressed *hui* is 67.4 Hz (sd = 6.65), and the mean of unstressed *hui* is 66.9 Hz (sd = 5.39). The Student's *t*-test results showed that the two samples are not significantly different (*p*-value = 0.87). However, this result does not invalidate the prosodic prominence of stressed *hui* since intensity is not the primary indicator of prosodic stress in Mandarin.

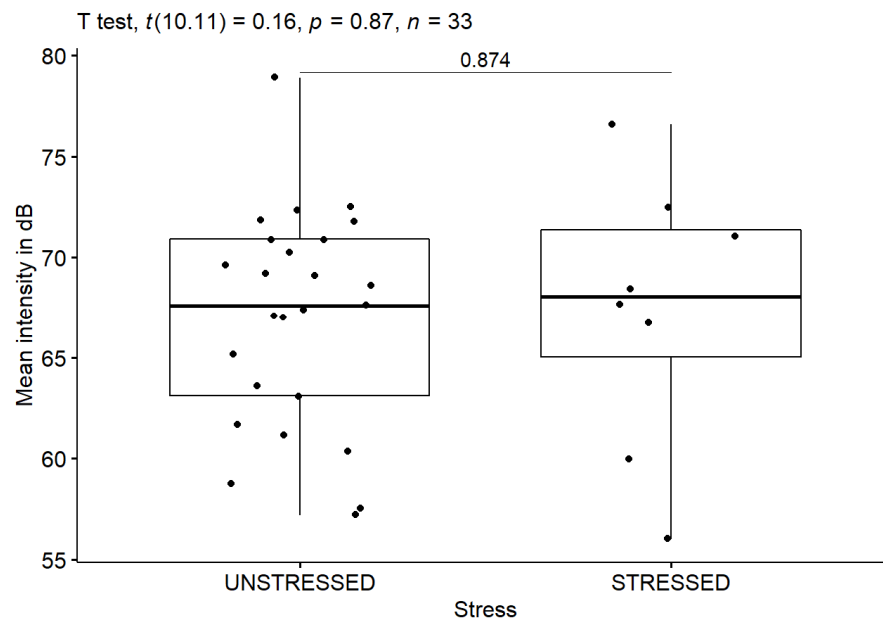


Figure 5. Boxplot for Mean intensity grouped by stress.

Despite the variances of voice quality and pitch ranges among different speakers of both genders in natural conversation, the statistical analysis results presented above show that across the collected cases, stressed *hui* is produced significantly more prominent than unstressed *hui* in terms of pitch range and duration.

4.1.2. Distribution of Stressed and Unstressed *hui* in Sequences

In the current collection, the unstressed *hui* is predominantly observed in initiating position with only two exceptional cases. The stressed *hui* is found in both initiating and responding position. Table 2 shows the distribution of the two variations in different positions and social actions.

Table 2. Distribution of stressed and unstressed *huì* in different sequential environments.

Variations	Initiating Position	Responding Position	Total
[wǒ huì X (de)] with the unstressed <i>huì</i>	Offering: 6	/	6
	Informing arrangement: 20	Agency: 2	22
[wǒ huì X (de)] with the stressed <i>huì</i>	Reassuring of an existing commitment: 4	Reassuring of a granted request: 2 Claiming agency: 2	8
Total	30	6	36

Among the twenty-eight observed cases of unstressed *huì*, six of them are found in initiating position as the speaker offers to perform a future action for the interest of the recipient, and twenty of them are used when the speaker informs the recipient of an arrangement of an established future activity. Only two cases are found in responding position, both of which are used to claim agency with a stressed self-referential pronoun *zìjǐ* ‘self.’

The functions of the [wǒ huì X (de)] format with the unstressed *huì* in initiating position can be explained by information structure. When *huì* is unstressed, an informational focus lands on other parts of the turn, i.e., the X part, where the speaker delivers the new information. The information could be (1) the future action as one whole piece of information (broad informational focus in Ladd (2008)), which often consists of simple verb phrases, or (2) a specific information of the established future activity such as a time expression in a more complex verbal phrase of X (narrow informational focus in Ladd (2008)). In the former case, the particle *de* are often observed cooccurring with *huì* to display the speaker’s certainty towards the future action, which is consistent to the observation in previous studies (Li et al. 1998; Xu 2008). In the latter case, *de* is often absent in the [wǒ huì X (de)] format⁴ since the speaker orients to informing the arrangement of the future activity as a narrow informational focus.

The stressed *huì* is observed less frequently (8 out of 36) than the unstressed *huì* (28 out of 36) in the current dataset, and it is more evenly distributed in initiating (4 out of 8) and responding position (4 out of 8). When *huì* is stressed, the speaker’s strong commitment to perform the named future action is emphasized. Informational focus is no longer available to be placed on other items. In this environment, the [wǒ huì X (de)] format reassures the recipient of the speaker’s commitment to performing a future action that has been promised but not fulfilled. This includes (1) commitment made to fulfill an obligation existing before the current conversation and (2) commitment made to reassure the recipient of a granted request, which is a response to the recipient’s pursuit. Additionally, the stressed *huì* is also found in responding position to claim the speaker’s agency.

The above results shows that the format with the unstressed *huì* is significantly more common than the stressed *huì* in the current collection. Moreover, a two-tailed Fisher’s exact test was conducted to determine if there was a significant association between sequential position–initiating or responding–and the stress on *huì*. The *p* value equals 0.0144, indicating that the association is statistically significant. A possible account for this result is that speakers make arrangements more often than reassurance of commitment/promises in everyday life, and the result might be different in registers where reassurances of commitment are expected more frequently such as in political discourse.

In what follows, I present the sequential analyses of each category, including their subcategories.

4.2. Unstressed *huì*: Offering or Informing an Arrangement of an Established Activity

The variation with unstressed *huì* is often used in informing the recipient of the speaker’s my-side arrangement of a future activity, which could be (1) the speaker’s offer to perform a future action for the recipient’s benefit, or (2) the speaker’s arrangement of an established activity that needs the recipient’s attention or cooperation.

In Ex 14, four kids are playing a board game. Lele plays a dominant role in the group's daily interactions⁵ and has been winning this game for a few rounds. This extract starts at the beginning of a new round of the game where everyone just received their cards and Lele reveals his role as the monarch who has to kill other roles to win the game. While others are busy organizing their cards, Lele initiates a strong commitment in line 06 without a request from anyone, 'I will let you survive more rounds.' The commitment is not responded to—neither accepted nor rejected—by anyone. By making this commitment, Lele displays his understanding that the other players would prefer to survive more rounds in the game and expect him to kindly keep them alive for a longer time, which presupposes Lele's dominant agency in determining the future activity and in this game.

