

The feeling of the sound: Qualitative differentiation among house dancers in Singapore

Yin Lin Tan

Stanford University; National University of Singapore

INTRODUCTION

- Qualitative experience of dance is subjective
- Embodied feeling of moving cannot be completely shared
- But can be intersubjectively constructed through substantial semiotic work
- What semiotic processes are involved in differentiating between qualities?

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

THE ETHNOGRAPHY

- Fieldwork as house dance community member
- Smaller community compared to other styles
- Done to house music; 4/4, ~120-140 bpm
- Narratives of house dance history: USA, Japan, Singapore
- Dancers express “the feeling of the sound” by moving to music in an improvised way
- Dance and Discussion:** video recordings of 1) freestyle dance, 2) discussion of movement



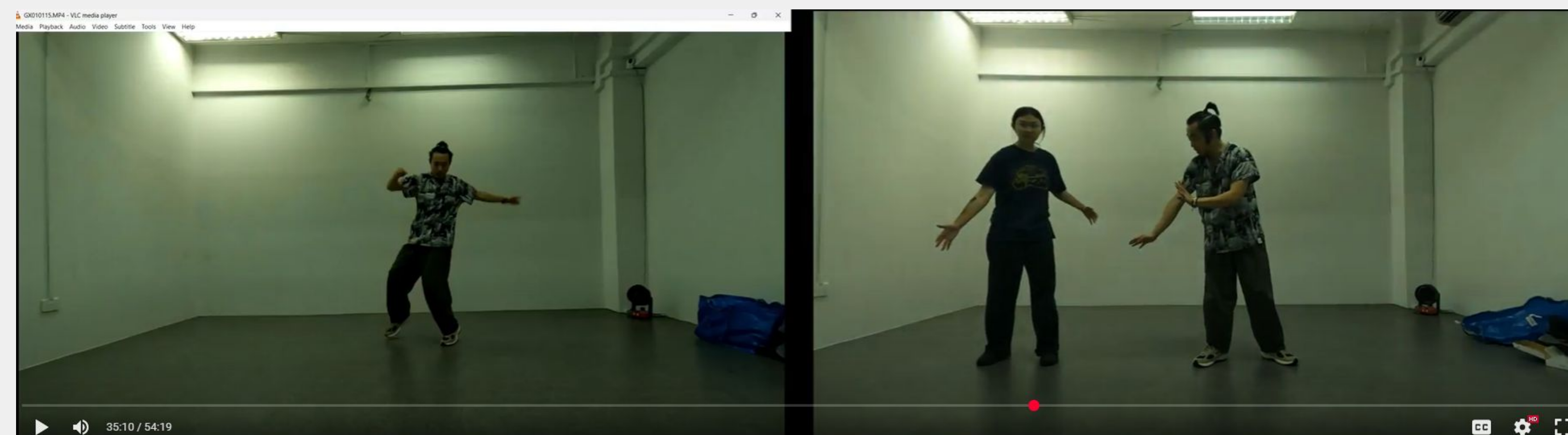
Dancers in a cypher during a freestyle house dance course.

HOUSE AND *FAST-SLOW*

“The base rule is you must understand your tempo. You understand tempo, everything else is just a flavor.” (CK)

- fast-slow* is a fundamental distinction in house
- House is ideologized as faster than other styles of music and dance
- Slowness is marked
 - E.g., taking a move from hip hop and “tweak[ing] it to the sound”

Qualia of fastness and slowness are intersubjectively constructed through iconicity, indexicality, and symbolization using different material.



Screenshot from Dance and Discussion interview. L: Junjie's freestyle dance; R: Junjie saying “SLOWLY” (line 2).

Scan for video, transcript, and poster PDF:



