

Age, local identity and change in Tianjin tone sandhi

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Four variable disyllabic tone sandhi patterns are traditionally identified in Tianjin (Li & Liu 1985). The present study focuses on two of these tone sandhi variables, referred to as (FF) and (FL) after their input patterns of ‘falling falling’ (HL.HL) and ‘falling low’ (HL.LL) respectively. The data are drawn from 72 sociolinguistic interviews conducted in Tianjin in 2014-16. In line with other reports (Shi & Wang 2004, Gao & Lu 2003), the study finds that (FF) has decreased in frequency over time, while (FL) has increased in frequency. But the social motivations for the rise and the decline of these variables have not previously been investigated. This study fills an important gap by examining the distribution of (FF) and (FL) by age, sex, style and social class, and by contextualizing the results against Tianjin’s sociodemographic history.

(FF) represents the variable transformation of the sequence HL.HL→LL.HL, i.e. where a falling tone becomes a low tone when it is followed by another falling tone, as in (1). (FL) represents the variable transformation of the sequence HL.LL→HH.LL, i.e. where a falling tone becomes a high tone when it is followed by a low tone, as in (2).

(1) HL.HL→LL.HL *jiaoshou* “professor”

(2) HL.LL→HH.LL *jiaoshi* “teacher”

2880 tokens of (FF) and 2880 tokens of (FL) were extracted from the interviews and word lists, and were coded for the application or non-application of the relevant rule, for a total of 5760 tokens in the final analysis. The 72 participants (M= 34, F=38) were aged 18 to 82 years old, and were all native speakers of Tianjin. Interviews were conducted in the dialect. Participants were categorized as ‘middle class’ or ‘working class’ using a combined measure of occupation, education and income.

The results indicate that age has significant influences on (FF) and (FL), while neither gender nor class have strong effects on the variation. (FF) displays a linear decrease of the local variant in apparent time, probably due to its status as a stereotype (Labov, 1972) of ‘old-fashioned’ Tianjin identity and speech (Han 1993). Speakers of all ages avoid it in the more formal word list style. In contrast, (FL) has increased its frequency enormously in apparent time. (FL) occurs on average only 52.15% of the time among speakers aged 65 or older, but on average 94.91% of the time among speakers under 65, with little evidence of style-shifting.

Under the standardizing influence of Standard Chinese, why has one traditional local variant become the new norm, while the other has virtually disappeared? Because (FL) has never been stigmatized; it appears to be below public awareness. As such it is available for ‘recycling’ (Dubois & Horvath 2000) as a positive marker (Labov, 1972) of ‘new’ Tianjin identity. By applying the (FL) rule, natives of Tianjin may be linguistically contrasting themselves with the many migrants who have moved to the city in the last three decades. The rise of (FL) coincides well with the history of migration to Tianjin.