The Rectification of Names: Semantic Coordination and Social Harmony

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Abstract. The injunction “father, father; son, son” distinguishes a role’s designation from its adequate realization. This paper develops two abstractions: from filial relations to legitimate social roles, and from those roles to names as words in communication. Public words coordinate action by making distinctions mutually available. Rectification requires adequate application and sufficiently shared understanding; their failures generate coordinated error and semantic disharmony. Social duties may arise constitutively from unchosen dependencies rather than voluntary role acceptance. Dynamic proportionality governs excellent performance as circumstances change. The paper develops this reconstruction through Analects 12.11 and 13.3, Xunzi, Aristotle, and contemporary theories of convention and social ontology.

Keywords: Confucius; xiao; zhengming; constitutive obligation; semantic disharmony; coordination; Aristotle

1. Father, Father; Son, Son

Asked about government, Confucius replies that the ruler should be ruler, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son (Analects 12.11). The repetition seems to assert identities: a father is a father. As an injunction, however, it distinguishes occupying a position from adequately realizing it. A father may bear the name while failing to father well; a son may bear his designation without responding appropriately to the relationship. The difference is between nominal occupancy and excellent realization, not between a true and a false statement of numerical identity. [1]

This distinction is formal. The repetition does not tell us everything a father should do, nor does it license treating customary expectations as self-validating. Rather, it poses a question: what makes the named relationship intelligible, and what counts as realizing it rather than frustrating it? Answering requires knowledge of human development, particular circumstances, and legitimate responsibilities. The apparent tautology therefore opens an inquiry instead of ending one.

The proposed interpretation is constructive. Confucius does not explicitly offer a contemporary semantic theory in 12.11. Yet the passage supplies a particularly economical model for thinking about the gap between designation, understanding, and conduct. A later discussion of rectifying names (Analects 13.3) supplies the explicit connection to speech and successful affairs.

2. Xiao, Dysfunction, and Dynamic Proportionality

Filial relations make the problem concrete. A father can be too strict, suppressing the child’s developing independence, or too lax, failing to provide necessary guidance. Opposed actions can frustrate the same developmental good. Likewise, what a son appropriately owes a parent may change as dependence, maturity, and the parent’s needs change. Xiao, filial piety, names a virtue internal to this relational field; its content cannot be exhausted by a timeless list of gestures. [2]

Call dynamic proportionality the realization of a function through activity appropriate to the particular persons and circumstances involved, as those circumstances change. The standard is not an arithmetic midpoint between strictness and laxity. It is the judgment of what the relationship requires here and now. Aristotle’s mean relative to us and his account of practical wisdom provide a useful comparative vocabulary (Nicomachean Ethics II.6; VI.5). This is a philosophical synthesis, not a claim of historical transmission. [3]

Dysfunction reveals function without proving an inherited convention correct. The excessively controlling parent may undermine independence; the neglectful parent may undermine security. These are defeasible, empirically assessable claims about human flourishing. A practice may also be defective at the institutional level. To say that a role has standards of successful performance is not yet to say that every role or every inherited standard deserves moral endorsement.

3. First Abstraction: From Filial Relations to Social Roles

The structure does not depend on the sex of the parent or on a single family arrangement. “Mother, mother; child, child” can express the same formal demand as “father, father; son, son,” while leaving room for different concrete responsibilities. The same distinction applies to teacher and student, judge and litigant, ruler and minister. One can hold a title without realizing the function that makes its legitimate exercise intelligible.

The generalization has four steps. First, a genuine role identifies a structured relation or position. Second, that relation has characteristic activities or responsibilities. Third, performance admits standards of success and failure distinct from nominal

occupancy. Fourth, excellent performance must be proportionate to the relevant circumstances. This does not make xiao literally the virtue of every role. Rather, filiality exhibits a formal structure of relational excellence that can be abstracted from its specifically filial content. [4]

Role performance is also interdependent. Teaching requires a learner; parenting involves the developing child; political offices act within an institutional order. A teacher may give technically correct explanations that fail to meet the student's present understanding. A ruler may exercise one legitimate power in a way that obstructs another office. In each case, isolated performance is insufficient: the differentiated activities must fit together.

