Rethinking the Standard: A language attitude survey on neutral tone variation in Modern Standard Chinese

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Standard Chinese has four contour tones; however, a syllable can be "neutralised" and lose its original tone in certain positions (Norman, 1988). Standard Chinese is characterised by a limited use of neutral tone (Chen, 1999; Hu, 1986; Zhang, 1956). Overuse and underuse are considered non-standard and associated with regional dialects. This paper investigates native Chinese speakers’ attitude towards neutral tone variation in Standard Chinese in order to assess the presence, or lack thereof, of prestige status for the official standard language among speakers with different dialect backgrounds.

Data was collected from over 170 university students/graduates from three regions in China where different Chinese dialects are spoken (Beijing, Henan and Guangdong). An on-line language attitude questionnaire and a matched-guise test (Lambert, 1967) were used to collect participants’ language backgrounds and their ratings on six guises representing neutral tone variation: overuse, standard and underuse, which correspond to particular local dialects.

Focusing on the differences across regional groups, quantitative methods were used to analyse self-reported language use data and implicit language attitude data from the matched-guise test. Using statistical analysis, the paper presents participants’ own language use and the prestige they associate with the standard language.

Beijing participants self-reported to be the most standard in speaking Standard Chinese despite of the non-standardness of Beijing dialect. The standard guise received overt prestige from all regions; however, a high overt prestige was also found for the overuse guise associated with Beijing dialect. Based on these results, this paper argues that Beijing variety is changeling the status of the standard language.

This study illuminates the emergence of new prestigious standard in a country undergoing deep socio-economic changes. It also demonstrates a combination of methodologies in analysing sociolinguistic variables and enriches the literature on Chinese sociolinguistics, especially that of the standard language and little known phonetic features.

Keywords: Neutral Tone, Prestige, Modern Standard Chinese.