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LANGUAGE ATTITUDES OF HOKKIEN SPEAKERS TOWARDS HOKKIEN AND MANDARIN

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The paper examined the attitudes of Hokkien speakers towards their vernacular language and Mandarin. The participants for the study were 50 students at a Malaysian university in Kuching, Sarawak who were of Hokkien parentage and spoke Hokkien. Data collected using the matched-guise technique were analyzed using a paired t-test to investigate whether the participants' attitudes towards these two languages were significantly different. The results showed that Mandarin was ranked significantly higher than Hokkien on both status and solidarity dimensions. The study revealed that, based on the participants' subconscious reactions to selected traits examined in the matched-guise technique, participants with a strong Hokkien identity are likely to perceive Hokkien speakers as less educated, having less leadership skills and more humorous than Mandarin speakers. As a group, the participants were found to have closer affinity to Mandarin speakers. The findings have implications on language maintenance efforts of speech communities concerned with diminished affiliation of the younger generation with vernacular languages.

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INTRODUCTION

Language attitudes is said to be one of the most vital studies in the social psychology of language (Trudgill, 1992). Language attitude has been broadly defined as the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of others (Crystal, 1992). The definition of language attitudes has also encompassed attitudes towards speakers of the language and language usage (e.g. Fasold, 1984; Holmes, 1994; Trudgill, 1992), and this is the notion of language attitudes adopted in this paper.

Since language attitudes cannot be known or observed directly, the mentalist approach is favoured in language attitudes research. The data collection methods frequently used in the mentalist approach are matched-guise technique, interviews and questionnaires. The matched-guise technique was developed by Wallace Lambert and his associates in the 1960s to control all variables except language. A few bilingual speakers who are fluent in the languages are chosen to read the same text or passage in two different languages. Their readings are recorded and arranged in such a way that they seem to be different speakers reading the same text. When the listeners listen to the recordings, they rate the recordings on characteristics such as social status and intelligence using a semantic differential scale where listeners mark the speakers on a continuum (e.g. unknowledgeable -- knowledgeable). The results of the matched-guise technique would reveal the attitudes of the listeners towards the languages under study.

Research on language attitudes using variations of the matched-guise technique indicated that it is a feasible technique for tapping into subconscious language attitudes. Soukup's (2001) study on language attitudes towards Southern American English in the United States revealed discrimination towards regional accents. In addition, Brubaker's (2003) research on language attitudes in Taiwan showed that Taiwanese Mandarin is rated higher than other dialects. The standard Chinese language used in China, Potonghua, is also rated socially higher than the Shanghai dialect in Gilliland's (2006) study on language attitudes. The similarity of the findings on the family of Chinese languages confirms what is known in sociolinguistic literature on the higher status of standard languages than vernacular languages.

However, what is less known is attitudes towards Chinese languages in a multilingual speech community where the Chinese is not the majority group, as in Taiwan and China. In the Malaysian setting, the Hokkien population in Sarawak stands at 68,935, constituting 13.45% of the Chinese population in Sarawak (Malaysia Department of Statistics, 2009). In total, the Chinese population accounts for 25.49% of the ethnically-diverse Sarawak population of 2 million.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The paper examined the attitudes of Hokkien speakers in Sarawak, Malaysia towards their vernacular language and Mandarin. The specific aspects examined were:

1. status and solidarity dimensions of language attitudes of Hokkien and Mandarin speakers
2. language attitudes of Hokkien speakers with strong and weak Hokkien identity

METHOD OF STUDY

The study involved 50 Hokkien speakers in a Malaysian university, 25 female and 25 male. An equal number of female and male Hokkien speakers were selected to reduce the occurrence of gender preferences towards the language as research has shown inconsistent results. For example,

Gilliland (2006) has shown that male participants ranked the standard language as having a higher status than the dialect but Karahan (2007) has found that female participants were more inclined than male participants to rate English as having a higher status. Furthermore, other studies on language studies such as Brubaker (2003) and Dalal (2007) also selected equal numbers of female and male participants in their studies on Mandarin and Southern Min in Taiwan, and Arab-American identity respectively.

