

**Doing *fast* and *slow*:  
Qualitative differentiation among  
house dancers in Singapore**

Yin Lin Tan  
17 April 2025

# Background

## Axes of differentiation organized through contrasting qualities

- e.g., East/West dichotomy in 19th century United States (Gal & Irvine 2019)

## Differentiation at the 'assemblage' level

- Characterological figures, personae, ...
- Key semiotic processes

# Background

## Differentiation at the 'quality' level?

- How do dancers construct differences between *fast* and *slow*?

Dance as sensuous, experiential, and embodied

# Background

## A note on terminology

- **quality** = abstract, uninstantiated potentiality (e.g., redness)
- **qualia** = subjective experience of quality (e.g., experience of redness)
- **qualisign** = quality acting as a sign (e.g., redness of apples)

## Qualia in sociolinguistics

- Descriptions of languages, dialects, and accents
- Multimodality and style

# The ethnography

## Fieldwork in Summer 2023, 2024

- Existing member of the community
- Participant observation, interviews

## Freestyle house dancers in Singapore

- Historicity of street dance from USA to Japan to Southeast Asia
- Relatively smaller community compared to other dance styles
- Connecting movement with music; "the feeling of the sound"

# Data

## 'Dance and Discussion'

- Five dancers (CK, Sam, Junjie, Huimin, May)
- Two-part interview

# Analysis

## How do dancers do *fast* and *slow*?

- Lexical Analysis
  - How are fastness and slowness relevant qualities?
- Acoustic Analysis
  - How are prosodic features associated with fastness and slowness?
- Discourse Analysis
  - How are embodied features associated with fastness and slowness?

# Junjie

Active member of house  
dance community

- Organizes events
- Engages in house-adjacent practice, like capoeira
- Regularly sessions and competes



# Acoustic Analysis

## Identifying fastness and slowness

- Explicit mention and elaboration of 'fast' and 'slow' in transcripts

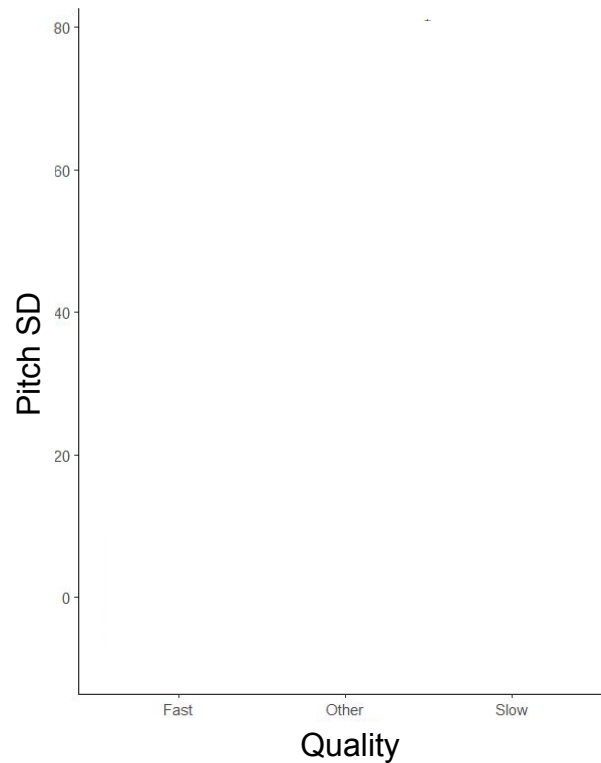
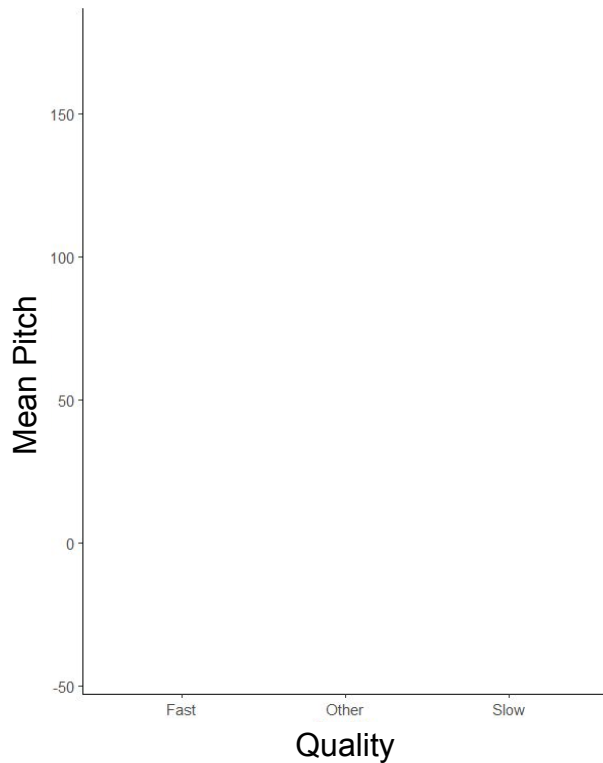
## Extract prosodic features