Ex 14 00071_0945 'I will let you survive several more rounds'

- 01 Lele: 啊 呀 呀 呀 呀.
a ya, ya ya ya. ((exclamation))
 INT INT INT INT INT
 'Oh/Wow.'
- 02 Niman: 我 这 次 没 看见.
wǒ zhè cì méi kànjiàn.
 1sg this time NEG see
 'I didn't see {it} this time.'
- 03 Zili/lele: 一 二: 三:
yī èr: sān:
 one two three
 'One two three.'
 ((Zili and Lele are counting the number of cards that another player draws from the deck))
- 04 Niman: 其实 我 [自己 也 不 知道 自己 是 什么 牌.]
qíshí wǒ [zìjǐ yě bù zhīdào zìjǐ shì shénme pái.]
 actually 1sg self also NEG know self is what card
 'Actually I' don't know what cards I have either.'
- 05 Zili/lele: [四:: (.) 五:]
[sì:: (.) wǔ:]
 four five
 'four five'
- 06 Lele:→ 我 会 给 你们 活-
wǒ: huì gěi nimen huó-
 1sg will let 2pl live
 'I will let you live'
- 多 活 几 个 回合 的.
duō huó jǐ gè huíhé de.
 more live several CL round PRT
 'live more rounds.' ((gazing at another player))

Figure 6 shows the waveform, spectrogram, pitch contour, and intensity contour of line 06 in Ex 14. Multiple prosodic features indicate that *huì* in this utterance is not produced with a prosodic prominence: the duration of *huì* (177 ms) is not longer than the surrounding syllables (*wǒ*, 231 ms; *gěi* 184 ms); the pitch range of *huì* (43.4 Hz from the highest pitch to the lowest pitch) is not significantly higher either (*gěi* is produced with a rising pitch contour with a higher pitch range of 71.1 Hz); the mean intensity of *huì* (71.8 dB) is only slightly higher than the following *gěi* (70.1 dB).

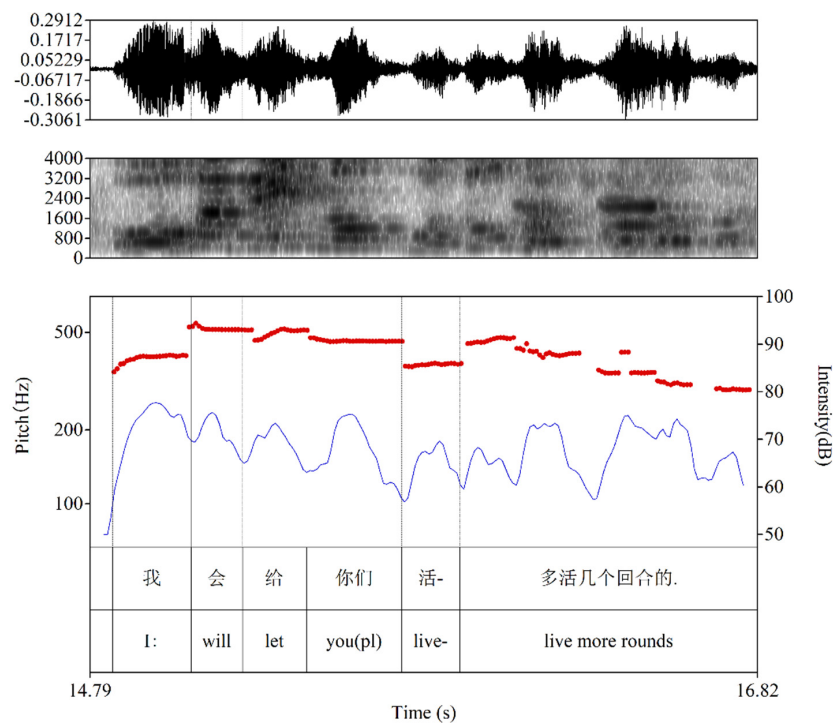


Figure 6. Waveform, spectrogram, pitch contour, and intensity of line 06 in In.

In Ex 15, the speaker offers to benefit a third-party using the *[wǒ huì X(de)]* format with an unstressed *huì*. The two speakers, mom (MOM) and son (SON), have just discussed a relative's plan to immigrate to a foreign country. It is indicated in the earlier part of the phone call that the mom contacted this relative, Shuanglin, frequently, and she is the one who launches this topic. The son, who lives in the U.S., is more knowledgeable about the immigration process and starts providing information and suggestions. In line 03, MOM reports her plan to tell the relative (the son's cousin) this information, 'I will tell Shuanglin.' The promise shows that MOM treats informing the relative of this important information as a responsibility of hers, and this understanding is shared by the son as he responds 'uh right' in line 04, followed by another piece of advice for the cousin. In other words, the two speakers have established a common ground that the information will be delivered to the relative by the mom after the call, and the mom's promise confirms this expected commitment.

Ex 15 Callhome_1393 'I will tell Shuanglin'

- 01 SON: 他们 可能 就是 这样 一 种 政策.
 tāmen kěnéng jiùshì zhèyàng yì zhǒng zhèngcè.
 3pl maybe just.is this one CL policy
 'Their policy {in Canada} is just like this,'
- 02 美国 没有 那 种 政策. hhh.
 měiguó méiyǒu nà zhǒng zhèngcè. hhh.
 U.S. don't.have that CL policy
 'The U.S. doesn't have such a policy.'
- 03 MOM:→那 我 会 告诉- 告诉 霜林 一下.
 nà wǒ huì GÀOsu- gāosu shuānglín yíxià.
 DM 1sg will tell tell NAME briefly
 'In that case, I will tell Shuanglin.'
- 04 SON: 呃: 对:.
 e: duì:.
 INT correct
 'Uh, right.'