The participants in this study were selected on the basis that they could speak both Mandarin and Hokkien, and at least one parent was Hokkien by descent. By virtue of the participants being university students, their age ranged from 20 to 25. Based on this selection criteria, Hokkien-speaking university students within the social network of the researcher were requested to participate in the study. Their social contacts were also used to identify other Hokkien speakers who were subsequently approached.

To collect the language attitudes data, the matched-guise technique was used. By using this technique, the language attitudes were indirectly gauged through the participants' response to audio recordings of speech in Hokkien and Mandarin. For this study, six audio recordings were made by three bilingual female speakers, each speaking once in Mandarin and another time in Hokkien. The sample script was a recount of the speaker missing an opportunity to speak to an old friend:

That Monday morning, I went back to Kuching. My mum was not free to fetch me, she needed to work. So I waited for her at the airport lobby. While I was waiting, I saw a girl. She kept smiling to me. I don't think I know her, so I just ignored her. Then, I walked to the escalator because my mum asked me to wait for her at the other side. Suddenly, I heard someone call my name. I turned around and it was the girl just now. She kept waving at me and she shouted my name loudly. Then I realised she was my primary school friend. I wanted to talk with her but my mum had arrived. So I missed the chance to talk to her.

The three bilingual female speakers were given the same script and asked to imagine a similar authentic situation where this might have occurred. Then they were asked to memorise the script before the audio-recording but they were free to deliver it in a natural way during the recording. The recordings were made in a quiet place to minimise the background noise. The length of the six recordings ranged from 49 seconds to 1.08 minute (average of 58 seconds).

To obtain the Hokkien speakers' response to the audio-recordings of casual speech in Hokkien and Mandarin, a five-point semantic differential scale was prepared. The semantic differential scale covered two dimensions, status and solidarity, following Hohenthal (1998) and Holmes (1994). Hohenthal stated that evaluations on the two dimensions reflected the "social status or power of the speakers" (p. 39). According to Krauss and Chiu (1997), the evaluation gathered information on the participants' "socio-psychological perspective towards language attitudes" (p. 45). The dimensions of language attitudes included in the semantic differential scale were:

1. Status: educated, rich, having leadership and intelligent
2. Solidarity: trustworthy, humorous, friendly. (Soukup, 2001, p. 58)

In addition to these solidarity traits, good looking (Brubaker, 2003), kind, sincere, unselfish, humble, and informal were added to the semantic differential scale. The five-point scale ranged from extremely positive (5) to extremely negative (1) with 3 as the neutral mid-point.

During the procedures for the use of the matched-guise technique, the participants were told that they could listen to the recordings as many times as they liked before they rated the speakers using the five-point semantic differential scale. However, the pilot testing revealed that the participants were inclined towards indecision rather than certainty if they listened to the recordings repeatedly. In the actual study, the recordings were played only once each, with an alternation of the six Mandarin and Hokkien recordings.

For the data analysis, the means for the status and solidarity dimensions of language attitudes were calculated for the six recordings. T-test was used to determine whether the participants rated the Mandarin and Hokkien speakers as significantly different on the status and solidarity traits. The null hypothesis for the t-test was that there was no difference between the ratings for Mandarin and Hokkien for each trait.

Besides the data from the semantic differential scale used with the matched-guise technique, data on the participants' Hokkien identity were also obtained from a part of a language attitudes questionnaire given in the larger study. The relevant five-point Likert scale items were:

1. I strongly identify myself with my mother tongue (i.e. Hokkien) and the group that speaks it.
2. Sometimes, I identify myself with other cultures (e.g. the Western culture).
3. I am proud to be a Hokkien as it is my culture, heritage and identity.
4. Hokkien has become part of my life.
5. Hokkien makes up a significant part of my history and identity.