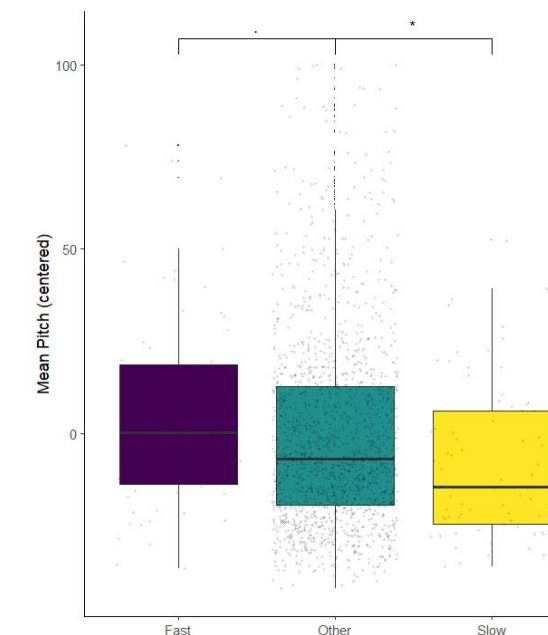
<https://bit.ly/sla2025tan>

ACOUSTIC MATERIAL

Can be *iconized* into acoustic qualisigns of *fast* and *slow*

Junjie

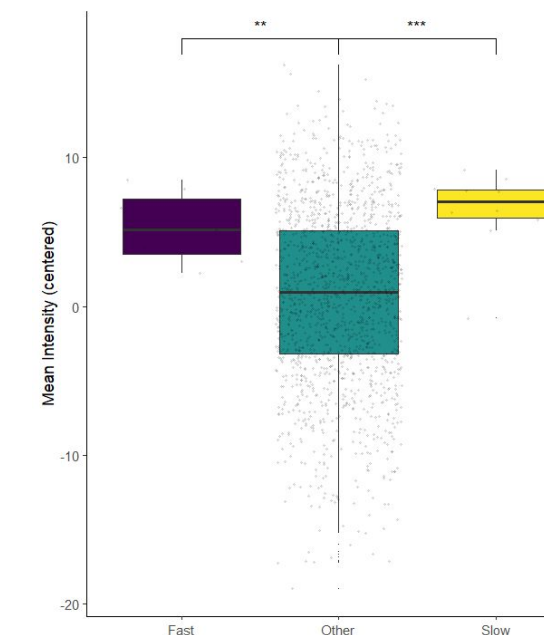
‘Slow’: ↓ pitch
‘Fast’: ↑ pitch



Not necessarily oppositional; can alternatively *index* emphasis

Sam

‘Slow’: ↑ intensity
‘Fast’: ↑ intensity



Not always done using the same material

Aggregate

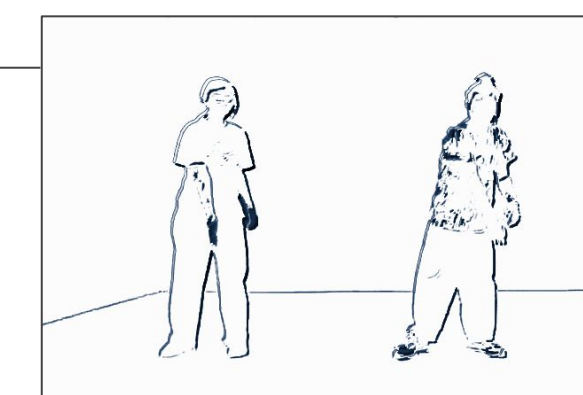
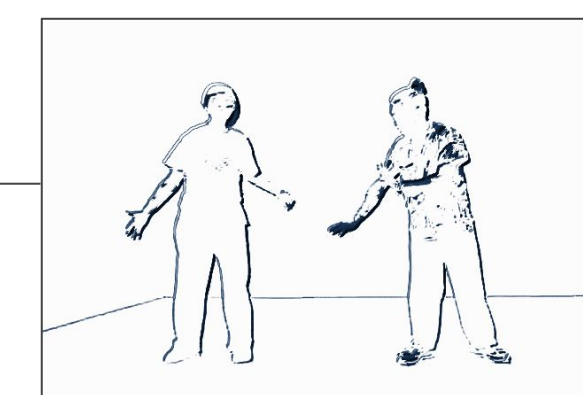
‘Slow’: ↓ speech rate,
↓ pitch
‘Fast’: ↑ intensity

→ *fast-slow* may seem like opposing sign objects, but they are not done through opposing sign vehicles

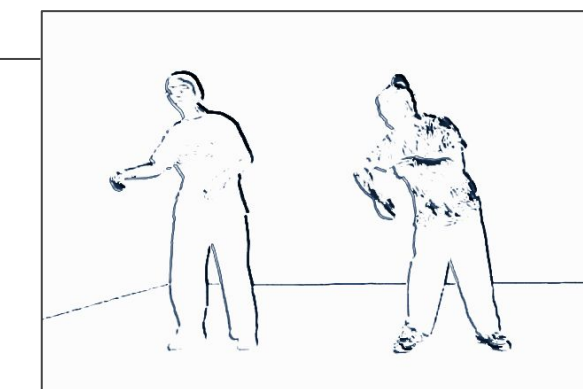
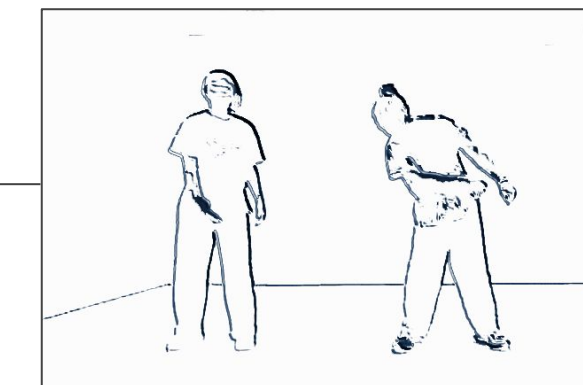
ICONIZATION AND REFERENTIAL MEANING

Junjie's demonstration of slowness and fastness:

- slow*
- 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.