- 05 如果 她: 如果 去 加拿大 的话 呢:
 rùguǒ *tā:* *rùguǒ* *qù* *jiānádà* *dehuà* *ne:*
 if 3sg if go Canada PRT PRT
 ‘If she, if {she} goes to Canada,’
- 06 那么: 可能 是不是- (..)
 name: *kěnéng* *shìbúshì-* (..)
 DM maybe is-not-is
 ‘Then maybe, is it {that}’
- 那么 她 也 可能 机会 就-
 name *tā* *yě* *kěnéng* *jīhuì* *jiù-*
 DM 3sg also maybe opportunity just
 ‘then she might also {get more} opportunities’
- 就 多 一些 就是了.
 jiù *duō* *yìxiē* *jiùshìle.*
 just more some DM
 ‘{there will be} more opportunities.’
- 07 MOM: 嗯.
 en.
 INT
 ‘Yeah.’
- 08 (0.2)
- 09 MOM: 哎 (.) 家里 那些 药 啊.
 ai (.) *jiālǐ* *nàxiē* *yào* *a.*
 INT home those medicine PRT
 ‘Okay. Regarding the medicine at home,’

Figure 7 shows that the prosodic stress of this utterance is placed on the first syllable of the verb *gàosu* ‘to tell,’ which embodies the pitch peak (242.6 Hz), high pitch range (41.6 Hz), the highest intensity (78.2 dB), and the longest duration (323 ms). That is, in this example, *huì* does not demonstrate prosodic prominence with a highest pitch of 225.4 Hz, a pitch range of 23.3 Hz, a maximum intensity of 73.1 dB, and a time duration of 163 ms.

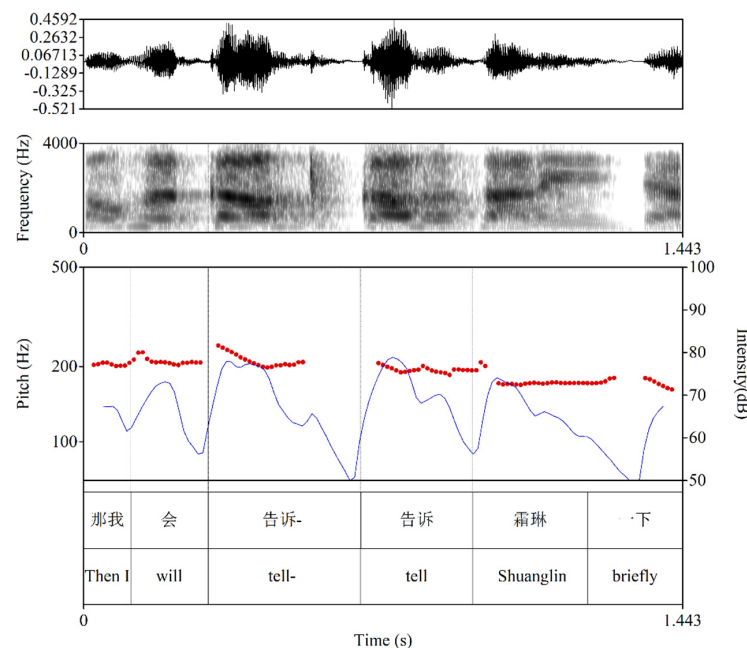


Figure 7. Waveform, spectrogram, pitch contour, and intensity of line 03 in Ex 15.

When the speaker adds more details to the future action, such as time expressions, the [*wǒ huì X (de)*] format is used to inform of the speaker's arrangement of an established future activity. In terms of turn design, the particle *de* is dropped in these situations and an emphasis might be added to the informational focus of the utterance—the details of the arrangement. Similar to the phenomenon of my-side telling in Pomerantz (1980), information expressed with [*wǒ huì X*] tends to be the speaker's my-side arrangement of the future activity known by both participants, which makes a confirmation or agreement relevant in the recipient's next turn.

In Ex 16, the daughter (DAU) has been telling her mom (MOM) about her summer schedule. In line 02, the daughter informs the mom that 'I will call you on that weekend.' The format with an unstressed *huì* is used in this environment as this arrangement is part of her summer schedule, which has been established in the prior conversation. The mom does not respond to this informing action until after a one-second-long silence. Noticing the silence, which often signals problems of the prior turn and projects dispreferred actions, the daughter provides an account for the arrangement in line 07, 'because Leinuo has not called for a while.' In line 09, the mom agrees with the arrangement ('uh, ok ok ok, no problem'). The further expansions through lines 11–17 provide additional evidence that the daughter's my-side arrangement orients to seek the recipient's confirmation on the future activity.

Ex 16. Callhome_0735 'I will call you on that weekend'

- 01 DAU: 然后 (.) 我 在 那儿 (在)-
ránhòu (.) *wǒ zài nàr (zài)-*
 then 1sg at there again
 'And then {in} there I {will}-'
- 呃: 可能 是 下 下 个 星期:
uh: kěnéng shì xià xià gè xīngqī:
 uh maybe is next next CL week
 'uh, maybe the week after next week,'
- 中间 那 个 week- 那 个: (.) ^周末.
zhōngjiān nà ge week- nà ge: (.) ^ZHOU MO.
 middle that CL week that CL weekend
 'that weekend in the middle {of the month},'
- 02 → 我 会 给 你们 打电话.
wǒ huì gěi nǐmen dǎdiànhuà.
 1sg will to 2pl call
 'I will call you.'
- 03 (1.0)
- 04 MOM: 呃.
uh.
 INT
 'Uh'
- 05 CHL: 下 下 个.
xià xià gè.
 NEXT NEXT CL
 'The week after next week.'
- 06 MOM: [下 下 个-]
[xià xià gè-]
 next next CL
 'Next next'

- 07 DAU: [因为 那时候] 雷-
[yīnwèi nàshíhòu] léi-
because that.time NAME
'Because at that time, Lei-'
- 因为 雷洛 好 [久 没 打] 电话 了.
yīnwèi léiluò hǎo [jiǔ méi dǎ] diànhuà le.
because NAME long.time NEG make phonecall CRS
- 08 MOM: [嗯 行,]
[ēn xíng,]
INT okay
'Hmm, okay,'
- 09 MOM: 呃 行 行 行 (.) 没事.
uh xíng xíng xíng (.) méishì.
INT okay okay okay no.problem
'Uh, Okay, no problem.'
- 10 (0.8)
- 11 DAU: 行 吗:
xíng ma:
okay Q
(Is that) okay?
- 12 MOM: 呃
uh.
INT
Uh.
- 13 DAU: 下 个 周 [末.]
xià gè zhōu [mò.]
next CL weekend.
'Next weekend.'
- 14 MOM: [行] 行 行,
[xíng] xíng xíng,
INT INT INT
'Okay, okay, okay./That works.'
- 15 (0.2)
- 16 DAU: 行 [吗:]
xíng [ma:]
okay Q
'{Is that} Okay?'
- 17 MOM: [哎] 可以.
[ai] kěyǐ.
INT okay.
Yeah, {that} works.

