Investigating the role of speaker attitudes in speech production through two linguistic features in Hohhot, China.

The effect of speaker attitudes on language change has been the focus of much work in sociolinguistics. Although qualitative studies often advocate for the role of attitudes (see e.g. Clark & Watson, 2016; Llamas 2007; Hilton 2010), significant correlations between measures of language attitude and linguistic behaviour are not always found in quantitative research (e.g. Ladegaard, 2000; Stuart-Smith et al, 2013). This paper explores the degree to which people's attitudes influence their speech production by presenting variation and change in two linguistic features in Hohhot, a Chinese immigrant city.

Hohhot is home to a complex mixture of ‘traditional’, local residents, who speak Jìn dialect, and migrants, who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s, encouraged by government policy. Thus, a mixed, new vernacular combining features of Jìn and Mandarin was formed, known locally as "Hohhot Mandarin". Given the complex social conflicts between the local-born and migrant communities, I ask whether speakers vary in the degree to which they adopt various Jìn-features, and whether this variation is conditioned by their attitudes. To explore this, 35 speakers from the migrant community in Hohhot were interviewed, with their attitude information collected from questionnaires using magnitude estimation (Redinger 2010). Principal Component Analysis of the questionnaire responses revealed 4 different attitudinal categories: attitudes towards Jìn dialect, attitudes towards Jìn speakers, emphasis of migrant identity, and emotional attachment to Hohhot.

Language production data were collected from interviews and an elicitation task designed to explore variation in a set of disyllabic words known as "l-words" (Hou, 1999). Two local Jin-features are potentially carried in this set of words: 1) a weak-strong or iambic stress pattern; 2) initial heavily aspirated plosives (Chao, 1935). About 1500 l-word tokens were manually coded for whether these two features occurred, and these data were separately hand fit into binomial mixed effects models using the lme4 library in R (Bates, Maechler & Bolker, 2011; R Core Team, 2013). The independent variables included were social factors like age group, sex, education, attitudinal scores, social networks; as well as linguistic factors like following vowel, duration, etc. Word and speaker were treated as random intercepts.

The results suggest that attitudinal scores are strong predictors for the stress pattern variable: speakers are more likely to use weak-strong patterns if they demonstrate positive attitudes towards the local community, but this effect of attitude is not found for the plosives variable. The stress pattern variable is mainly predicted by social factors, while the plosives variable is more constrained by linguistic factors. This could be related to the nature of the two linguistic variables: speakers may be less aware of the plosives variable than the stress pattern variable. The results will be further discussed in terms of speaker attitudes in relation to the social meaning of linguistic features in language change.

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