4. Functional Harmony and Its Limits

We may define functional harmony as the dynamically proportionate coordination of legitimate, interdependent functions. This definition makes differentiation essential rather than accidental: parent and child, teacher and learner, ruler and minister need not perform the same acts. Analects 13.23 distinguishes harmony from sameness; this provides a classical point of comparison, though it does not by itself prove the present functional definition. [5]

The corresponding functional disharmony occurs when activities frustrate one another or fail to realize the goods for which their coordination is justified. Excess, deficiency, neglect, and incompatible expectations are possible mechanisms. Yet failure is not automatic: others may compensate for a deficient parent or teacher, and an institution may remain effective despite a local breakdown. The claim is explanatory, not a deterministic law.

Nor is successful coordination sufficient for moral goodness. An exploitative enterprise may coordinate very efficiently. This is why the definition includes legitimate functions and why semantic rectification, discussed below, cannot alone deliver justice. Correctly understanding a role may reveal an injustice; it does not confer moral legitimacy on the role simply by making it intelligible.

5. Second Abstraction: Names as Mechanisms of Coordination

Why have a name such as "father" at all? It makes a distinction available for repeated use. Participants can identify a relationship, communicate expectations, make inferences, and coordinate their conduct around it. The same enabling structure appears outside social roles. Mathematical terms coordinate calculations; scientific categories organize observation and explanation; legal designations allow participants to recognize powers and obligations. Names are mechanisms of coordination because they render distinctions usable across occasions and, where communication occurs, across persons. [6]

The present claim concerns names as words in communicative use, not every private mental representation. It does not require that every word was invented for coordination, that all language is instrumental, or that every expression denotes an external object. A word used publicly enables agents to align their attention, judgments, and expectations around a repeatable distinction. Solitary reasoning has analogous standards of consistent use, but the paper's central coordination thesis requires only the interpersonal case. [6] [14]

The schema "father, father; son, son" can now be expressed as "X, X; Y, Y," for coherent terms X and Y in communicative use. This generalization is precise only if its levels are kept distinct. For role terms, the gap is between occupying a position and performing it excellently. For non-role terms, the gap is between uttering or deploying an expression and using it correctly. A purported triangle may fail to satisfy the defining conditions of a triangle; that failure is classificatory, not a moral defect of the triangle. What generalizes is answerability to standards of appropriate use, not the moral duties peculiar to social roles.

The normativity of correct naming is conditional but genuine: insofar as speakers undertake to communicate by a word, they have reason to use it in ways that allow its relevant distinction to be understood. Role obligations have a further source. Some roles are voluntarily undertaken, but others are constitutively incurred through relationships and dependencies not chosen by their occupants. A parent does not escape obligations to a dependent child by declining the identity of caregiver. Such duties arise from the dependent person's needs, the agent's relation to those needs, and the absence of an adequate substitute, not from mere acceptance of a title. This claim is defeasible: responsibilities can be transferred or modified, and neither biological relation alone nor institutional naming automatically settles their scope. Semantic rectification clarifies and coordinates these obligations; it does not create them by fiat. [7] [13]

6. The Two Axes of Rectification

Objective adequacy. A concept should be applied adequately to what it purports to distinguish. A scientific category may misclassify its subject; a social category may obscure the actual dependencies of the persons involved. “Objective” here means answerability to relevant facts or standards, not that every term has a concrete external referent. Institutional facts may partly depend upon shared rules, while mathematical and fictional discourse have their own standards of correct use. Adequacy is therefore domain-sensitive. [8]

Shared intelligibility. Where names coordinate participants, their use must be understood compatibly enough for the task at hand. Identical private definitions are unnecessary. Speakers often communicate successfully despite different background beliefs. What matters is sufficient common ground to identify the relevant distinctions, interpret commitments, and adjust expectations. The required degree of compatibility varies with the precision of the activity: casual conversation tolerates ambiguity that legal drafting or scientific measurement may not. [9]

The conditions are independent. People may agree perfectly about a category that systematically misrepresents reality: their understanding is shared but inadequate. Conversely, two investigators may each classify the same phenomenon adequately yet employ incompatible terminologies: their separate judgments are sound but their communication is obstructed. Hence consensus is not truth, and private accuracy is not yet successful public coordination.