DAU's orientation to informing her arrangement is also displayed in the prosodic design of her turn in line 02. As shown in Figure 8, the prosodic prominence of this line is placed on *zhōumò* 'weekend,' rather than *huì*. With a wider pitch range (316.2 Hz), higher mean intensity value (66.1 dB), and longer duration (588 ms) compared to other parts of the utterance (the highest and lowest pitch of *wǒ huì gěi nǐmen dǎdiànhuà* 'I will call you' is 340.5 Hz and 73 Hz, respectively; the mean-energy intensity is 61.7 dB; and the speech rate 128 ms per syllable), the time expression *zhōumò* is the pitch peak (423 Hz) and narrow informational focus of the utterance. In other words, what is emphasized in this utterance is not the commitment to perform but how to perform, which can be seen as an alert to the recipient so that they can be prepared accordingly. *Huì* is not produced with audibly prominent stress with an average time duration of 128 ms, and its mean intensity is lower than that of the whole clause (60.4 dB).

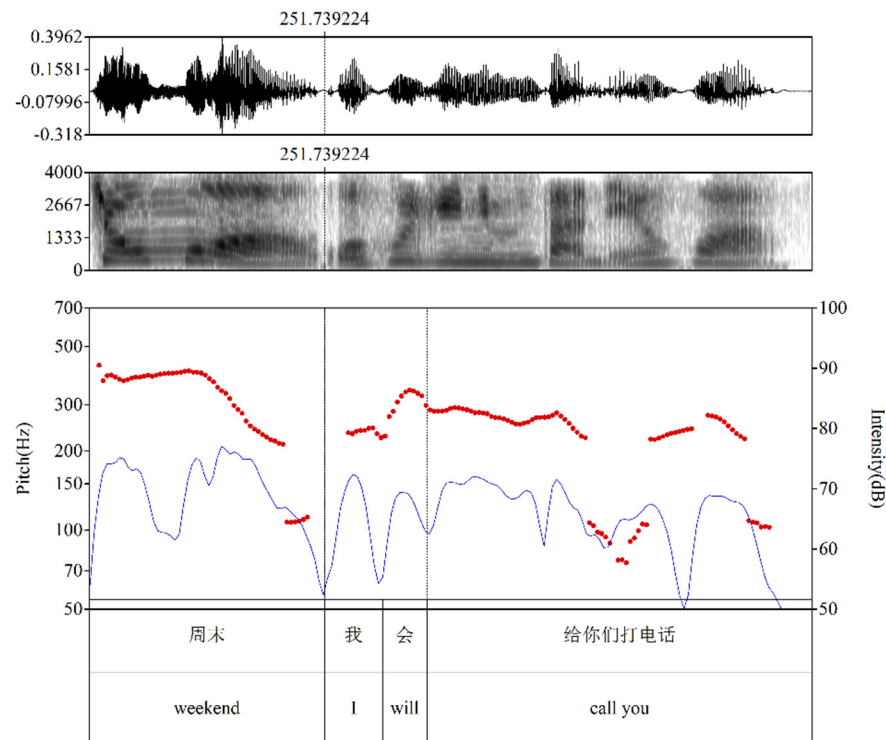


Figure 8. Waveform, spectrogram, pitch contour, and intensity of the second half of line 02 in Ex 16.

[*wǒ huì X (de)*] with unstressed *huì* in the above examples highlights that the future activity has been established or expected prior to the current talk and displays the speaker's understanding of the recipient's expectation in the irrealis world. In cases where no specific information is included in the utterance and the particle *de* is present, the speaker adopts the format [*wǒ huì X de*] with the unstressed *huì* to initiate an offer to perform the future action, which at the same time assures their commitment expected to the recipient. In the environment where details of the future action such as time expressions are emphasized as the narrow informational focus and the particle *de* is dropped, the speaker orients to inform about a my-side arrangement of the established future activity and seeks a confirmation or an agreement from the recipient.

The function of *huì* in the format becomes especially salient when compared to commissive actions performed by simple declaratives without *huì*, such as line 02 in Ex 17 and lines 04 and 05 in Ex 18. Both conversations occur between same gender friends.

In Ex 17, B has mentioned writing to A prior to this segment. In line 01, A accepts the earlier proposal, and in line 02 B commits to the letter-writing activity with a response format matches A's utterance: a same response token as A, *xíng* 'okay' and a simple declarative, 'I write a letter to you.' In the third TCU of her turn in line 03, B makes an arrangement with the modal verb *huì*. Considering the information structure of B's utterances, B's commitment in line 02 is made to a new activity, whereas the arrangement in line 03 is based on the assumption that the letter-writing activity has been established in the previous sequence (lines 01–02).

Ex 17 Callfriend_0111 'I will write a letter to you'

01 A: 行 那 你 就 写 信 过来 吧.
xíng nà nǐ jiù xiě xìn guòlai ba.
 okay then 2sg just write letter over PRT
 'Okay, you can just write a letter to me.'

02 B: 行(.) 我 把- 我 给 你 写 封 信.
xíng (.) wǒ bǎ- wǒ gěi nǐ xiě fēng xìn.
 okay 1sg BA 1sg to 2sg write CL letter
 'Okay, I will write a letter to you.'

03 → 然后 我 在 信 里 会
 ránhòu wǒ zài xìn lǐ huì
 and.then I at letter inside will
 'And inside the letter, I will'
 写 些 什么东西 给 你.
 xiě xiē shénmedōngxi gěi nǐ.
 write CL something to 2sg
 'write something to you.'

In Ex 18, A and B are talking about business cooperation opportunities with another company. A makes a request in line 01, 'Could you go ask {them} again'. B's response in lines 04 and 05 are both declarative sentences without the modal verb *huì*. Unlike line 03 in Ex 17 and other examples, B makes the commitment to perform a future action that is just requested in the question-answer sequence. In other words, it has not been established or expected before the current course of talk.

Ex 18 Callfriend_0756 'I'll go ask.'

01 A: 这 个 你(.) 能不能-
 zhè ge nǐ(.) néngbunéng-
 this CL 2sg can-not-can
 '[Regarding] this, could you-'
 能不能 再 去 问 一下.
 néngbunéng zài qù wèn yíxià.
 can-not-can again go ask briefly
 'could you go ask {them} again?'

