Variation in the Production and Perception of Regional *Putonghua* in Ningbo, China

Although many existing variationist studies rely solely on production or perception, the study of language variation has long benefitted from a combination of both production and perception data (Drager, 2009; Labov, 1972; Walker, 2014). This mixed-method approach not only offers a fuller picture of the variation in question, but also contributes to our theoretical understanding of, for example, the mechanism of indexicality (Campbell-Kibler, 2009, 2010). Nonetheless, to date, there is a lack of variationist studies of Mandarin Chinese using this method (though cf. Lin, 2018). This study presents a study on variation observed in the production and perception of Ningbo *Putonghua* – a regional variety of *Putonghua* (literally translated as ‘common speech’), the standard language in China.

As part of a bigger project examining language variation and attitudes in China, this paper investigates young adults’ production and perception of different linguistic features found in the local variety of *Putonghua* in Ningbo, a port city in Eastern China. Ningbo *Putonghua* is often characterised by the merger of dental-retroflex fricative/affricates (/s/-/ʂ/, /ts/-/tʂ/, and /tsʰ/-/tʂʰ/) and alveolar/velar nasal finals /n/-/ŋ/, possibly due to the contact between the standard Mandarin variety and the local non-Mandarin Wu variety (Xiao, 2013).

This paper presents data collected from 40 university students (20 female and 20 male) based at universities in Ningbo. All participants are locally-born Ningbonese (aged 21-23) and bilingual in *Putonghua* and local dialect (Wu dialect). The production data of both target features was obtained through auditorily coding relevant tokens from one-on-one sociolinguistic interviews. A matched-guise experiment (Lambert, Frankle, & Tucker, 1966) was used to investigate the perception of these features, using recorded speech from native Ningbonese talkers varying the presence and absence of the two mergers in *Putonghua* and semantic differential scales.

Preliminary results from quantitative analyses show that the two local features differ in their usage in production: the merger of dental-retroflex fricative/affricates is more frequent than that of the alveolar/velar nasal finals. Additionally, the former merger is more frequent in male speakers while little difference is observed across gender groups for the latter feature. More importantly, the perception of these two mergers indicate that the social meanings associated with the two features are also different: the former often indicates a lack of status (e.g. education level) while the latter does not.

This study contributes to the understanding of language variation and language attitudes in general by combining the production and perception of Mandarin Chinese, an under-researched variety. Moreover, by investigating multiple features with potentially different (enregistered) meanings (Agha, 2005; Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson, 2006), the paper sheds light on the complex process of meaning-making in a seemly simple linguistic variety. From a variationist perspective, the results indicate that speakers utilise different linguistic features in the construction of social meanings.
References


