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## **Language attitudes towards Hong Kong English: A comparison of direct and indirect measures**

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### **Abstract**

In sociolinguistic studies, language attitudes have been described as the perception and value judgments that people ascribe to language varieties (Hidalgo 1986) and the speakers of these varieties (Anderson & Toribio, 2007; Fasold, 1987; Galindo, 1995). Previous studies on language attitudes have shown that in many Asian countries, English learners perceive American or British variety more positively than local varieties. Hong Kong English as an outer circle variety (Kachru, 1992), has been compared with inner circle and expanding circle varieties (e.g., Kim, 2007; Zhang, 2009). However, little is known about Chinese mainland people's attitude towards Hong Kong English. Considering the cultural and economic differences between China and Hong Kong which has given rise to certain tensions, the present study examined attitudes of Chinese undergraduates towards Hong Kong English accent when spoken by male and female speakers using direct and indirect measures.

To measure implicit attitudes, the matched-guise technique was used. To measure explicit attitudes, a questionnaire was used. Previous studies have shown that using two different measurement methods may produce different results (e.g., Ahmed et al. , 2014; Kaur, 2014) but such studies are still limited.

The study involved 30 English major students, aged 19-21, from one private university in Shandong Province, China. There was a balance of gender (16 females, 14 males). For the matched-guise technique, the speech samples with fact-neutral content were produced by a male and female Hong Kong English speaker in their own words. The semantic differential scale accompanying the matched guide technique had seven items on status and nine items on solidarity. The online questionnaire had items on attitudes towards English and varieties of English. The results of the indirect and direct measures of language attitudes were analysed and compared.

The results of the seven-point bipolar semantic differential scale used in the matched-guise technique showed that the male Hong Kong English speaker is rated with a mean above 3.5 on all the characteristics except “have sense of humor”. The female Hong Kong English speaker sample is rated 3.5 on 13 out of 16 traits, except for “have sense of humor”, “self-confidence” and “ambitious”. The results indicate that Chinese mainland students have positive attitudes toward Hong Kong English speakers, regardless of the gender of the speaker.

A comparison of evaluations of the male and female Hong Kong speakers revealed that men are seen in a more positive light. The male Hong Kong speaker was rated as more ambitious and confident than the female speaker, which may be related to gender stereotypes. In China, gender prejudice and gender stereotypes have had a long history (Chen, 2014). People usually stereotype the characteristics of “self-confidence, decisiveness and competitiveness” as male’s personality traits while the characteristics of “dependence, obedience and inferiority” are characterized as female’s personality characteristics.

The questionnaire results showed unfavourable attitudes towards the Hong Kong variety of English. The students disagreed that they speak English like Hong Kong people ( $M=2.1$ ). Their view is understandable because English speakers in different regions have their own accents, word choices, grammatical structures and other variations in intonation, tone, and pronunciation. The students also disagreed that “Chinese people should learn Hong Kong English” ( $M=2.1$ ). In fact, many had not heard of Hong Kong English ( $M=2.47$ ). Mainland Chinese people speak their own variety of English.

To contextualise the results on attitudes towards Hong Kong English, attitudes towards exonormative native speaker models of English were explored. The students reported positive attitudes towards British and American English. They believed that Chinese people should learn British English ( $M=3.27$ ) and American English ( $M=3.2$ ). The results indicate that the “norm-dependent” concept is deeply rooted in their mind. A majority of them acknowledged that they do not speak English like the British ( $M=2.87$ ) or Americans ( $M=2.63$ ). On the contrary, they believed that they spoke English like other Chinese in mainland China ( $M=3.37$ ), which shows that they believed that there is a unique variety of English in mainland China. The positive attitudes towards British English, American English and China English are in sharp contrast to the students’ negative attitudes towards Hong Kong English. Some mainland Chinese people may regard Hong Kong people as Machiavellian competitors, who think they care about others’ welfare, pursue their own interests, and are unlikely to adhere to China’s traditional values (Guan et al., 2010). The unfavourable attitudes towards Hong Kong English may be a reflection of such views or other factors which need to be further investigated.

Keywords: Language attitudes, Hong Kong English, direct measures, indirect measures