The participants' responses to these five items were totalled and an average value of the participants' Hokkien identity was obtained. The values for the 50 participants' Hokkien identity which ranged from 1.8 to 5 were sorted into three levels: low (3.45), moderate (3.90) and high (4.2). Participants in the high category were classified as having a strong Hokkien identity whereas those in the low category were classified as having a weak Hokkien identity. Then, the values were used in the computation of a paired t-test for each trait.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ratings of status and solidarity dimensions of Mandarin speakers

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the three recordings in Mandarin (Recording 1, Recording 3 and Recording 5). Means above and below 3 reflect the participants' positive or negative inclination towards Mandarin speakers on the five-point semantic differential scale respectively.

Table 1 shows that the participants gave higher ratings to the status dimensions of the Mandarin speakers as compared to the solidarity dimensions. The ratings for the status dimensions of Mandarin speakers were consistently higher for all the three recordings and tended towards a positive evaluation of the status traits of Mandarin speakers (3.53, 3.42 and 3.64 versus 3.03, 3.36 and 3.16). A closer examination of the average mean for the status traits revealed that the participants were more inclined to agree that Mandarin speakers are educated, rich and intelligent but do not necessarily have leadership skills (average mean of 2.99). However, it needs to be noted that the standard deviation values of close to 1 is rather high, indicating variability in the participants' ratings of the status traits of the three Mandarin speakers.

Table 1. Ratings of status and solidarity dimensions of the three Mandarin speakers

Dimensions	Traits	Recording 1		Recording 3		Recording 5		Average	
		Mean	Standard deviation						
Status	Educated	4.06	0.6824	3.70	0.9529	4.02	0.8204	3.93	0.8186
	Rich	3.60	0.9035	3.50	0.9949	3.86	1.0104	3.65	0.9696
	Intelligent	3.50	0.8631	3.46	0.8855	3.66	0.7722	3.54	0.8403
	Having leadership	2.96	0.9026	3.02	1.0398	3.00	1.0498	2.99	0.9974
		3.53		3.42		3.64		3.53	
Solidarity	Trustworthy	3.36	0.9848	3.58	0.8352	3.46	0.8134	3.47	0.8778
	Good looking	3.36	0.8751	3.34	0.6581	3.28	0.9485	3.33	0.8272
	Formal	3.18	1.0821	3.02	0.9998	3.02	1.0398	3.07	1.0406
	Kind	3.12	0.91785	3.68	0.8676	3.38	0.9452	3.39	0.9102
	Proud	2.96	0.8071	3.10	1.1473	2.92	1.007	2.99	0.9871
	Friendly	2.94	0.9775	3.66	0.8947	3.36	0.9638	3.32	0.9453
	Sincere	2.84	0.9971	3.62	0.9234	3.30	0.9949	3.25	0.9718
	Humorous	2.78	0.9322	3.34	0.9817	2.84	1.1132	2.99	1.0090
	Selfish	2.76	1.0606	2.86	0.9478	2.84	1.0759	2.82	1.0281
		3.03		3.36		3.16		3.18	

Next, the analysis of the average mean for the solidarity traits of the Mandarin speakers indicate that the participants tended to think that Mandarin speakers are trustworthy, good looking, formal, kind, friendly and sincere. However, they were not as inclined to agree that Mandarin speakers are proud (average mean of 2.99), humorous (average mean of 2.99) and selfish (average mean of 2.82). Similar to the status traits, the standard deviation values of about 1 indicate variability in the participants' ratings of the solidarity traits of the Mandarin speakers.

Ratings of status and solidarity dimensions of Hokkien speakers

The Hokkien speakers in Recordings 2, 4 and 6 were also rated relatively higher on the status dimensions than the solidarity dimensions, similar to the rating for the three Mandarin speakers (see Table 2). The average means of the status dimensions based on the three recordings were 3.18, 3.25 and 3.39 as compared to 3.07, 2.95 and 3.22 for the solidarity dimensions.

A comparison of the four status traits showed that the Hokkien speakers were perceived as educated, rich and intelligent but do not necessarily have leadership skills. Similar results were obtained from the ratings of the Mandarin speakers (average means of 2.89).