02 B: 好.
 hǎo.
 okay
 'Okay.'

03 A: 看看.
 kànkàn.
 look look
 'Take a look.'

04 B:→ 我- 我 去 问 一下.
 wǒ- wǒ qù wèn yíxià.
 1sg 1sg go ask briefly
 'I'll go ask.'

05 → 唉 我 来 问 一下.
 ai wǒ lái wèn yíxià.
 INT 1sg come ask briefly
 'Yeah, let's me ask.'

06 A: 还- 你- 对.
 hái- nǐ- duì.
 also 2sg right
 'Also- you- right.'

4.3. Stressed *huì*: Reassuring an Existing Commitment

Unlike previous examples where the speaker uses the unstressed *huì* in offering or informing my-side arrangement of an established activity, the [*wǒ huì X (de)*] format with stressed *huì* is used to reassure the speaker's commitment to an existing obligation or a granted request where a higher degree of commitment is due.

When the speaker has not fulfilled an existing obligation and the interlocutor shows an understanding that the action is not likely to happen in the future, the speaker initiates a promise with stressed *huì* to reassure their commitment to performing the future action. In the following Ex 19 (the same conversation as Ex 13), the son (SON) has been living in the United States for many years and is not able to take care of his parents back home,

which violates the traditional value of “filial piety” in Chinese culture. In lines 01–06, the dad (DAD) launches a pre-sequence telling regarding the content of a letter he has sent to the son, which is a discussion on the possibility for the son to return to China. In lines 07–08, the dad informs that son does not need to go back home if he is occupied with work in the States. Dad’s practice in these two lines can be seen as an account he offers to the son for his unavailability, ‘you should prioritize your job.’ This account not only shows his current understanding that the son is not likely to go back home but also licenses the son to disregard the existing family obligation. In line 11, the son initiates a promise to visit his parents, ‘I will go back as soon as possible,’ which is partially repeated in line 14 with an additional sentence-final particle *de*. As shown in Figure 2 presented in Section 4.1, the first occurrence of *huì* is audibly stressed. The son’s promise here rejects the account offered by the dad and reassures his commitment to fulfilling the family obligation. The dad’s response in lines 15 and 16, *duì duì, duì* ‘Right, right,’ ‘right’ is a positive assessment of the son’s promise, indicating his preference of having the son back home. The account for the preference is provided in lines 18 and 20.

Ex 19 Callhome_0848 ‘I will go back for you as soon as possible

- 01 DAD: 不是 你 那 个 信 不是: 七月 二十号- 二十一号
bùshi nǐ nà ge xìn bùshi: qīyuè èrshíhào- èrshíyīhào
 is.not 2pl that CL letter is.not July 20th- 21st
 ‘Isn’t it that the letter {I sent} on July twenty-second, twenty-first,’
 那 个 信: 收到 了 嘛.
nà ge xìn: shōudào le ma.
 that CL letter receive PFV Q
 ‘{you} have received that,’
- 02 SON: [嗯.]
 [en.]
 INT
 Yeah.
- 03 DAD: [.h 完了 就] 是 给 你 发 了 封 信.
 [.h wánle jiù]shì gěi nǐ fā le fēng xìn.
 finish just.is to 2sg send PFV CL letter
 ‘{It’s} just that I sent you a letter.’
- 04 SON: [mm hmm?]
 INT
 mm hmm.
- 05 DAD: [发 了] 封 信 呢 跟 你 说了说 就是::
 [fā le] fēng xìn ne gēn nǐ shuō-le-shuō jiùshì::
 send PFV CL letter PRT with 2sg say.briefly DM
 ‘{I} sent you a letter, and told you {in the letter} that’
- 06 .h 哎 回家 的 事.=
 .h ai huíjiā de shì.=
 INT return.home NOM thing
 ‘{Regarding} coming back home,’
- 07 =回家 事 的话 (.) 你 看 你 自己:
 =huíjiā shì dehuà (.) nǐ kàn nǐ zìjǐ:
 return.home thing DM 2sg see 2sg self
 ‘Regarding coming back home, you should decide by yourself,’
- 08 .h 哎 以 你 工作 为主 吧.
 .h ai yǐ nǐ gōngzuò wéizhǔ ba.
 INT as 2sg work as.priority PRT
 ‘Uh, you should prioritize your job.’
- 09 SON: mm hmm.
 INT
 mm hmm.

- 10 DAD: [啊,]
[a,]
INT
'Okay?'
- 11 SON:→ [反 我:] 尽快 会: 回去 一趟.
[fǎn wǒ:], jǐnkùài HUÌ: huíqu yìtàng.
anyway 1sg as.soon.as.possible will return once
'Anyway, I will go back as soon as possible.'
- 12 你们 放心 吧.
nǐmen fàngxīn ba,
2pl no.worry PRT
'You should not worry.'
- 13 DAD: [哎.]
[ei.]
INT
Okay.
- 14 → [我 尽] 快 给 您 [会 回]去 的.
[wǒ] jìn kuài gěi nín [HUÌ huí]qu de.
1sg as.soon.as.possible for 2sg will return PRT
'I will go back for you as soon as possible.'
- 15 DAD: [对 对.]
[duì duì]
right right,
'Right, right.'
- 16 对.
duì.
right
'Right. '
- 17 SON: [到时候-]
[dàoshíhòu-]
by.then
'By then,'
- 18 DAD: [因为] 我 呢:
[yīnwèi] wǒ ne:
because 1sg PRT
'Because I'
就 反正 因为 人 老 了 生病 了.
jiù fǎnzhèng yīnwèi: rén lǎo le shēngbìng le.
just any.way because person old CRS sick CRS
'{I'm} old and got sick,'
- 19 SON: [mm hmm,]
INT
mm hmm.
- 20 DAD: [所以] 总 想 呢 (.)
[suǒyǐ] zǒng xiǎng ne (.)
therefore always think PRT
'So {I} have always been thinking'
好像 亲人 呢 (.) 能够 能够:
hǎoxiàng qīnrén ne (.) nénggòu nénggòu:
as.if family PRT can can
'if my family can, can,'
.hh 呃: 看一看 啊 什么的.
.hh e: kànyikàn a shénmede.
INT visit PRT like.that
'uh, visit {me}, or something like that.'

Stressed *hui* is also found in the responding position where a request has been granted but the unsatisfied requestee pursues a promise with a higher degree of commitment. In these environments, the speaker reassures the recipient of their commitment to the granted action, displays their agency in the future events, and indicates that the interlocutor's pursuits are not necessary. Ex 20 is such an example where the daughter (DAU) reassures her dad (DAD) of her commitment to a request that she has granted.

