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Language Attitude Change of Yue Dialect speakers Towards Putonghua in Guangzhou

Introduction & Background Information

For the past few decades, the discussion on enforcement of standard language policy in China and its effectiveness have been in the spotlight of international media. One main goal in creating a standard national language (Putonghua) in China is to establish and maintain a national unity across China. One key measurement in examining whether such goal is met is to create an analysis on language attitude of native speakers of different Chinese dialects towards Putonghua, and to inspect whether different dialect speakers are holding a more positive perception towards Putonghua speakers than before when there was no national language in China. This paper aims to investigate various factors that influence the language attitude of Yue speakers in Guangzhou and propose a study to investigate the potential positive shift of language attitude of Yue dialect speakers towards Putonghua, the national language, in the city of Guangzhou. I suspect that there is a change of attitude of the “Post-90s” Cantonese speakers towards Putonghua speakers in Guangzhou, in which Putonghua speakers are perceived to have relatively similar social standings as the native Cantonese speakers.

The city of Guangzhou holds a significant stand in studying native Yue speakers’ attitude towards Putonghua speakers. Guangzhou as the capital of Guangdong province and the cultural center for the mainland Yue dialect culture has had strong cultural influence on the nearby Yue dialect areas in history. Thus not only does the language attitude of Yue dialect speakers in Guangzhou has a direct impact on the attitude of Yue dialect speakers in nearby areas, their attitude also gives a relatively accurate perception of the language attitude towards Putonghua speakers in metropolitan areas of Guangdong.

Furthermore, Guangzhou is also an excellent starting point in doing a nationwide language attitude analysis on Putonghua as the Guangzhou is influenced by relatively more historical, economic and social factors than other dialect regions. Historically, Yue dialect speakers held a stronger sense of group identity compares to speakers of other Chinese dialects. Though speakers of other dialects also have a strong pride of their dialects and local cultures, they do not have a sense of separation between their culture and the culture of the rest of the country. Yue speakers, on the other hand, recognize the Yue culture as the center of their local culture and Yue dialect as the standard form of speech (Ramsey 61). Many television shows and radio programs in Guangzhou are, in fact, still produced in Yue dialect (Snow 215). Secondly, Guangzhou is one of the first cities that experienced rapid economic success after the *Deng Xiaoping Reforms*. The amount of Gross Domestic Product Guangdong province generates has ranked first since 1989 (Yeung et al. 470). The rapid economic success has attracted a superabundance amount of migrant workers from the rest of the country to Guangdong for better job opportunities and living conditions. Since most of the migrant workers are unable to speak the Yue dialects, they communicate with the locals using Putonghua. And most of those migrant workers work as factories workers, physical labors, and other low-paid positions. Such phenomenon has furthered Yue speakers' prejudice over Putonghua speakers in terms of social standings. In addition, as an exported-oriented economic zone, Guangzhou has also experienced much more external cultural influences than internal culture influences. One of the main influences comes from British Hong Kong. Because Guangzhou and British Hong Kong share the same vernacular variety, Yue dialect speakers often prefer Hong Kong media production over mainland media productions. Unlike mainland media productions in which Putonghua speakers are portrayed as likeable characters, Hong Kong productions often have negative portrayal of Putonghua speakers whom often hold lower social standings. For instance, in the blockbuster movie *Iceman Cometh* (1989), professors from Qinghuang University were portrayed as characters that were greedy and lecherous. Moreover, the enforcement of the standard language

policy is not as strict comparing to other dialect regions. In the book *China, Regional differences in the Development of Rural Education*, the author states that the dominated medium of instruction in middle and high schools in many towns continues to be Yue dialect as instructors think that Yue dialects can help students better understand the materials. Students thus have more exposure to the Yue dialect and the local culture and might even perceive Yue dialect as an acceptable standard of speech in academic environment (Ma 44).

