

Research on the Impact of Language Attitude on Language Variation*

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This paper empirically studies the impact of Mandarin and Cantonese attitudes on Cantonese variation, and finds that Mandarin values have a significant positive impact on Cantonese variation, while Cantonese emotions and values have a significant negative impact on Cantonese variation. The impact of Cantonese emotional attitude on language variation is generally stronger than that of Cantonese value attitude. The protection of dialects and the promotion of popularization policies should be implemented in the same direction to maintain language diversity and promote the harmonious development of language ecology.

Keywords: language attitude, emotional attitude, value attitude, language variation

Introduction

In an environment of linguistic diversity, different languages are bound to constantly come into contact and merge, leaving traces on each other and producing new features, resulting in language variation or change (Hartmann & Stork, 1972). Language variation is closely related to the language attitude of speakers (Fishman, 1999). Language attitude is people's basic understanding and value evaluation of different languages and their users (Adler & Plewnia, 2018), reflecting their psychological activities, including the three elements of emotions, cognition, and usage tendencies (behavior) (Edwards, 2018; Schröder, 2019).

If the speaker is faced with only one language, their attitude towards that language is generally clear, at least they consider it useful; When people are in a bilingual or multilingual environment, especially when faced with two or more dominant languages, the attitude of speakers towards different languages is relatively complex. They may only identify with one language or may identify with two or more languages. For the Han ethnic group, the first thing people usually speak is the local dialect, and Mandarin is usually learned after acquiring the dialect, and depending on the situation, whether to use the dialect or Mandarin is chosen. For many people, dialects with regional characteristics can unite relatives and close neighbors, which is what sociolinguists call the potential

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reputation of dialects. The social foundation for maintaining “hometown” relationships is their common regional identity (Trudgill, 1972), and dialects influenced by Mandarin can produce the phenomenon of “dialect mingled by Mandarin”. Cantonese has always played the role of the lingua franca for oral communication in the Lingnan region. In Hong Kong, the younger generation is more accustomed to using Cantonese in formal occasions such as studying and working, mixed with English’s “Hong Kong style Cantonese” and increasingly mature Cantonese written language, which is seen by many “Hong Kong people” as a symbol of identity that distinguishes them from mainland “others” (Edwards, 2018).

Therefore, does the speaker’s attitude towards a certain language affect their own or other language variations? This paper takes the Guangdong dialect area in the Pearl River Delta as the research scope, and answers these questions through investigation and empirical research.

Variables and Data

Variable Selection and Measurement

1. Explained variable

This paper chooses Cantonese variation (CV) as the dependent variable, which refers to the degree to which speakers are influenced by the pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of Mandarin when using Cantonese. We do not examine the situation where the speaker is completely unable to use Cantonese, and the range of Cantonese variation is (0,1).

2. Explanatory variables

Mandarin attitude and Cantonese attitude are selected as explanatory variables. Mandarin attitude and Cantonese attitude respectively refer to the degree of recognition or approval of Mandarin and Cantonese by the speaker, both including emotional and value levels. Specifically, it includes: Mandarin Emotional Attitude (MEA), Mandarin Value Attitude (MVA), Cantonese Emotional Attitude (CEA), and Cantonese Value Attitude (CVA).

3. Control variables

This paper selects some personal information characteristics closely related to language variation as control variables, including age, gender, education, registered residence, personality, and marriage.

Data Source

The scope of this study is prefecture level cities in the Pearl River Delta region, and data are obtained through a combination of questionnaire surveys and interviews. The implementation period is from July to August 2024. The number of effective interview recordings and questionnaires is 6687, accounting for 95.53% of the total input. The interviewee is required to meet two conditions: (1) aged between 7 and 60 years old; (2) Can use Mandarin and Cantonese for daily communication.

We use discourse analysis to analyze heterogeneous words. The investigators conducted situational communication with the respondents through face-to-face interviews and WeChat. After obtaining the consent of the interviewee, the investigator will record the interview content, and the conversation time with each interviewee generally does not exceed 5 minutes. Due to the large recording memory, this paper only provides examples to illustrate the measurement details. Assuming a certain interviewee used a total of 10 words, including “ $\eta\text{o}5\ \text{x}\text{e}\text{o}\text{i}3\ \text{l}\text{i}\text{u}5\ \text{t}\text{s}\text{i}\text{u}6\ \text{x}\text{i}\eta3$ (我去了肇庆), “小心陌生人” and “你比佢大”. Among them, 3

heterogeneous words are generated, namely “Zhaoqing” (heterogeneous pronunciation, the International Phonetic Alphabet of Cantonese is “siu13 hiŋ33”), “陌生入” (heterogeneous vocabulary, generally referred to as “生保人” in Cantonese), and “比佢大” (heterogeneous grammar, Cantonese expression should be “大过佢”). Through discourse analysis, the proportion of heterogeneous words to the total vocabulary is 3/10=30%.

All other data are obtained through a questionnaire survey. All data used for research in this paper are cross-sectional data from 2024.