Ex 20 Callhome_0003_004500 'I will write a letter'

- 01 DAD: 你 如果 有空 那个 啊.
nǐ rúguǒ yǒu kòng nàge a.
 2sg if have.time that PRT
 'If you have time,'
- 02 DAU: 哎.
ai.
 INT
 'Yeah.'
- 03 DAD: 跟 一春 叔叔 啊.
gēn yìchūn shūshu a;
 with NAME uncle PRT
 '(To/with) Uncle Yichun,'
- 04 DAU: 啊.
a.
 INT
 'Yeah?'
- 05 DAD: 一春 啊.
yìchūn a.
 NAME PRT
 'Yichun,'
- 06 DAU: 哎.
ai.
 INT
 'Yeah.'
- 07 DAD: 一春 叔叔 写 一 封 信.
yìchūn shūshu xiě yì fēng xìn.
 NAME uncle write one CL letter
 'Write a letter to Uncle Yichun'
- 08 感谢 一下.
gǎnxiè yíxià.
 thank briefly
 'Thank him.'
- 09 DAU: 哦 一春 是 吧.
o. yìchūn shì ba;
 INT NAME is PRT
 'Oh, is it Yichun?'
- 10 在 台湾 [的 是 吧.]
zài Táiwān [de shì ba.]
 in Taiwan NOM is PRT
 '{The one} in Taiwan, right?'
- 11 DAD: [哎,:]
 [ai,]
 INT
 'Yeah.'

- 12 哎,: 对. 对.
 AI,: duì. duì.
 INT right right.
 ‘Yeah, right, right.’
- 13 DAD: 直接 写 到 台湾 去 是 吧.
 zhíjiē xiě dào Táiwān qù shì ba.
 directly write to Taiwan go is PRT
 ‘Write directly to Taiwan, right?’
- 14 DAD: 哎,: 对: (.) 对.
 AI,: duì:(.) duì.
 INT right right.
 ‘Yeah, right, right.’
- 15 DAD: 哦: .h 那 你 下回 来-
 o: .h nà nǐ xiàhuí lai-
 INT DM 2sg next-time come-
 ‘Oh, then next time when you come-’
- 下回 你 写信 的 时候
 xiàhuí nǐ xiěxìn de shíhou
 next-time 2sg write-letter NOM time,
 ‘next time when you write back to me,’
- 把 他 的 地址 告诉 我 一下
 bǎ tā de dìzhǐ gàosu wǒ yíxià
 BA 3sg NOM address tell 1sg briefly
 ‘tell me his address,’
- 好不好.
 hǎobuhǎo.
 good-not-good
 ‘okay?’
- 16 (0.8)
- 17 DAD: 我- [我 不 知道 我 这 有没有] 地址.
 wǒ- [wǒ bù zhīdào wǒ zhè yǒuméiyǒu] dìzhǐ.
 1sg 1sg NEG know 1sg here have-not-have address
 ‘I don’t know if I have {his} address.’
- 18 DAD: [哦 下一次 我 告诉 你.]
 [ò xiàyíci wǒ gàosu nǐ.]
 INT next.time 1sg tell 2sg
 ‘Oh, next time I’ll tell you.’
- 19 (0.8)
- 20 DAD: 哎 好.
 ai hǎo.
 INT okay
 ‘Okay.’
- 21 DAD: 好的.
 hǎode.
 okay
 ‘Okay.’
- 22 .h [你-]
 .h [nǐ-]
 2sg
 ‘You-’

- 23 DAD: [我] 上次-
[wǒ] shàngcì-
2sg last.time
'Last time, I'

我 这 次 是:: 回去 碰到 他 了 嘞.
wǒ zhè cì shì:: huíqù pèngdào tā le lei.
1sg this time is return encounter 3sg CRS PRT
'I saw him this time when I went back.'
((4 lines omitted. The speakers confirm that Yichun was there.))
- 24 DAD: 还: 还 给(.) 给 给 那个: 嗯: .h 阿娘
hái: hái gěi(.) gěi gěi nàge: en: .h ā'niāng
even even for for with DM mm grandma
'{He} even accompanied us to {send your} grandmother's {coffin}'

送 送葬 送到 山上 去 了.
sòng sòngzàng sòngdào shānshàng qù le.
send send.coffin send.to mountain go CRS
'to {the grave on} the mountain. ((traditional Chinese burial customs))'
- 25 他 也 去 了 嘞.
tā yě qù le lei.
3sg also go CRS PRT
'He also went.'
- 26 DAU: 真的 啊.
ZHENde a.
Really PRT
'Really?'
- 27 DAD: [哎 哎 哎.]
[ai ai ai.
INT INT INT
'Yeah, yeah, yeah'
- 28 DAU: [哦::]
[o::]
INT
'Oh.'
- 29 → 那 好的 那 我 有空 会: 写 信 的.
nà hǎode nà wǒ yǒukòng huì: xiě xìn de.
DM okay DM 1sg have.time will write letter PRT
'Okay, {in that case} I will write a letter when I have time.'
- 30 DAU: .h 你 下[回] 要是-
.h nǐ xià [huí] yàoshi-
2sg next.time if-
'Next time if you-'
- 31 DAD: [哎.]
[ai.]
INT
'Yeah.'
- 32 DAU: 写 信 的 时候
xiě xìn de shíhou
write letter NOM time
'When you write to me,'

把 地址 告诉 我 一下 好不好.
bǎ dìzhǐ gàosu wǒ yíxià hǎobuhǎo.
BA address tell 1sg briefly good-not-good
'tell me the address, okay?'

As Figure 9 shows, *hui* in line 29 is stressed with a prolonged duration (244 ms, compared to 184 ms/syllable in the utterance) and a pitch peak (383 Hz, compared to 312 Hz average pitch of this utterance). The prominent prosodic features display the speaker's agency and commitment towards the granted action.

