

# Mainland Chinese Students' Attitudes to Hong Kong English

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## Abstract

This study investigates the overt and covert attitudes of China Mainland undergraduate students towards Hong Kong English (HKE) through questionnaires and verbal-guise technique (VGT). The questionnaire showed the participants' negative attitude towards Hong Kong English, and the female participants showed a more inclusive attitude than the males. For VGT, participants rated two recordings of HKE speech on a bipolar semantic scale with 16 adjectives. The results showed that the male HKE speaker was evaluated more highly than the female speaker on both status and solidarity. The female and male participants were significantly different in their ratings of three status traits (confidence, hardworking and fluency), with female participants being stricter. The study suggests the aspects of language attitudes in which there are disparities need to be further explored using direct and indirect measures.

**Keywords:** overt attitude, covert attitudes, Hong Kong English, gender

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## 1. Introduction

With the spread and popularization of English in the world, varieties of English have developed in various sociocultural contexts. Kachru (1990) divides English varieties into the inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle. Researchers have been interested in attitudes of different social groups towards varieties of English. Language attitude indicates language vitality and the thoughts, beliefs and preferences of speech community (Baker, 1992, p. 9), and may affect speaker's speech behavior as well as the national

decision-making to implement, maintain and promote particular language policies (Errihani, 2008; Gabsi, 2020). Research on attitudes towards inner circle varieties have shown that standard varieties of English are often highly evaluated in terms of status or competence, while non-standard English varieties are rated higher on social attractiveness by native English speakers, regardless of whether the studies are on native speakers or non-native speakers of English. For example, Milroy and McClenaghan (1977) showed that the status characteristics of standard varieties

such as Received Pronunciation are more highly evaluated than non-standard varieties, but its solidarity characteristics were lower than Scottish and Ulster accents. Ball (1983) found that Received Pronunciation (RP) is associated with high competence and low social attractiveness while two English dialect varieties and three other Europe continental varieties are associated with incompetence and slightly greater social attractiveness.

In addition, non-native speakers have also been found to have positive attitudes towards standard British and American English (e.g., Galloway, 2011; Kaur, 2014; McKenzie, 2008), and prefer them as ideal models for learning to local varieties (e.g., Jodai, Pirhadi & Taghavi, 2014; Moore & Bounchan, 2010; Snodin & Young, 2015; Tajeddin, Alemi & Pashmforoosh, 2018). In an outer circle context, Hong Kong (HK), research has shown positive attitudes towards standard English over the local variety. Tsui and Bunton (2000) reported that HK English teachers preferred standard English, and do not accept HKE. HKE can be divided into the educated variety spoken by speakers moving towards the exonormativity of a native-speaker accent and the broad variety spoken by HK people who have a lower proficiency of English and with many HKE features (Bolton & Kwok, 1990; Poon, 2007). Chan (2016) found students showed a prominent English-centred attitude (especially RP) and negative attitudes towards HKE. Li (2009) found that 84.1% of participants preferred to speak with a native speaker accent, while only 11.2% preferred the HKE accent. In addition, Zhang (2011) discovered that the negative attitude of males towards HKE is milder than the females. Edwards (2015) found contradictions in reported language attitudes and practice: while local HK university students acknowledge that HKE represents HK identity and culture, they do not want to use it. Most HK people identify with their HK identity rather than Chinese identity (Edwards, 2015). Thus far, the findings show HK people's deep-rooted exonormative orientation.

To obtain deeper insights into language attitudes, researchers have investigated how it may reflect gender and contextual differences. Cameron (2011, p. 589) believed that the ideology of language and gender is specific to their time and place; they

vary by culture and historical period. Females rate standard varieties more positively than males (Bresnahan & et al., 2002; Coupland & Bishop, 2007; McKenzie, 2010) and they also evaluate foreign languages more positively than males (Bilaniuk, 2003; Wright, 1999; Zammit, 1993). Similar findings were obtained by Lai (2006) in her study using questionnaires and interviews in HK. The standard languages studied were English (the international and the ex-coloniser's language) and Putonghua (the national language of China) and the vernacular language was Cantonese, which males evaluated more positively than females. The same association of male speakers with Cantonese and female speakers with English and Putonghua was found by Zhang (2011) in his study using questionnaires and VGT. The female students were more favourable towards standard languages than male students.