- **Pitch**: mean, max, min, SD, range
- **Intensity**: mean, max, min, SD, range
- **Speech rate**

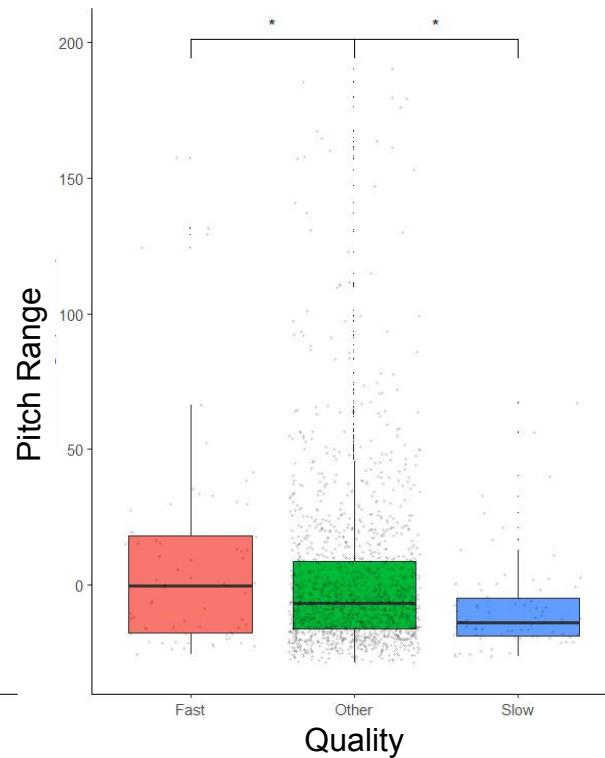
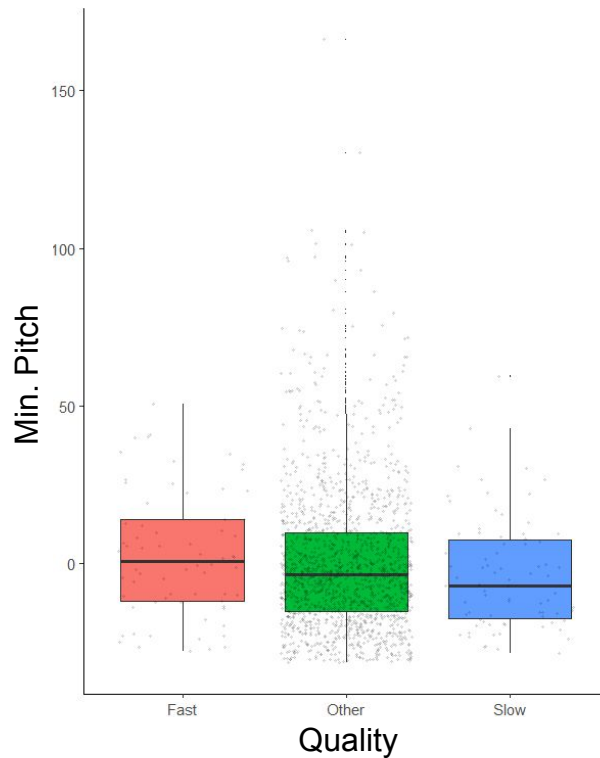
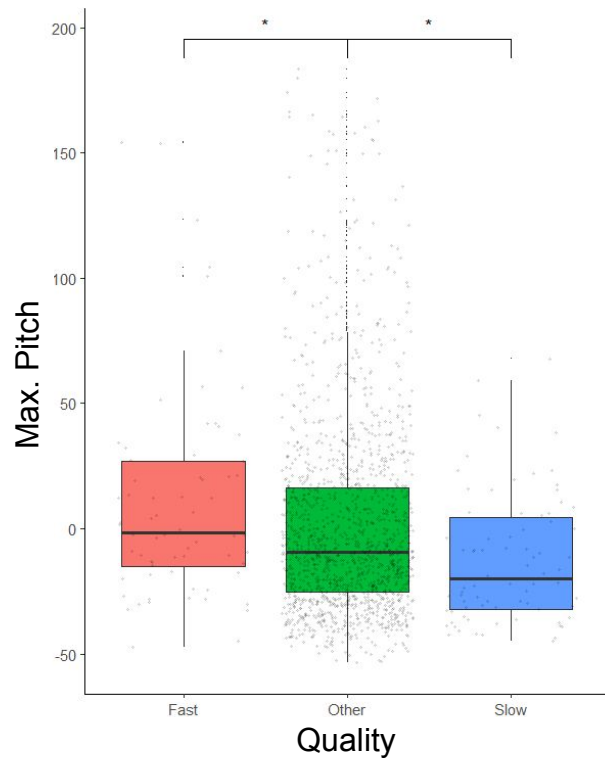
## Statistical model per feature per speaker