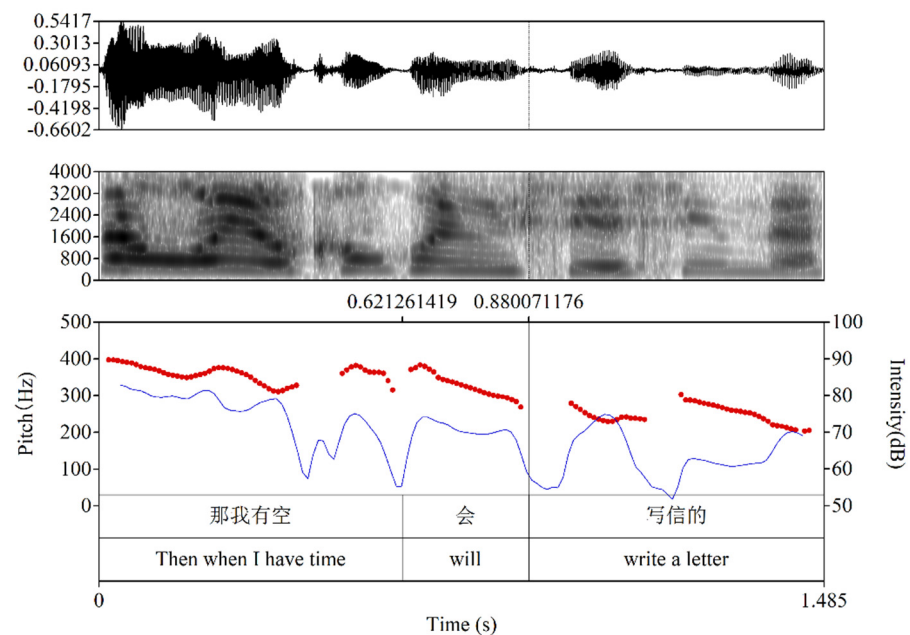


Figure 9. Waveform, spectrogram, pitch contour, and intensity of line 29 in Ex 20.

A special type of commitment observed in everyday conversation is where a commitment is made to the recipient, but it benefits the speaker themselves. The variation of the [*wǒ huì X(de)*] format with stressed *huì* is used in these cases to mark the speaker's agency over the future action. In the following example Ex 21 the son (SON) just had a heated discussion with his mom about his wife prior to the segment. The mom disapproves of her daughter-in-law's behavior and requests the son to "educate" his wife. In the current extract, the dad (DAD) just took over the telephone and starts talking to SON. In line 02, DAD proposes to change the topic '(we can) talk about (that) later,' but SON insists on continuing the current topic with the preface, 'I just (want to) tell you' in lines 03 and 04, and makes a promise using the [*wǒ huì X(de)*] format with stressed *huì*, 'I will tell (her)' (line 08). The following turn constructional unit, *wǒ yǒu shù* 'I know (what's going on),' asserts his primary knowledge of the matter and provides an account for the proceeding promise. Stevanovic (2021) finds that epistemic authority can be a resource for deontic authority—the right to decide each other's future actions—in joint decision-making activities. In the current conversation, SON integrates his epistemic primacy to claim agency over his own action and displays resistance to the parents' interference in his relationship with his wife.

Ex 21 Callhome_0913 'I will talk to her'

01 DAD: 不要紧 哎.

bùyàojǐn ai.
doesn't.matter PRT
'It doesn't matter.'

02 [以后 再-]
[yǐhòu zài-]
later again
'{We can} talk about {that} later.'

03 SON: [我 就 跟 你 讲-]
[wǒ jiù gēn nǐ jiǎng-]
1sg just with 2sg talk
'Let me just tell you-'

04 我 [就] 跟 你 讲 (.)
wǒ [jiù] gēn nǐ jiǎng (.)
1sg just with 2sg talk
'let me tell you'

- 05 DAD: [哎.]
[ai.]
INT
'yeah?'
- 06 SON: 这个 她 啊 (.)
zhège tā a (.)
this 3sg PRT
'She,'
张毅 这 事情 (.) 我 这边 [有-]
zhāngyì zhè shìqíng (.) wǒ zhèbiān [yǒu-]
NAME this thing 1sg here have
'regarding issues with Zhangyi, I-'
- 07 DAD: [哎.]
[ai.]
INT
'Yeah.'
- 08 SON:→ 我- (.) ^会 讲.
wǒ- (.) ^HUI jiǎng.
1sg will talk
'I will talk {to her about the issues}.
- 09 我 有 [数.]
wǒ yǒu [shù.]
1sg have-idea
'I know {what's going on.}'
- 10 DAD: [呃] 好 好 好 好.
[e] hǎo hǎo hǎo hǎo.
INT good good good good
'Oh, {that's} good, {that's} good.'

Figure 10 shows that the modal verb *huì* is produced with prosodic prominence as the pitch peak of this turn constructional unit⁶ (notice the pitch step up at the onset of *huì* with a maximum pitch value of 420.3 Hz), a wider pitch range (32.2 Hz, compared to 9.6 Hz of the following syllable, *jiǎng*). *Huì* is also produced with a higher intensity value (maximum intensity 79.5 dB and mean-energy intensity 76.6 dB) as demonstrated by the dark area of the spectrogram compared to the surrounding syllables (the maximum intensity value of the following syllable *jiǎng* is 70.5 dB, and the mean-energy intensity value of it is 67.2 dB).

The [*wǒ huì X (de)*] format with stressed *huì* in general is used to reassure the recipient of an existing commitment. It is observed in environments where the speaker has an unfulfilled pre-existing obligation or when the recipient has explicitly pursued a higher degree of commitment to the requested future action. In both situations, the recipient enters the current stage of conversation with an understanding that the speaker is unlikely to perform the desired future action. Such an understanding is displayed in the interactional space through direct and indirect requests and accounts. Given this context, the speaker orients to reassure the recipient that they are fully committed to the named action, therefore no more further pursuits are necessary. In addition, the format with stressed *huì* is used to resist the recipient's interference on the speaker's own business and to claim agency towards their future activities.

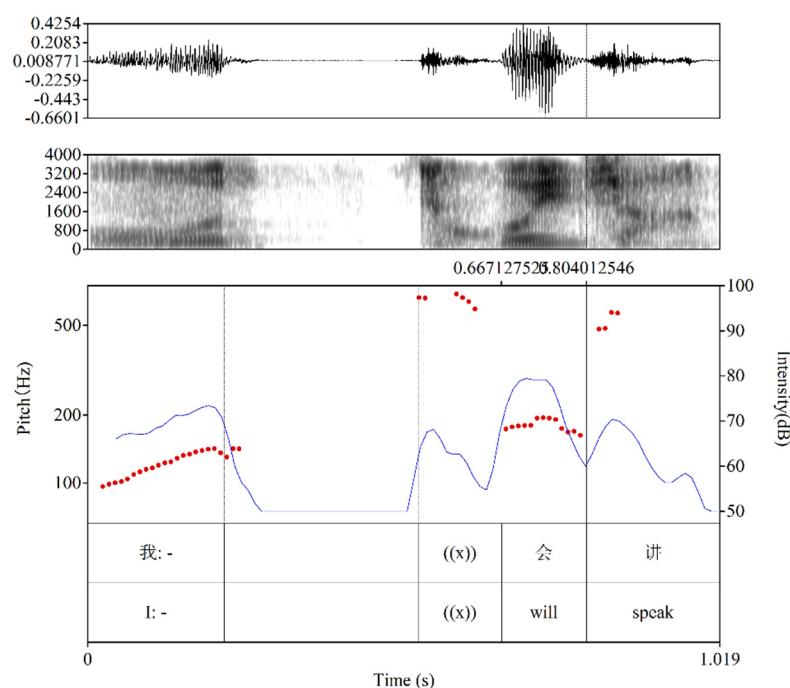


Figure 10. Waveform, spectrogram, pitch contour, and intensity of line 08 in Ex 21.