7. Semantic Disharmony, Coordinated Error, and Functional Failure

Semantic disharmony occurs when meanings or rules of use are insufficiently compatible for the coordination at issue. Participants talk past one another, equivocate, or act upon conflicting expectations. Coordinated error occurs when participants share an inadequate conception and organize their judgments or actions around it. Compound discordance combines the two: the conception is inadequate and its use is insufficiently shared.

These are analytically distinct from functional disharmony. A group may misunderstand one another yet negotiate a workable arrangement; it may communicate flawlessly but pursue harmful ends; and it may suffer institutional failure through scarcity or coercion despite accurate, shared terminology. The proposed account identifies recurrent sources of miscoordination, not a complete causal theory of every social failure.

Consider a school in which “independent learning” means self-directed inquiry to teachers but minimal supervision to administrators. The term is shared phonetically but not practically; expectations diverge, and educational coordination may fail. Alternatively, everyone may agree that independent learning means never providing corrective feedback. Here shared understanding could still organize a pedagogically defective practice. The first illustrates semantic disharmony, the second coordinated error. These are illustrative cases, not empirical findings.

This distinction explains why disagreement is not always a defect. Open disagreement can expose false consensus and initiate correction. Conversely, apparent agreement can conceal deep semantic incompatibility. Rectification aims neither at enforced unanimity nor at conformity for its own sake; it aims at sufficiently accurate and mutually intelligible distinctions for the relevant intellectual and practical activities.

8. Classical Evidence and Rival Interpretations

Analects 13.3 provides the strongest textual bridge. In the familiar sequence, failure to rectify names disrupts speech; failures of speech then impair the conduct of affairs and the ordering of public life. This is not a deductive proof that all semantic defects cause political disorder. It is a striking diagnosis of the dependence of organized activity upon intelligible linguistic distinctions. Read beside 12.11, it invites the movement from role realization to the coordination-enabling function of names. [10]

Xunzi’s “Rectifying Names” (Zhengming, chapter 22) supplies a more explicit account of naming practices and public distinctions. Fraser emphasizes conventions governing public use while allowing constraints from how things are; Hagen emphasizes naming as a constructive social project; Ryan argues for a stronger truth-directed reading. These are genuine rival emphases, not merely different labels for the same position. These emphases need not be collapsed into one historical doctrine. The present two-axis reconstruction instead makes their tension productive: public convention enables shared use, while adequacy constrains what counts as successful application. [11]

The contemporary comparison is likewise selective. Lewis’s theory of convention helps explain coordination; Austin foregrounds linguistic action; Clark and Stalnaker clarify common ground; Brandom connects conceptual use to normative

commitments. These authors do not jointly endorse the thesis advanced here. They clarify distinct mechanisms that the account of rectification must keep apart. The proposal is a comparative philosophical reconstruction, not an attribution of modern pragmatics to early Confucian texts. [12]

9. Objections and Replies

Objection: not all conceptual activity is interpersonal. A solitary thinker may reason without speaking. Reply: the argument is expressly about words as used in communication. It need not reduce private cognition to interpersonal coordination. A related analogy is noted separately. [14]

Objection: shared coordination can be vicious. Criminal conspirators may understand one another perfectly. Reply: semantic coordination is an enabling condition, not a moral ideal. Functional harmony, as defined here, adds legitimacy and proportionate realization of worthwhile functions. The theory must not smuggle moral approval into the mere fact of agreement.

Objection: xiao cannot apply to every relationship. Filial obligations differ from professional or political obligations. Reply: the first abstraction preserves the distinction. The generalizable structure is the difference between nominal role occupancy and context-sensitive excellence; the specifically filial content of xiao remains particular to familial relations.

Objection: meaning changes, so rectification would freeze language. Reply: successful use requires enough stability to coordinate, not immutability. Meanings, classifications, and practices may be revised when new evidence or circumstances demand it. Dynamic proportionality is thus not an optional addition but a condition of sustained rectification over time.

10. Conclusion

The apparent tautology “father, father; son, son” distinguishes naming a role from realizing it adequately. The first abstraction extends this distinction to social roles generally: legitimate functions require proportionate, interdependent performance. The second extends it to coherent words in communicative use: shared names make distinctions publicly available and thereby enable interpersonal coordination.