- Fixed effects: Quality, Distinction, Phrase Position
- Random effects: Word, Speaker

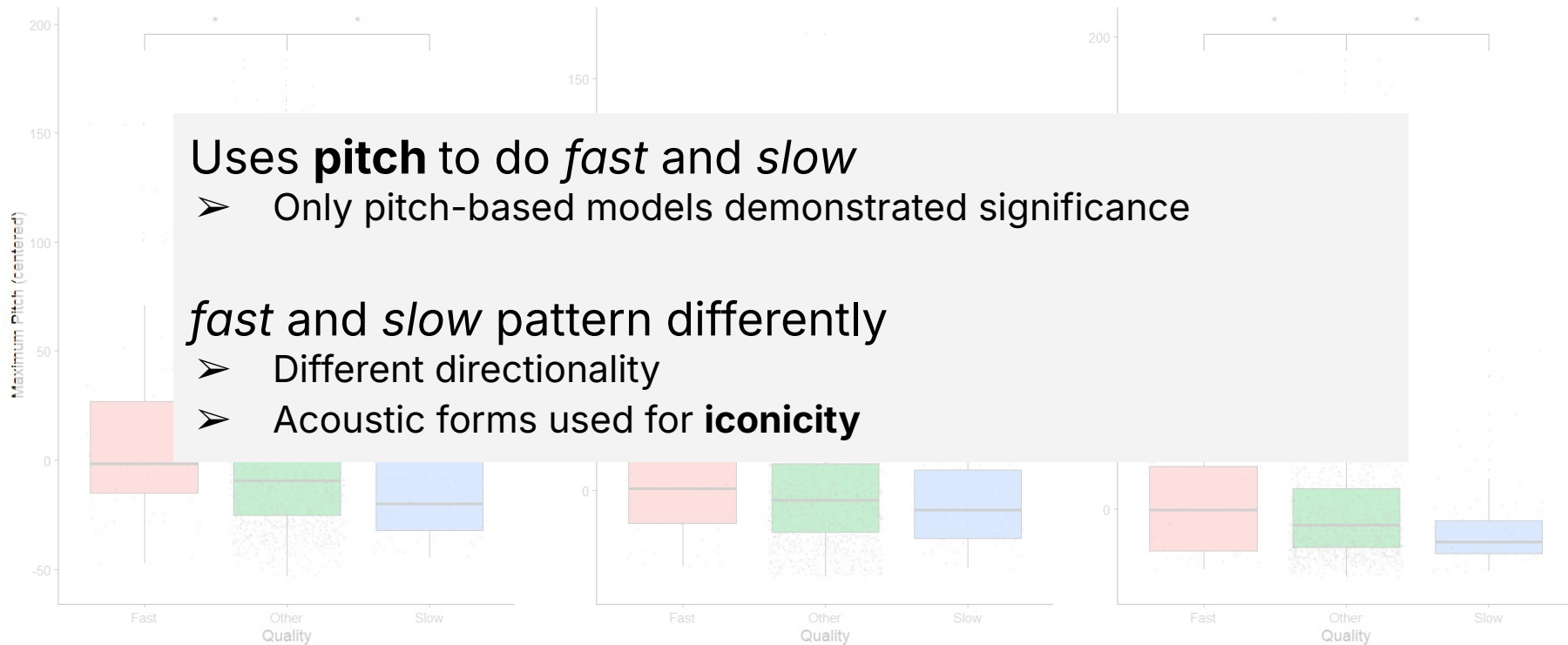
# Acoustic Analysis



# Acoustic Analysis



# Acoustic Analysis



# Acoustic Analysis

Acoustic forms can be iconized into **acoustic qualisigns**

- A specific *quality* of the utterance can act as a sign
- Sonic qualities of language carry semiotic potential

How is this iconization carried out?

