When regional dialect meets the standard—it’s not just about accommodation

Silvie Liao, UC Davis

Since the lifting of martial law in 1987, the rapid liberalization and democratization of Taiwan has led to the transformation of the island's political structure from a single-party system to a full two-party system. Along with this political opposition are the two contrastive concepts, the North and the South. Located in this background, this paper focuses on two groups of Taichung people (Taizhong ‘central Taiwan’) in two different sociopolitical contexts. One group resides in Taichung, their home region, and the other group migrated to Taipei, the capital in northern Taiwan. Taichung, in central Taiwan, is chosen because of its special border-town status and the Taichung accented variety of Mandarin for which its speakers are known.

This study specifically examines two salient dialectal features of Taiwan Mandarin as used by younger generation speakers of central Taiwan: 1) the realization of T4, the high-falling tone, as T1, the level tone, and 2) the substitution of lateral [l] for alveolar approximant rhotic [r̰]. For example, the word shàng in wānshàng ‘evening’ would be pronounced as wānshāng, the level tone. The word rén [rən] ‘people’ would be pronounced as [lən].

Interviews of forty speakers ranging in age from 20 to 32 were coded and analyzed, yielding 8162 tokens for the tonal variable and 2466 tokens for the [r] variable. Varbrul was used to examine the linguistic behavior conditioned by internal linguistic constraints and external factors such as gender, age, political affiliation, residence, and topic. The results indicate that external factors and internal constraints play different roles in the substitution of [l] for [r̰] and the realization of T4 as T1. The paper concludes with a discussion of the speakers’ awareness and the social meanings of the two linguistic variables and suggestions of how they trigger or fail to trigger accommodation by speakers migrating to Taipei.