As for the nine solidarity dimensions examined, the participants rated the Hokkien speakers as trustworthy, good looking, kind, proud, friendly, sincere and humourous but less formal and selfish. For the solidarity traits, there are differences between the participants' evaluations of the Hokkien and Mandarin speakers. The participants were likely to think of the Hokkien speakers as informal (average mean of 2.75) as opposed to Mandarin speakers who were viewed as more formal (average mean of 3.07). Although the participants' ratings of the Hokkien speakers being proud and humorous were slightly above 3 (3.05 and 3.09 respectively), they were actually not much higher than the ratings given for the Mandarin speakers (both 2.99). Similarity of the ratings for the selfish trait is also evident for the Hokkien and Mandarin speakers (2.99 and 2.82 respectively). Thus, the main difference in the participants' ratings on the solidarity traits of the Hokkien and Mandarin speakers appeared to be on the formality trait but there is no obvious

difference from the error bar graph in Figure 1.

Table 2. Ratings of status and solidarity dimensions of the three Hokkien speakers

Dimensions	Traits	Recording 2		Recording 4		Recording 6		Average	
		Mean	Standard deviation						
Status	Educated	3.42	1.1265	3.40	1.0690	3.68	1.0774	3.50	1.0910
	Rich	3.30	1.0152	3.48	0.9089	3.54	1.0343	3.44	0.9861
	Intelligent	3.12	0.8485	3.16	0.7656	3.48	0.9740	3.25	0.8627
	Having leadership	2.88	1.1183	2.96	1.1600	2.84	1.1132	2.89	1.1305
		3.18		3.25		3.39		3.27	
Solidarity	Trustworthy	3.22	0.9100	3.22	0.8154	3.44	0.9293	3.29	0.8849
	Good looking	3.06	1.0184	3.00	0.8806	3.24	0.7160	3.10	0.8717
	Formal	2.66	1.0422	2.86	1.0882	2.72	0.9698	2.75	1.0334
	Kind	3.28	1.0698	3.04	0.9889	3.44	0.8843	3.25	0.9810
	Proud	3.28	1.0887	2.94	0.9564	2.94	1.0184	3.05	1.0212
	Friendly	3.06	1.0956	2.92	1.0270	3.22	1.0160	3.07	1.0462
	Sincere	2.96	1.0872	2.82	1.1727	3.58	0.9916	3.12	1.0838
	Humorous	3.16	1.1843	2.72	0.9485	3.38	1.0280	3.09	1.0536
	Selfish	2.92	1.0467	3.04	0.9468	3.00	1.0102	2.99	1.0012
	3.07		2.95		3.22		3.08		