The attention has been on standard varieties of English, and attitudes towards HKE is not well-understood, apart from the fact that it represents HK identity (Edwards, 2015) and it is less favourably evaluated than standard English (Chan, 2016; Li, 2009; Tsui & Bunton, 2000). While HK people may strive to speak native speaker varieties of English, most undeniably speak English with a distinctive HK accent. Besides understanding attitudes towards HKE exhibited by HK people, it is necessary to understand the evaluation of HKE accent by Chinese mainlanders because HK is considered a special territory of China. The communication between HK and China mainland has grown rapidly since the political transition in 1997 (Ye, 2008). The language attitudes of Chinese mainlanders are likely to be influenced by different social cultural identities since there is a social cultural gap between HK and Chinese mainland (Cheung, 2013). The social and political conflicts in HK in recent years may complicate the relationship between mainland students and HK people (Yu & et al., 2019). This complication may be reflected in the attitude towards each other's language. Since language is a part of culture, understanding the attitude of mainland students towards HKE is helpful to understand the views of mainland people on HK and HK people who have different cultural backgrounds and social background. At this point in time, the attitude of Chinese mainlanders

towards HKE is not understood due to scarcity of studies.

The study examined the evaluative reactions of Mainland Chinese female and male university students to female and male speakers of HKE. The specific objectives are:

- (1) to compare female and male Chinese university students' evaluation of female and male HKE speakers using a verbal guise technique; and
- (2) to determine Chinese university students' attitudes towards HKE by means of a questionnaire.

## 2. Method of the Study

A descriptive study was conducted using VGT and questionnaire. The participants were 30 English major students, aged 19-21, from Weifang Institute of Technology in China. There was a balance of gender (16 females, 14 males). Twenty were from grade one, seven from grade two and three from grade three.

The instruments used in this study were a questionnaire and a semantic-differential scale. The questionnaire was formulated based on other language attitudes scales (Chew, 2013; He & Li, 2009; Kircher, 2009; Liu & Zhao, 2011; Qian & Liu, 2016; Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011; Young, 2006; Yu, 2010). The questionnaire of five-point Likert scale had sections on attitudes toward the English language and four English varieties. In this paper, only results on HKE are reported.

For the verbal guise technique, a semantic differential scale specific to HKE was constructed with reference to related studies (Carrie, 2017; Chan, 2016; He & Zhang, 2010). The seven-point bipolar semantic-differential scale (1= not at all, 7= very) comprised 16 traits. The seven status traits

were intelligence, confidence, hardworking, well educated, competence, fluency, and ambition. The nine solidarity traits were traditional, trustworthiness, friendliness, honesty, kindness, gentleness, humility, likeability, and sense of humour. Status attribution is mainly based on perceived social and economic status (Dragojevic, Berglund & Blauvelt, 2018), while solidarity attribution refers to the degree to which a person is similar to the perceiver in terms of group membership, shared experiences, and socioeconomic class (Ryan, 1973, p. 68). For the recordings of HKE speech samples used in VGT, a female and a male HKE speaker described the floor plan of the underground facilities of a museum in their own words for about one minute. The speech samples were in the educated HKE variety, which is closer to exonormative varieties of English.

The VGT was carried out by getting the participants to listen to the female and male HKE speakers' recordings (<https://www.wjx.cn>) on their mobile phones. They rated the four speech samples using the semantic differential scale, and subsequently filled in the questionnaire.

For the analysis, the means and standard deviations were computed. MANOVA and t-tests were run to analyze the significance of differences between male and female participants in their evaluative reactions to HKE.

## 3. Results

In this section, the two speakers in the recordings are referred to as Hong Kong male speaker (HKMS) and Hong Kong female speaker (HKFS).