In addition to the mentioned factors that contribute to the language prejudice towards Putonghua in Guangzhou, there exists recent social and economic changes that might create a positive attitude shift towards Putonghua in Guangzhou. Firstly, comparing to the 1980s and 1990s in which Yue children attended school with others whose parents were also Yue speakers, “Post-90s” children whose parents are Yue speakers are now attending the same schools as children of those migrant workers whom came to Guangzhou in the 1980s. “Post-90s” children thus have more interactions with Putonghua speakers and can change their perspective that Mandarin speakers might hold a lower socioeconomic status than Yue speakers. Secondly, the change of the types of migrant workers might also influences the younger Yue speakers’ attitude towards Putonghua speakers. Although there is still a large amount of migrant workers moving to Guangzhou to become factory workers and physical labors, there is also an increasing trend in skilled and college-educated Putonghua speakers moving to Guangzhou to become medical professionals, company executives and white-collar workers. In the long-run Guangzhou local TV series *Wailai Xifu Bendilang* (“Native Husband with Wife from Afar”), one could observe a change of new characters. In the first 50 episodes, Putonghua speakers in the series were portrayed as convenience store workers, and factory workers (“Danggongmei”); but starting from episode 200 and on, one could notice an increasing trend of Putonghua speakers portrayed as entrepreneurs, white-collar workers, etc. The perception change from Hong Kong media production also has a significant impact on the potential positive attitude shift of Yue speakers towards Putonghua speakers. After the end of British rule in

Hong Kong, there is a dramatic increase of contacts between mainland China and Hong Kong, Hongkongers thus begin to get more and more exposure to the mainland culture and gain a better understanding of the Putonghua language. As a result, more and more Putonghua speakers are portrayed as characters with positive traits and higher understanding in Hong Kong media productions. Such social and media changes can alter the old perception of Yue speakers toward Putonghua speakers in which Putonghua speakers generally hold a lower socioeconomic standings comparing to Yue speakers. Furthermore, the recent economic success in other regions of China is also a contributing factor to the possible positive shift of language attitude in Guangzhou. In mid-1990s, urbanization have started to take place in central and western regions of China, foreign investors have moved their capital to provinces such as Sichuan (Chu, HKTDC Research).

In short, the contributing factors, whether positive or negative, in which influence the language attitude of Yue speakers in Guangzhou towards Putonghua speakers are much more diverse and complex than contributing factors on language attitude in other dialect regions in China. One can possibly conclude that if there is a positive attitude shift of Yue dialect speakers in Guangzhou towards Putonghua, there is likely a positive attitude shift of Putonghua in other dialect regions of China.

Literature Review (Method References)

There are three common methods used in past language attitude studies. The most commonly used method is the Matched Guise & Verbal Guise technique (MGT) developed by Wallace Lambert and his team in 1960. In Lambert et al. (1960), Lambert and his team conducted an experiment to evaluate monolingual and bilingual Montreal residents' attitudes towards French speakers and English speakers. The participants were instructed to listen to recordings of children's voices in both English and French, and then asked to rate each the personality of each speaker on 15 traits. In the experiment, participants were told the recordings in French and English were produced by two different speakers, but in fact, they were voices produced by the same person. Lambert and

his team found that monolingual English speakers in Montreal evaluated the Canadian French speaker in the experiment with less positive traits, while bilingual English-French speakers in Montreal also found the Canadian English speakers less favorable.

Another study conducted by Kalmar & Yong (1987) also employed the MGT method in testing the attitude of Yue dialect speakers in Guangzhou towards standard Putonghua and heavily Yue-dialect-accented Putonghua. In that study, native Yue dialect speakers and non-Yue speakers from the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies were asked to listen to recordings of the same speaker speaking standard Putonghua and heavily Yue-dialect-accented Putonghua (participants were not told the recordings were the speech by the same speaker), and then evaluated the speakers on 20 personality traits. The researchers discovered that although both native Yue-dialect speakers and non-Yue speakers agreed that the speaker of standard Putonghua was likely to have more opportunities in social and career advancement, native Yue speakers found the speaker of heavily Yue-dialect-accented Putonghua more empathetic than the speaker of standard Putonghua.

Cavallaro and Chin (2009) also employed the MGT to examine bilingual Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) and Singapore Standard English (SSE) speakers' attitude towards SEC and SSE. Unlike the Kalmar studies (1987), however, the speech samples used in Cavallaro and Chin's study was different not only in terms of accent but also in lexical items and syntactical structures. For instance, the SEC speech sample included the typical sentence-final pragmatic particle typical of SCE. The researchers found that bilingual SCE-SSE speakers rated SCE lower in solidarity traits comparing to the SSE.

Another common method used in language attitude studies is the direct method which consists of interviewing participants through surveys, questionnaires, and talking to participants. In Speicher and McMahon's study in 1992, the researchers gave oral open-ended interviews to 16 African American affiliated with a Catholic university in exploring their experiences, opinions and attitudes towards the Black English Vernacular (BEV). The questions in the interview include:

“*what is your experience with BEV?*”; “*What do you think about BEV?*”, etc. The researchers found little unanimity among the responses they received and thus were unable to conclude any findings of significance.