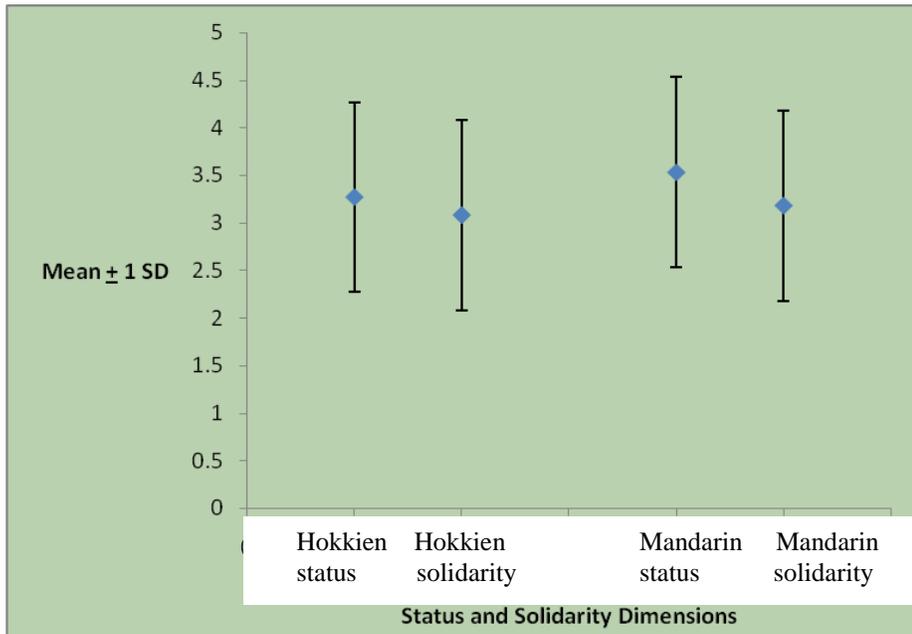


Figure 1. Means and standard deviation for status and solidarity dimensions of Hokkien and Mandarin

The means and standard deviation for Hokkien status, Hokkien solidarity, Mandarin status and Mandarin solidarity overlap to a large extent, indicating that there is no significant difference between the participants' ratings for the status and solidarity dimensions of Hokkien and Mandarin despite the patterns suggested by the examination of means alone. On the basis of

the semantic differential scale ratings given by this group of 50 Hokkien speakers, it seemed that their attitudes towards Hokkien and Mandarin do not differ. As they are able to speak both languages and use them for daily communicative situations, their language attitudes towards Hokkien and Mandarin are similar.

Strength of Hokkien identity and attitudes towards Hokkien and Mandarin

Since one of the purposes of this study was to examine the Hokkien identity of these speakers, participants were divided into two groups, strong and weak Hokkien identity groups, to determine whether there was a difference between their attitudes towards the dialect spoken. Positive values indicate positive attitudes towards Mandarin instead of Hokkien.

Table 3 shows that the only attitude dimension where there is a significant difference between the participants with strong and weak Hokkien identity is the level of education [$t(49) = +2.375$, $p < 0.05$]. Education is an element of the status dimension of language attitudes. The paired t-test shows that Hokkien speakers with a strong Hokkien identity are likely to perceive Hokkien speakers as less educated than Mandarin speakers. As Mandarin is used widely in the education domain, this has indirectly led to Mandarin speakers being ranked as more educated Hokkien speakers.

Table 3. Difference in language attitudes of Hokkien speakers with strong and weak Hokkien identity towards Hokkien and Mandarin

Dimensions	Traits	Strong Hokkien identity	Weak Hokkien identity
Status	Educated	+2.375*	+1.481
	Intelligent	+1.664	+0.423
	Rich	+0.860	+0.647
	Having leadership	+0.508	-0.058
Solidarity	Good looking	+0.953	+1.355
	Formal	+0.837	+1.002
	Trustworthy	+0.985	+0.637
	Kind	+0.867	+1.723
	Humorous	-0.249	-0.150
	Proud	-0.669	+0.866
	Sincere	+0.977	+0.623
	Friendly	+0.357	+0.692
Selfish	-0.926	-0.997	

N(a) = 17, N(b) = 13

An asterisk (*) means that the difference is significant at 95% confidence level. Two asterisks (**) means that the difference is significant at 99% confidence level.

Regardless of the strength of their Hokkien identity, the participants were inclined towards viewing Mandarin as a language having higher status and solidarity value than Hokkien, as indicated by the positive sign in the t-values for nine out of 13 traits examined. Hokkien speakers were generally viewed negatively, with the exception of humour and selfishness. Although the difference is not significant, the qualitative difference suggests that participants were likely to view Hokkien speakers as more humorous and less selfish than Mandarin speakers.

An examination of the positive and negative t-values in Table 3 indicates some differences between participants with strong and weak Hokkien identity on two traits: leadership skills and being proud. Although the difference is not statistically significant, the opposing t-values suggest that participants who identified strongly with their Hokkien identity were inclined to view Mandarin speakers as having leadership skills and not proud but participants with a weak Hokkien identity had the opposite views. Generally, the large number of status and solidarity dimensions with positive t-values point to the participants having closer affinity to Mandarin speakers.

