

Constructing a new linguistic self: Stylistic variation in a second dialect

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Previous research found substantial inter-speaker variability in second dialect acquisition (SDA) and suggested that factors like speakers' attitudes towards the second dialect (D2)-speaking communities are important (Siegel 2006). It is reasonable to hypothesize that D2 use is also subject to intra-speaker variation. However, much SDA literature remains “a-stylistic” (Nycz 2015). This paper presents a novel investigation of D2 stylistic variation.

The paper examines the acquisition of a Northern Mandarin (NM) feature by Xiamen Mandarin (XM)-speaking undergraduates in Beijing. NM is spoken in Northern China, including Beijing, whereas XM is used in Xiamen in Southern China. In XM, /ʂ/ is fronter than in NM. The paper compares Xiamen speakers' /ʂ/ production when talking with NM and XM-speaking interlocutors respectively.

Fifteen female focal Xiamen speakers each participated in one experiment session with their Xiamen friend, and another with their Northern friend. Each session included a 30-min conversation followed by wordlist reading (containing 36 /ʂ/ tokens) by the focal speakers. Ethnographic interviews were conducted to investigate participants' attitudes towards Beijing and Mandarin varieties.

Wordlist data was analyzed, with peak frequency as the measure of /ʂ/ frontness: higher frequency suggests fronter production. A Beijing orientation score was calculated for each speaker from the interview. A linear mixed-effects model was built with peak frequency as the dependent variable, and the independent variables of following vowels, length of residence, interlocutor background, Beijing orientation, and the interaction between the last two variables.

Results showed that the interaction between interlocutor background and Beijing orientation was significant ($p < 0.05$). When talking to Northern friends, the more Beijing-oriented speakers had more NM-like production.

The paper shows that D2 use is subject to stylistic variation, and can be modulated by speaker attitudes. It calls for more SDA research on intra-speaker variation.