### 3.1 Attitudes Towards HKE

The questionnaire results showed negative attitudes towards HKE, as shown by the means below the mid-point of three in Table 1.

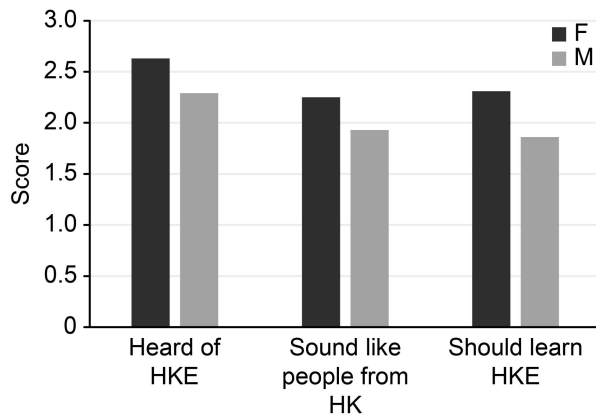
**Table 1.** Chinese mainland students' overt attitudes toward HKE

Item	Mean	S.D.
1. I have heard of Hong Kong English.	2.47*	.937
2. I speak English like Hong Kong people.	2.1*	.776
3. Chinese people should learn Hong Kong English.	2.1*	.923

Note: \*Mean scores below mid-point of 3.

The mean scores of three items closer to two indicate that many of the participants had not heard of HKE. They also did not think that they should speak English like HK people, or that Chinese people should learn HKE.

Figure 1 shows the overt attitudes of male and female participants towards HKE. Female's scores on the three items are higher than male's, indicating that males give more negative evaluation on HKE. The female students gave milder negative evaluations, indicating that they may be more inclusive towards HKE.



**Figure 1.** The mean scores of female and male respondents on three items

### 3.2 Evaluations on HKE Accents in Verbal Guise

Table 2 shows that the HKMS was evaluated more positively than the HKFS on the status dimension by both male (M=5.71) and female (M=5.04) participants as shown by the mean scores. Similarly, for the solidarity dimension, the evaluation of male (M=4.98) is higher than that of female (M=4.85). However, the HKFS was evaluated more positively on the status dimension by female participants (M=4.27) than male participants (M=3.86). A similar pattern was found for the solidarity dimension, where the female participants also evaluated the HKFS more positively (M=4.55) than the male participants (M=4.32). The average mean scores show that HKMS was rated higher (M=5.13) than HKFS (M=4.26) on both dimensions.

MANOVA test results showed significance of differences between male and female participants in their attitudes to HKE. The analysis revealed that the evaluation of HKMS on status by male and female participants reached a significant level [ $f(1, 28) = 0.017, P < 0.05$ ]. The means showed that the evaluation of HKMS on status by male participants (M=5.71) was higher than that of female participants (M=5.04). There was no significant difference on evaluations of HKMS solidarity dimension and the two dimensions of HKFS.

**Table 2.** The evaluations on HKE accents in terms of status and solidarity

Dimension	Gender	Mean	S. D.	N
HKMS status	Male	5.71	.83	14
	Female	5.04	.62	16
	Total	5.35	.79	30
HKMS solidarity	Male	4.98	.79	14
	Female	4.85	.74	16
	Total	4.91	.75	30
HKFS status	Male	3.86	1.22	14
	Female	4.27	1.00	16
	Total	4.08	1.10	30
HKFS solidarity	Male	4.32	.97	14
	Female	4.55	.98	16
	Total	4.44	.97	30

Note: HKMS refers to Hong Kong male speaker, HKFS refers to Hong Kong Female speaker.

In order to further analyze whether there were significant differences in the scores of each trait, independent t-tests were conducted. There were significant differences in male and female participants' evaluations on HKMS. The male participants (M=6.07, SD=0.92) and female participants (M=5.06, SD=1.48) were significantly different in their rating on the confident trait at  $p < .05$ . The mean scores indicated the male participants were more likely to think that HKMS was confident. There were also significant differences in ratings given by male and female participants on the hardworking and fluency traits

of the HKMS. The mean scores show that male participants (M=5.79, SD=0.78) were more likely to think that the HKMS was hardworking, but the female participants (M=4.75, SD=1.19) thought that the HKMS was slightly lazy. As for fluency, both ratings were above the mid-point of the rating scale, and male participants (M=6.50, SD=0.94) felt that the HKMS was more fluent in HKE while female participants (M=5.69, SD=1.08) felt that the HKMS was moderately fluent. The female participants were stricter in their rating of the HKMS than the male participants.