4.4. Summary

Drawing on social action format, intensifying emphasis, and informational focus, this study investigated how prosodic stress operates on the modal verb *huì* in the format [*wō huì X(de)*] and enables the conversation participants to perform different types of commissive actions. As illustrated in Table 2, the two variations of the format are observed in different sequential environments. The format with unstressed *huì* is recurrently observed in initiating position where the speaker (1) offers to perform a future action expected but unrequested by the recipient or (2) informs a my-side arrangement of an established future activity. The format with stressed *huì* is often used to reassure the recipient of the speaker's commitment to a future action, either in initiating position due to an obligation existing prior to the on-going conversation or in responding position where a higher degree of commitment to a granted request is pursued by the recipient.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Morphosyntactic devices such as the modal verb *huì* have long been observed to perform interpersonal functions in language (Halliday 1978). What less discussed is how these functions are realized in natural conversation. The current study analyzed *huì* in the context of a recurrent commissive action format and discovered that the same format can perform different social actions when produced with and without prosodic stress. The empirical findings are limited to the particular format, but they lead to broader implications for understanding natural conversations.

First, prosody plays a crucial role in producing and recognizing social actions. Although there is no one-on-one relationship between prosodic features and social actions (Couper-Kuhlen 2012), researchers of other languages have also reported the important role of prosody (Reber 2012; Couper-Kuhlen 2009; Selting 1996). Observations made in the current Mandarin conversational data contribute to the discussion by investigating a less studied language.

Second, this study highlights the importance to take into consideration of information structure in studying actions in social interaction. The information structure of an utterance represents the speaker's assumptions about the recipient's knowledge at the time of the utterance (Lambrecht 1994), and informational focus is a means to establish common ground in relation to the current status of propositions among conversation participants

(Chafe 1976; Clark 1996). Given the fact that informational focus is often realized by sentential prominence and coincides with prosodic stress (Shen 1990; Li 2009), it is crucial to examine how information structure may affect the prosodic design and other aspects of social actions.

Third, social interaction is fundamentally a collaboration of multiple modes of communication. Kendon (2004) describes an utterance as the *ensemble* of speech and gestures, and Goodwin (2013) uses the metaphor of lamination to describe the multiple layers of semiotic resources in interaction. Morphosyntax, or prosody and other resource alone is insufficient to understand social interaction. By revisiting the modal verb *huì* in Mandarin conversations with an interactional linguistic approach, this study hopes to call attention to study naturally occurring Mandarin conversations and to investigate prosody and other the non-verbal resources in future studies.

Funding: This study was supported by a Harry and Yvonne Lenart Graduate Travel Fellowship (UCLA).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of University of California, Los Angeles (IRB#19-001337, 8/9/2019) for studies involving humans.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed oral consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The telephone call conversational data presented in this study are openly available on [Talkbank.org](https://talkbank.org) at doi:10.21415/T54022 and doi:10.21415/T5R38Z. Video recorded face-to-face conversational data are collected with participants' informed oral consent and managed by the researcher privately.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Transcript conventions	
→	target line
,	rising to mid final pitch movement
.	falling to low final pitch movement
?	rising final pitch movement.
^	pitch step up
-	cut-off
=	latching
[]	overlap
◦	the utterance is produced very weak
hhh	laughter
.hh	inhale
(.)	micro-pause
(1.0)	measured pause of approximately 1 second.
hui::	prolongation
HUI	primary, or main stress
((XX))	unintelligible syllables in pinyin line
((arms))	gestures or transcriber's notes
{ }	information added in the free translation

Appendix B

Gloss conventions	
1pl	first person plural
1sg	first person singular
ASS	associative
ATT	attributive
BA	<i>ba</i> structure
CL	classifier
CRS	current relevant state (<i>le</i>)
DM	discourse marker (e.g., <i>na</i> , <i>nage</i> , <i>nishuo</i>)
EXP	experiential marker (<i>guo</i>)
NEG	negator
NOM	nominalizer (<i>de</i>)
PFV	perfective aspect (<i>le</i>)
PRT	particle
Q	question particle (e.g., <i>ma</i>)
INT	interjection (e.g., <i>ai</i> , <i>ya</i> , <i>o</i> , <i>en</i>)

Notes

- ¹ X represents a predicate that consists of a verb or a verb complex. This formulation is an abstraction of various forms of commissive actions that consists of a first-person singular pronoun, the modal verb *huì*, and a verb or a verb complex. It also includes cases with and without the utterance-final particle *de* and other adverbial elements between *wǒ* and *huì*.
- ² In this example, the mean intensity of the proceeding syllable *kuài* is slightly higher than the stressed *huì*. However, mean intensity is not the primary indicator of prosodic prominence, especially when there is a noticeably expanded pitch range and lengthened time duration.
- ³ A separate set of statistical tests were conducted to compare the three prosodic features between male and female speakers. Results of the two-sample Wilcoxon rank sum exact test show that the pitch range of *huì* in the female group (median = 49, rqr = 45.6) is significantly higher than in the male group (median = 13, iqr = 22.7), *p*-value = 0.000835. The duration and mean intensity of the two groups are not significantly different. Although further analyses are necessary, gender differences, among other acoustic differences in the natural speech produced by different speakers, might be the reason why the three prosodic features of stressed and unstressed *huì* are not normally distributed or significantly different in their variances.
- ⁴ While a separate investigation is necessary to fully understand the particle *de* in the [*wǒ huì X (de)*] format, the current study focuses on *huì*.
- ⁵ Ethnographic observation conducted by the author.
- ⁶ The pitch trace proceeding *huì* is caused by the cut-off and the ensuing glottal stop after *wǒ* in the same line and is unintelligible.

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