- Statistical analysis does not explain this

# Discourse Analysis

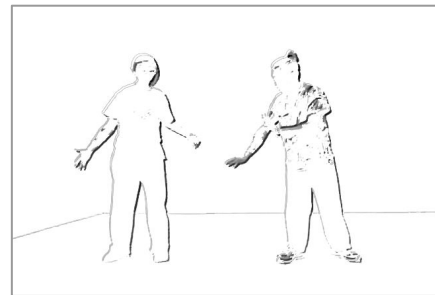
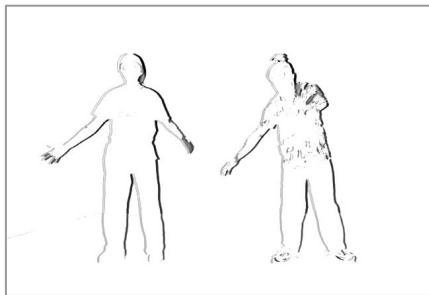
- 1    cause as you like that,
- 2    SLOWLY.
- 3    if you do it slowly,
- 4    it'll be like [e]:→ you can  
      you can feel your hands  
      moving.
- 5    but if you do it fast,
- 6    you will probably like,
- 7    be like that.

# Discourse Analysis

- 1 cause as you like that,
- 2 **SLOWLY.**
- 3 if you do it slowly,
- 4 it'll be like [e]:→ you can  
you can feel your hands  
moving.
- 5 but if you do it fast,
- 6 you will probably like,
- 7 be like that.

"SLOWLY": Referential meaning  
without acoustic iconization

- High intensity, high pitch
- Gaze at interlocutor, tilts palms upward



# Discourse Analysis

1    cause as you like that,  
2    SLOWLY.  
3    if you do it slowly,  
4    it'll be like [e]:→ you can  
      you can feel your hands  
      moving.  
5    but if you do it fast,  
6    you will probably like,  
7    be like that.

“[e]:→”: No referential meaning

- Low intensity, low pitch, level intonation, slow speech rate
- Bodily demonstration of slowness



# Discourse Analysis

- 1    cause as you like that,
- 2    **SLOWLY.**
- 3    if you do it **slowly,**
- 4    it'll be like [e]:→ you can  
     you can feel your hands  
     moving.
- 5    but if you do it **fast,**
- 6    you will probably like,
- 7    be like that.

## Use of explicit lexical items

- Establishes context for interpretation of bodily demonstration
- Even if acoustic realization is not iconic
  - "SLOWLY": high intensity, high pitch
- Lexical items precede demonstration

# Discourse Analysis

- 1    cause as you like that,
- 2    SLOWLY.
- 3    **if you do it slowly,**
- 4    it'll be like [e]:→ you can  
     you can feel your hands  
     moving.
- 5    **but if you do it fast,**
- 6    you will probably like,
- 7    be like that.

## Perceptible contrast in **discourse**

- Parallel conditional clauses frame both sections as instances of demonstration
- Explicit contrast through use of conjunction "but"