Rectification requires two separable achievements: adequate application to what names distinguish and sufficiently shared understanding among those who employ them. Their failures yield coordinated error and semantic disharmony; where the relevant concepts organize social practices, either failure may contribute to functional disharmony. Because circumstances change, successful rectification remains an ongoing activity rather than a fixed linguistic settlement.

The general thesis is that words enable interpersonal coordination; rectification secures its semantic conditions; and dynamic proportionality governs excellent realization where legitimate functions are interdependent. Some duties are constitutive of relationships rather than optional undertakings.

Notes

1. Analects 12.11; Edward Slingerland, trans., Confucius: Analects (Hackett, 2003), ad loc. Classical passage locators are used rather than unverified translation-specific page numbers.

2. Analects 1.2 and 2.5–2.8 for filial conduct and the importance of manner, respect, and responsiveness. The account of developmental goods is a constructive argument, not a literal translation of xiao.

3. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics II.6, 1106a26–1107a8; VI.5, 1140a24–1140b30. The “mean relative to us” is not an arithmetic midpoint.

4. Roger T. Ames, Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011). The generalization concerns role structure, not the extension of filial duties to all relations.

5. Analects 13.23 and 1.12. Harmony and sameness are distinguished in 13.23; the present functional definition is an interpretive development.

6. David Lewis, Convention: A Philosophical Study (Harvard University Press, 1969); J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words (Oxford University Press, 1962). Coordination and linguistic action are distinct theoretical contributions.

7. Christine Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity (Cambridge University Press, 1996); John Searle, The Construction of Social Reality (Free Press, 1995). Neither constitutive rules nor role labels alone establish moral duties. The paper separates semantic standards from duties grounded in vulnerability, dependence, and responsibility.

8. Searle, The Construction of Social Reality; Brian Epstein, The Ant Trap (Oxford University Press, 2015). Institutional kinds may be socially constituted yet subject to factual assessment.

9. Herbert H. Clark, Using Language (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert Stalnaker, “Common Ground,” Linguistics and Philosophy 25 (2002): 701–721.

10. Analects 13.3. The received passage describes a sequence connecting names, speech, affairs, and ritual or penal order; translation details vary. This paper does not treat the sequence as a universally exceptionless causal law.

11. Xunzi, “Zhengming,” chapter 22, in Eric L. Hutton, trans., Xunzi: The Complete Text (Princeton University Press, 2014), 236–247 (chapter locator confirmed); Kurtis Hagen, “Xunzi’s Use of Zhengming: Naming as a Constructive Project,” Asian Philosophy 12, no. 1 (2002): 35–51; Chris Fraser, “Language and Logic in the Xunzi,” in Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi (Springer, 2016), 291–321, doi:10.1007/978-94-017-7745-2_10; Liam D. Ryan, “Let the Ruler Be the Ruler: Aiming at Truth in Xunzi’s Doctrine of the Rectification of Names,” Asian Journal of Philosophy (2022), doi:10.1007/s44204-022-00055-x. Fraser’s published abstract explicitly stresses convention, communication, and unity; his author summary identifies conventionalism with qualified realism. Ryan’s published title and article frame the truth-directed alternative. Full-text verification remains necessary for narrower interpretive claims.

12. Robert Brandom, Making It Explicit (Harvard University Press, 1994); Lewis, Convention; Austin, How to Do Things with Words; Clark, Using Language; Stalnaker, “Common Ground.” These sources represent distinct approaches, not a unified school.

13. Chenyang Li, “Filial Care,” in Reshaping Confucianism: A Progressive Inquiry (Oxford University Press, 2023), 97–116, doi:10.1093/oso/9780197657621.003.0005, distinguishes material, psychological, and moral dimensions of filial care. Stephen C. Angle, “Be Filial,” in Growing Moral (Oxford University Press, 2022), 25–35, doi:10.1093/oso/9780190062897.003.0003, links familial obligations to relationships that precede deliberate choice. These sources support attention to unchosen dependence; the paper’s precise constitutive-obligation argument is its own reconstruction, not a proposition attributed verbatim to either author.

14. Lewis, Convention (1969), concerns interpersonal coordination. Solitary inference can exhibit analogous requirements of stable discrimination, but the manuscript does not rely upon treating an individual as literally a multi-agent society. The self may be understood as a social agent whose language is acquired and corrected through shared practices; that broader claim is not required for the argument here.

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