Statistical comparison of the ratings of the three Hokkien-Mandarin speakers

As the Hokkien and Mandarin recordings were produced by three speakers, it is of interest to find out whether there were individual differences among the speakers that might have influenced the participants' evaluations. If the ratings are significantly different for all three speakers, then there is a likelihood of the difference being due to the language rather than the voice quality or the personal characteristics that might be associated with an individual's voice quality.

Table 4. Comparison of ratings of Hokkien and Mandarin speakers

Dimensions	Traits	Speaker 1 Recordings 1 & 4	Speaker 2 Recordings 2 & 5	Speaker 3 Recordings 3 & 6
Status	Educated	+3.985**	+3.363**	+0.114
	Intelligent	+2.399*	+3.383*	-0.114
	Rich	+0.735	+3.259**	-0.286
	Having leadership	0.00	+0.622	+1.000
Solidarity	Good looking	+2.391*	+1.108	+0.819
	Formal	+1.609	+1.804	+1.941
	Trustworthy	+0.817	+1.600	+0.894
	Kind	+0.455	+0.494	+1.600
	Humorous	+0.409	-1.429	-0.207
	Proud	+0.159	-1.735	+0.831
	Sincere	+0.118	+1.625	+0.265
	Friendly	+0.109	+1.467	+2.635*
Selfish	-1.494	-0.397	-0.785	

An asterisk (*) means that the difference is significant at 95% confidence level. Two asterisks (**) means that the difference is significant at 99% confidence level.

Paired t-tests for the Hokkien-Mandarin recordings by Speakers 1, 2 and 3 showed that there is a significant difference between the two languages for the following traits (Table 4):

1. Status: educated. Speakers 1 and 2 ($t=3.985$, $p < .01$) and ($t=3.363$, $p < .01$)
2. Status: intelligent. Speakers 1 and 2 ($t=2.399$, $p < .05$) and ($t=3.383$, $p < .05$)
3. Status: rich. Speaker 2 ($t=3.259$, $p < .01$)
4. Solidarity: good looking. Speaker 1 ($t=2.391$, $p < .05$)
5. Solidarity: friendly. Speaker 3 ($t=2.635$, $p < .05$)

The participants viewed the Hokkien and Mandarin speakers as being different in education and intelligence levels for two speakers. The other traits (richness, good looking and friendliness),

although significantly different for one speaker, could be a matter of individual differences among the three bilingual Hokkien-Mandarin speaker. Speaker 3 seemed a little different from the other two. The results of the paired t-tests for the pairs of Hokkien-Mandarin recordings produced by the three bilingual speakers suggest that there is some individual variability that might have influenced the participants' attitudes towards the status and solidarity dimensions. This methodological limitation of the study may be overcome through a search for Hokkien-Mandarin bilingual speakers with more typical speech and voice quality to produce the recordings for the matched-guise technique.

CONCLUSION

The study on language attitudes of Hokkien speakers in Kuching, Sarawak using the matched-guise technique showed that the Hokkien speakers have more positive attitudes towards Mandarin than Hokkien, their vernacular language. Hokkien is viewed as having both lower status and solidarity value compared to Mandarin. The findings concur with Brubaker (2003) and Gilliland (2006) in which the standard language was ranked higher than vernacular languages in Taiwan and China respectively. Although the Chinese community in Sarawak is a minority group compared to Taiwan and China where Chinese speakers are the majority, the findings are similar on the younger generation's favourable attitudes towards the standard language rather than the vernacular language. These findings highlight the need for language maintenance efforts by the local Hokkien speech community as the diminished affiliation of the younger generation with vernacular languages may lead to a reduced range in communicative functions or social network for the use of Hokkien in future. The present study also revealed that the strength of identification with the Hokkien identity may lead to variable perception of Hokkien speakers on some status and solidarity dimensions, for example, Hokkien speakers being perceived as less educated, having less leadership skills and more humorous than Mandarin speakers. However, as there was some individual variability in bilingual Hokkien and Mandarin speakers used for producing the recordings used in the matched-guise technique, the findings need to be verified in further studies.

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