**Table 3.** Traits with significant differences in t-test

Trait	HKMS		S. D. (N = 16)		t	95% CI	
	Mean (N = 14)		Male	Female		LL	UL
	Male	Female	Male	Female			
Confident	6.07	5.06	0.92	1.48	2.20*	0.07	1.95
Hard-working	5.79	4.75	1.19	0.78	2.86*	0.30	1.78
Fluent	6.50	5.69	0.94	1.08	2.18*	0.05	1.58

Note: Significant statistical differences are indicated by \*,  $p < 0.5$

Independent t-tests showed that there were no significant differences in the evaluation of HKFS by male and female participants for all items. The results suggest that HKFS was perceived in similar ways on status and solidarity traits, regardless of the gender of the rater.

### 3.3 Comparison of the Results from Verbal Guise Technique and Questionnaire

The study showed contradictions in language attitudes towards HKE when measured using a direct measure (questionnaire) and an indirect measure (verbal guise technique).

The questionnaire results showed that the overt attitudes of both female and male participants toward HKE were negative while the verbal guise technique results showed positive attitudes. In verbal guise technique, the average scores of HKMS and HKFS on both solidarity and status dimensions exceeded four.

In the questionnaire results, the female and male participants were similar in their negative attitudes towards HKE, but the verbal guise technique results showed significant gender differences, but only towards the HKMS. The

indirect measurement of language attitudes revealed that although female participants attributed high status to HKMS, the male participants gave much higher ratings for confidence, hard-working and fluency. The results on the female students being less positive in their rating contradict the findings obtained in Western contexts. For example, Coupland and Bishop's (2007) quantitative study of 34 different English accents showed that female's evaluation of status and solidarity is less negative. Bauman (2013) shows that female speakers are more highly rated than male speakers in the context of non-native accent English. The contrary results may be because the evaluators in these two studies were native English speakers. The present study involved the ratings of non-native speakers of English for a non-native English variety (HKE). It seems that female Mainland Chinese students were stricter when evaluating HKE, when compared to female native speakers of English in these two studies. According to Maegaard (2005), listeners may expect females to speak more standard language than males. When faced with a non-standard female speaker (HKE in this case),

they will think that her speech is not as standard as that of a male speaker.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this study, both direct and indirect methods were used to examine language attitudes towards HKE among Chinese mainland students. Despite their belief that Chinese people need not learn HKE, the Mainland Chinese students rated the female and male speakers of HKE highly on both status and solidarity dimensions. The VGT results on speakers' evaluative reactions showed that the male speaker of HKE was rated more highly than the female speaker of HKE on both status and solidarity dimensions. There were significant differences in their ratings of three status traits, namely, confidence, hardworking and fluency, and the female students were stricter in their rating than male students. These are new findings which can contribute to a better understanding of the politics of language identity in view of the lack of studies using indirect measures on language attitudes of Mainland Chinese towards HKE. Most of the studies have been on HK people's attitudes towards Putonghua and learning of English (e.g., Du & Jackson, 2018) and Mainland Chinese people's attitudes to learning English (Edwards, 2017).

A limitation of the study is that the preliminary results are based on attitudes of Mainland Chinese students in a specific locality in China. Future research should investigate the disparities in evaluative reactions and questionnaire-elicited attitudes to arrive at a better understanding of language attitudes. For this purpose, direct measurement scales should include exploration of status and solidarity perceptions on non-native varieties of English to make direct comparison possible. As language attitudes have implications beyond the language learning classroom, such studies will reveal how language attitudes interact with changes of time and sociopolitical environment.

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