Attitudes towards multilingualism: A comparison between Shanghai and Ningbo

China, especially its urban areas, has become more and more multilingual in the 21st century. Younger generations born around and after the turn of century – roughly two decades after the 1978 Economic Reform – are often multilingual with Putonghua (China’s standard language), regional dialects (often mutually unintelligible with Putonghua), and English (amongst other foreign languages). Existing studies on language attitudes in China, possibly influenced by the country’s strong monolingual ideology, tend to focus on the contrast between ‘standard’ and ‘non-standard’ where Putonghua is seen as more ‘superior’ than all other languages [1-3]. Another gap in the literature is that many of these studies rely solely on either self-reported questionnaire data or implicit attitudes elicited from matched-guised experiments [3-6] while a combination of the two methods can potentially offer a more comprehensive picture.

This paper combines implicit and explicit data to discuss how these different languages/varieties are perceived by young adults in Ningbo and Shanghai. Data was collected from 66 university students from Ningbo (44 with 24 women) and Shanghai (22 with 12 women). Data analysed includes questionnaires on language attitudes and usage, a matched-guise experiment on the perception of two ‘non-standard’ phonetic features in Putonghua, and sociolinguistic interviews on language use and attitudes in general. The two cities differ in that Shanghai is more international with more English presence, and the local Shanghainese dialect is suggested to have more covert prestige [7].

Results from quantitative analysis on the questionnaires and experiments and qualitative analysis on interview extracts confirm patterns noticed by previous studies on English and Putonghua, suggesting both are valued by students. Attitudes towards local dialect in Shanghai seem to be more positive than those towards Ningbonese, possibly due to the latter’s lack of symbolic value. Students from both cities show a great tolerance towards variation (‘non-standard’ use of Putonghua and code-mixing of English, Putonghua, and dialects) despite the country’s monolingual ideology.

This study highlights variation in the attitudes towards different languages/varieties in two different cities, offering a fuller picture of the complex multilingual situation in urban areas in the increasingly multilingual China.
References