Empirical Results

Basic Regression Results

In order to understand the impact of language attitudes on language variation, this paper establishes a benchmark model as shown in equation (1):

$$CV_i = \alpha + \beta_1 MEA_i + \beta_2 MVA_i + \beta_3 CEA_i + \beta_4 CVA_i + \sum_i \lambda_i C_i + \mu_i \tag{1}$$

Among them, α is a constant term and β is the coefficient of the explanatory variable. The series control variable is represented by C_i . λ_i is its coefficient, μ_i is the random disturbance term, and the subscript i refers to the i -th respondent.

We use correlation tests and calculated variance inflation factor (VIF) to identify multicollinearity issues and find that the model does not exhibit multicollinearity. Using the White method for heteroscedasticity testing, it proves that the model does not have heteroscedasticity issues. The regression results of the benchmark model are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Regression Results of Benchmark Model

| | CV |
|----------------|-------------------|
| Intercept | 5.767*** (6.43) |
| MEA | 0.664 (1.27) |
| MVA | 1.208* (1.72) |
| CEA | -3.471*** (-9.15) |
| CVA | -1.720*** (-6.24) |
| Age | -0.398** (-2.17) |
| Gender | -6.721** (-2.27) |
| Education | 2.052*** (2.69) |
| Domicile | 8.674*** (4.87) |
| Personality | -2.838** (-1.89) |
| Marry | -1.174* (-1.84) |
| R ² | 0.777 |
| F value | 2326.122*** |
| Observations | 6687 |

Note: *, **, *** respectively indicate statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% levels, with t-values in parentheses. The meaning in the following table is the same.

MEA does not have a significant impact on CV, as the vast majority of respondents’ first language is Cantonese, and their emotional attachment to Cantonese is relatively deep and stable. Mandarin is acquired

through postnatal learning, and most of them hold a tolerant rather than exclusionary attitude, so they are minimally influenced by Mandarin; *CEA* has a significant negative impact on *CV*, and the reason is still that most respondents have a deep emotional identification with Cantonese, strong Cantonese usage ability, and low degree of Cantonese variation. *MVA* and *CVA* have significant positive and negative effects on *CV*, respectively, indicating that the higher the degree of Mandarin value recognition, the deeper the degree of Cantonese variation; The higher the degree of recognition of Cantonese values, the lower the degree of Cantonese variation. The more respondents identify with the value of Mandarin, the more willing they are to learn and improve their Mandarin skills, which has had an impact on Cantonese and promoted its variation. On the contrary, the higher the value recognition of Cantonese among the respondents, the more inclined they are to rely on Cantonese circles, and the less influenced Cantonese is by Mandarin, resulting in a lower degree of Cantonese variation.

Robustness Test

When designing the questionnaire in this paper, in order to reduce errors, the population under 6 years old and over 60 years old have been excluded. In order to further improve the accuracy of the regression, this paper follows the approach of Falck et al. (2012), sorts the entire sample by age, and removes the top 5% and bottom 5% of observations to perform the regression again. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Regression Results of 5% Samples before and after Removing Age

| | <i>CV</i> |
|--------------|------------------|
| <i>MEA</i> | 0.583 (0.68) |
| <i>MVA</i> | 1.138* (2.04) |
| <i>CEA</i> | -3.657** (-2.30) |
| <i>CVA</i> | -1.480** (-2.11) |
| <i>C</i> | YES |
| R^2 | 0.686 |
| F value | 1312.357*** |
| Observations | 6018 |

Due to the exclusion of some older respondents, the significance level and coefficient of Cantonese attitudes have decreased compared to Table 1. This is because older respondents generally have lower Mandarin identification and higher Cantonese identification. Compared to others, the impact of Cantonese attitudes has weakened because older people have a greater weight in Cantonese variation, and some samples of older people have been excluded, reducing the effectiveness of Cantonese variation. The changes in the above robustness test results are within a reasonable explanatory range, and there is no significant difference in overall changes, indicating that the regression results of this article are reliable.

Conclusion and Implications

Research Conclusion

The value attitude of Mandarin has a significant positive impact on Cantonese variation, while the emotional attitude and value attitude of Cantonese have a strong and significant negative impact on Cantonese variation. Horizontally, the impact of Cantonese emotional attitudes on language variation is generally stronger than that of Cantonese value attitudes; Vertically, the impact of language attitude on Cantonese variation is in a reverse

relationship. And by removing samples that are prone to errors at the beginning and end for robustness testing, the results are still reliable.

Policy Implications

Adhere to dialect protection policies and promote cultural diversity. Local cultural departments and education departments should jointly or establish various Cantonese cultural clubs and associations, and regularly organize exchange activities in Cantonese form. Firstly, maintain communication and learning of Cantonese, respect and guide residents' identification with Cantonese culture and its role; Secondly, strengthen Cantonese education for the younger generation, offer Cantonese courses, and promote the dissemination and inheritance of Cantonese. Thirdly, promoting and advertising Mandarin should not come at the cost of sacrificing Cantonese learning and inheritance, but should seek common ground while reserving differences and respect the equal status of Cantonese.

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