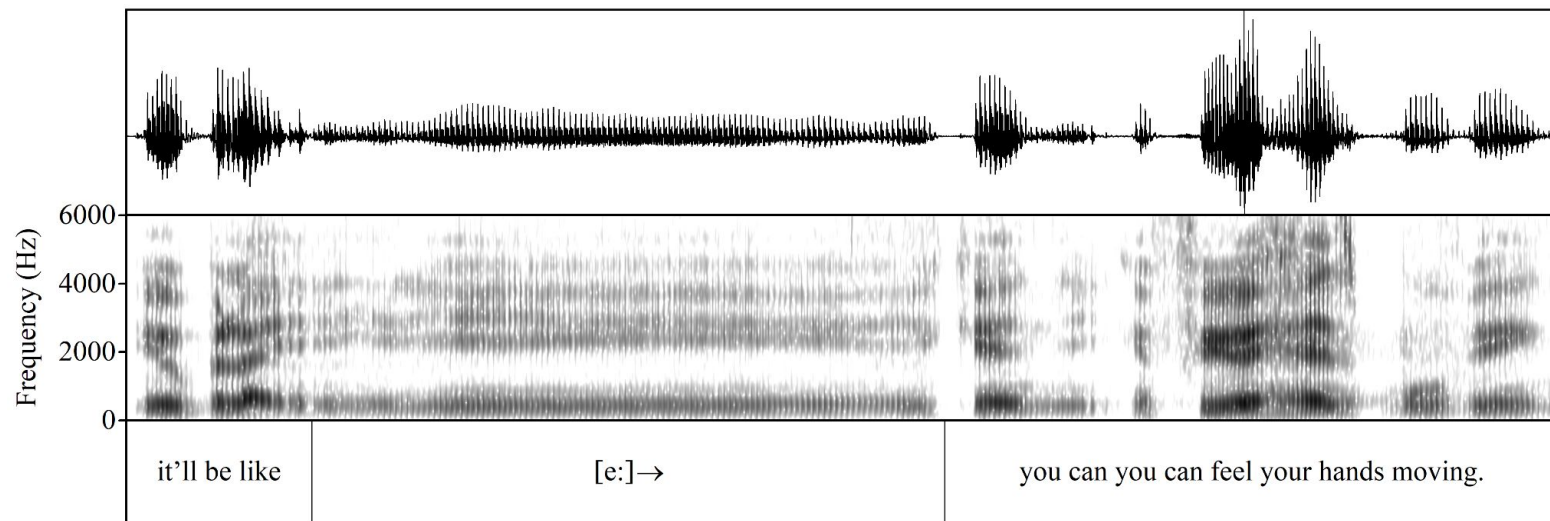
# Discourse Analysis

- 1    cause as you like that,
- 2    SLOWLY.
- 3    if you do it slowly,
- 4    it'll be like [e]:→ you can  
     you can feel your hands  
     moving.
- 5    but if you do it fast,
- 6    you will probably like,
- 7    be like that.

## Perceptible contrast in **acoustics**

- L3–4 are faster than L5–7
- But “it’ll be like” and “you can you can feel your hands moving” (L4) bracket “[e]:→”, the locus of slowness

# Discourse Analysis



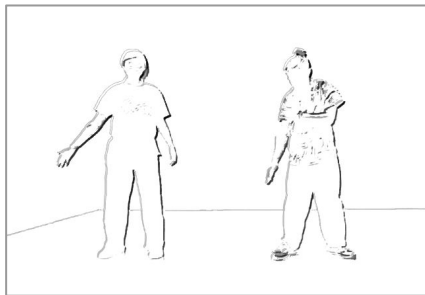
<u>Pitch</u>	94.93 Hz	<b>87.14 Hz</b>	101.03 Hz
<u>Intensity</u>	61.21 dB	<b>53.78 dB</b>	60.14 dB
<u>Speech Rate</u>	10.34 syl/s	<b>0.76 syl/s</b>	7.01 syl/s

# Discourse Analysis

- 1 cause as you like that,
- 2 SLOWLY.
- 3 if you do it slowly,
- 4 it'll be like [e]:→ you can  
you can feel your hands  
moving.
- 5 but if you do it fast,
- 6 you will probably like,
- 7 be like that.

## Perceptible contrast in **embodiment**

- *slow*: arm moves slowly, fingers move quickly in back-and-forth motion

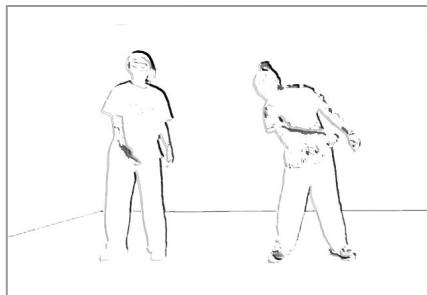


# Discourse Analysis

- 1 cause as you like that,
- 2 SLOWLY.
- 3 if you do it slowly,
- 4 it'll be like [e]:→ you can  
you can feel your hands  
moving.
- 5 but if you do it fast,
- 6 you will probably like,
- 7 be like that.

## Perceptible contrast in **embodiment**

- *fast*: quick initiation with torso, arm flows out slowly



# Summary

## Iconization and referential meaning are **jointly mobilized**

- When referential meaning is available, other signs are freed to do semiotic work
- Absence of referential meaning allows us to trace iconic pathways

## Referential meaning sets the **semiotic context for interpretation**

- Each section can be construed as *qualitically congruent*
- Allows iconization to be successfully deployed and interpreted in-the-moment

## **Recurring contrasts** enhance relevant qualities

- Occurs across modalities: discursively, acoustically, bodily
- Perceptible contrast highlight the slowness and fastness of each section

# Conclusion

**How do dancers construct differences between *fast* and *slow*?**

Acoustic features can be iconized as acoustic qualisigns

Referential meaning and iconization work together across multiple modalities to generate relevant qualia

Differences between qualities, like fastness and slowness, are constructed through qualic congruence and explicit contrast



# Thank you!

[yltan@stanford.edu](mailto:yltan@stanford.edu)