- fast*
- 5 but if you do it *fast*,
 - 6 you will probably like,
 - 7 be like that.



Referential meaning frees up other resources to do other semiotic work

- “SLOWLY”: Referential meaning without acoustic iconization
- “[e]:→”: No referential meaning, iconized acoustic features are necessary

Referential meaning sets the context for interpretation

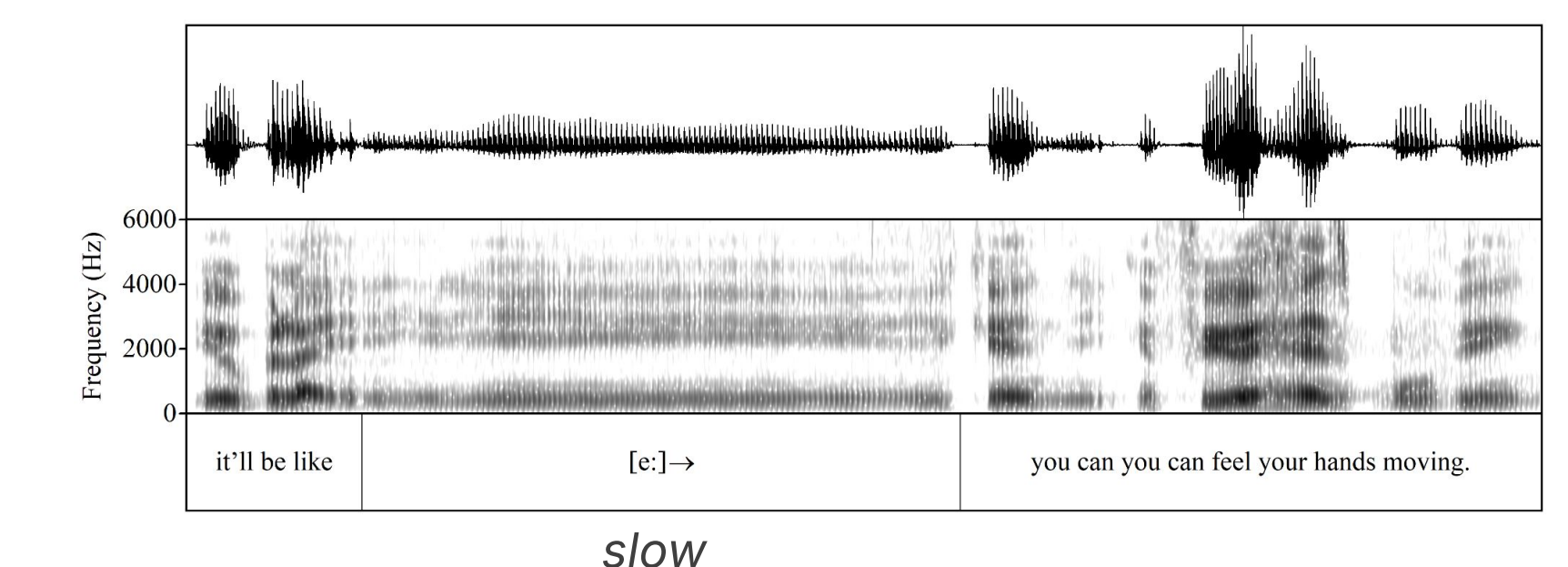
- “if you do it *slowly*”, “but if you do it *fast*”
- Lexical items as symbols that make bodily movement and onomatopoeia legible as *fast* or *slow*

→ Iconization and referential meaning are jointly mobilized to generate relevant qualia

CONTRAST AND *FAST-SLOW*

Repeated parallelism of contrast highlights relevant quality in each section

- Discourse: “if you do it ____”
- Embodiment: slow arm/fast fingers, fast initiation/slow flow-out
- Acoustics: “it’ll be like [e]:→ you can you can feel your hands moving”



Dancers at a session.

SUMMARY

- Multiple modalities are recruited to do fastness and slowness
- Explicit contrast at discursive, embodied, and acoustic levels construct relevant qualia
- fast-slow* are differentiated by exploiting multiple types of vehicle-object relations: iconic, indexical, and symbolic meanings

REFERENCES

- Chumley, Lily Hope & Nicholas Harkness. 2013. Introduction: Qualia. *Anthropological Theory* 13(1/2). 3–11.
- Eckert, Penelope. 2008. Variation and the indexical field. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12(4). 453–476.
- Gal, Susan & Judith Irvine. 2019. *Signs of difference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harkness, Nicholas. 2013. Softer soju in South Korea. *Anthropological Theory* 13(1/2). 12–30.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1997 [1897]. Ground, object, and interpretant. In Charles Hartshorne & Paul Weiss (eds.), *The collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, volume 2*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.