Purdie and his team also applied the direct method of interviewing participants in their study concerning the attitude of Australian aboriginal children towards Aboriginal English (AE) and Standard Australian English (SAE) in 2002. Unlike the study conducted in Speicher et al. (1992), researchers in this study gave out questionnaires to 114 AE speakers asking them for their opinions and attitudes towards AE and SAE in addition to the attitudes they attributed to their AE and non-AE speaking peers. Questions in the study include: “*How do you feel when you yarns the same as that when you’re at home? In the classroom a school? In the playground at school?*”, etc. The study found that AE speaking children felt positive in the use of AE at home, and in playgrounds; whereas they felt negative in the use of SAE in those contexts.

Furthermore, the map task is also a method used by linguists in exploring language attitudes in certain linguistic communities. In Tamasi’s 2003 study, Tamasi gave Georgia and New Jersey residents a stack of index cards with the state names written on them and asked the participants to sort the given cards into piles based on how they thought people speak in each state and then asked them to describe the speech of each pile using words such as “*attractive or unattractive*”, “*trustworthy or untrustworthy*”, etc. A map of the United States was also available to the participants for references. Tamasi found that the responses participants gave were similar to the results of similar studies conducted in the past, and that participants showed unfavorable responses towards the Southern variety of American English.

Method

The three common methods mentioned above could essentially be applied to my proposed study, however, I find the MGT method most appropriate as it can fully examine participants’ direct attitude towards Putonghua. The second method (interviewing) is less effective comparing the MGT

method as participants might consciously hide their true opinions towards Putonghua speakers as there is still strong enforcement of the use of Putonghua nationwide in China. The third method is the least applicable as the proposed study aims to study Putonghua speakers as a whole (despite their accents or origins).

To examine my hypothesis in which “Post-90s” native Yue dialect speakers hold a similar attitude towards both native Yue speakers and Putonghua speakers in terms of social standings, I will use a modified version of MGT method to conduct my experiment. The standard MGT uses recordings of the same speaker for both languages that are being examined, I suspect participants might be able to recognize that the recordings are in fact from the same speakers as everyone processes phonetic features that are unique to himself. Moreover, it is possible that there exists gender biases if the speech of only female or male is used in a MGT experiment. Thus I propose to use four bilingual speakers of Yue dialect and Putonghua, and ask them to speak in both Yue dialect and Putonghua. Detailed procedures will be explained in the following material section.

Subjects: A hundred and forty participants (80 males and 80 females) will be divided into four groups, with each group consists of 20 female and 20 male. All participants should be born and raised in Guangzhou with no previous experience living abroad or in other Mandarin spoken provinces. They should also be college students or college graduates with no prior experiences in the subject of Linguistics, who are between the age of 20 to 23 (“Post-90s”) to insure they have experienced the social and economic changes of Guangzhou. Additionally, the participants should possess the ability to speak Putonghua, and are children of native Yue-dialect speakers.

Materials: Four bilingual speakers of Yue dialect and Putonghua (two females and two males), all born and raised in Guangzhou, will record the fable *The Wind and the Sun* in Yue dialect and in standard Putonghua. The recordings will be then assigned with four images. The images are computer-generated depiction of average women and men from mainland China and Taiwan, and have very similar facial features (Daily-mail). The use of computer-generated images is to limit

participants' appearance preferences or their imagination of what the speakers might look like in the experiments (See Appendix A). There will be four speech recording-images combinations. Suppose the speakers chosen are Male A, Male B, Female A and Female B, and their speech recordings can be labelled to the images Male 1 & Male 2, and Female 1 & female 2 in the following combinations:

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1). M1 = Yue of Male A | 2). M1 = Y of Male B | 3). M1 = P of Male A | 4). M1 = P of Male B |
| M2 = Putonghua of Male B | M2 = P of Male A | M2 = Y of Male B | M1 = Y of Male A |
| F1 = Y of Female A | F1 = Y of Female B | F1 = P of Female A | F1 = P of Female B |
| F2 = P of Female B | F2 = P of Female A | F2 = Y of Female | F2 = Y of Female A |

In addition to the speech recordings of the four speakers, a list of questions will also be asked concerning the four traits of the speakers that are most commonly associated with one's social standings – financial status, appreciation of the arts, education level, career opportunities, and exposure to foreign culture.

Procedures: Participant will first be asked to verify their background information to see whether they are in fact qualified for this experiment. And then each group of participants will be instructed to listen to one of four combination of recordings and images listed above. After listening, they will be given the list of questions to answer (See Appendix A). All questions are closed-ended questions (multiple-choice) to eliminate the problem of participants' failing to focus on the tested area. Results will be collected and analysis after the completion of questions by all participants.

Pilot Study and Findings

In order to test my hypothesis, I conducted a pilot study of 8 (4 females and 4 males) using the materials mentioned above and following the mentioned procedure (See Appendix A). In my pilot study, I found the amount of participants, who ranked the male Putonghua speech (Male A and Male B) higher in the traits of *Education Level*, *Appreciation of the Arts*, *Career Opportunities*, and *Financial Status*, is the same as the amount of participants who ranked the male Yue Dialect speech (Male A and Male B) higher in the traits mentioned. There are more responses that ranked female Putonghua speech (Female A and B) higher in both the traits of *Appreciation of Arts* (5 responses)

and *financial status* (6 responses), while there amount of responses in giving a positive evaluation to Putonghua female speech was the same as the amount of responses in giving a positive evaluation to Yue female speech in the trait of *Education Level*. In the trait of *Exposure to Foreign Culture*, both male and female Yue dialect speech received more positive evaluations (6 responses) than the male and female Yue dialect speech. The findings in the trait of *Exposure to Foreign Culture* might have bias as it is still a social norm that Yue dialect speakers in Guangzhou or even Guangdong area, have more exposures to foreign culture due to the export-oriented economic model Guangdong province employs. Participants might just be following the social norm in this case.

Male	Cantonese	Mandarin
Financial Status	4	4
Career Opportunities	4	4
Appreciation of the Arts	4	4
Education Level	4	4
Exposure to Foreign Culture	6	2

Female	Cantonese	Mandarin
Financial Status	2	6
Career Opportunities	4	4
Appreciation of the Arts	3	5
Education Level	4	4
Exposure to Foreign Culture	6	2

The findings of the pilot study roughly confirmed my hypothesis in which the “Post-90s” Yue dialect speakers prefer neither Putonghua nor Yue dialects, and that Putonghua speakers are perceived to have relatively similar social standings as the native Yue dialect speakers. The findings of the pilot study have also raised the question that whether it is possible that female Putonghua speakers are perceived to have a higher social standings comparing to male Putonghua speakers. I expect the findings of my proposed study to be similar to the results that I found in my pilot study and I do not rule out the possibility that female Putonghua speakers might have perceived to have a higher social standings than male Putonghua speakers.

Implications

It has almost been 70 years since the establishment of the standard language policy in China, the study proposed in this paper will provide insights for government officials and the general public

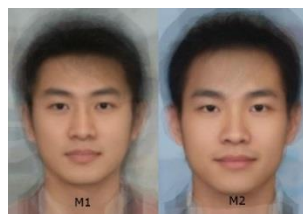
on the progress on pursuing a national language (Putonghua) and creating a national unity as it analyzes the shift of attitude of speakers of a major dialect towards Putonghua. In addition, the results of the proposed study can be a useful measurement in evaluating the effectiveness of the current promotion practices of the national language in Southeastern China and to decide whether stronger promotion of standard language policy is necessary in achieving the goal of creating a national linguistic unity in the future.

Appendix A. Pilot Study

Do you speaker Cantonese in your Family? (Yes, No)

If no, which dialect do you use in your family?

Listen to the audios corresponding to speakers listed below and answer the following questions:



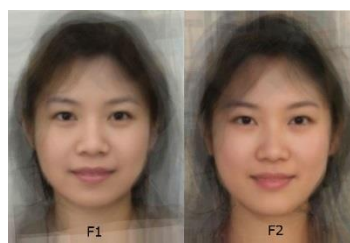
Male 1: [Link](#); Male2: [Link](#)

1. *Financial Status*: Who do you think is more likely to be seen in a private fundraising event?
(M1 or M2)
2. *Education Level*: Who do you think is more likely to obtain a college degree? (M1 or M2)
3. *Career Opportunities*: Which speaker do you think is more likely to be promoted to a higher position in a company? (M1 or M2)
4. *Appreciation of the Arts*: There will be a shimmering VIP event in the newly open art gallery in town, which speaker will you invite to the party? (M1 or M2)
5. *Exposure to Foreign Culture*: Which speaker is more likely to be able to speak English? (M1 or M2)

Listen to the audios corresponding to speakers listed below and answer the following questions:

Female 1: [Link](#); Female 2: [Link](#)

Repetition of the six questions listed above.



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