

A sociolinguistic study of Dalian Mandarin: vectors of change, sub-dialect levelling and the prestige of the local vernacular

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We report a sociolinguistic study of five phonological variables reportedly undergoing changes in Dalian Mandarin. This variety was born in intense dialect contact between Northeastern and Northern Mandarin dialects (Liu 1986). Migration from Inland Northeastern China continues to this day, with the rise of standard Mandarin introducing a potential prestige variety and a target of convergence (Gao 2005). While existing studies indicate marked convergence towards the standard Mandarin norm, it is unclear whether participants in those studies were producing accented standard Mandarin or vernacular Dalian Mandarin.

We draw data from sociolinguistic interviews, passage and word list reading tasks from 39 Dalian Mandarin speakers, divided among three age groups (18-28, 36-48, 60-75) and balanced for sex. Crucially, all conversations took place in vernacular Dalian. Through a questionnaire and the interview, we gauge participants' attitudes towards and use of Dalian and standard Mandarin. The variables studied are (in Dalian Mandarin): 1. Dental instead of retroflex fricatives and affricates 2. absence of medial glide /u/ following alveolar consonants 3. monophthong /e/ for standard Mandarin /ai/ diphthong 4. schwa instead of /o/ following labials 5. use of /əŋ/ rhyme for /uŋ/. Incidence and acoustic patterns of variants were analysed with logistic or linear mixed-effects models, incorporating factors age, sex, occupation, and proxies for attitudes to Dalian Mandarin and the linguistic variables in question.

Three significant results emerge. While the reduction in local variants is generally associated with more formal registers and increasing in apparent time, neither the directionality nor the speed of change is monolithic (Stanford et al. 2014). Local variants for variable 4, for example, do not appear to correlate with age – the younger groups overwhelmingly use the local variants when vernacular Dalian is elicited, and little variation across registers is observed. By contrast, variable 1 and 2 shows clear retreat in apparent time, the latter interacting more strongly with style. Hence evidence for both convergence and divergence (Denning 1989).

Second- and third-generalisation speakers of Dalian and non-Dalian parentage exhibit a high degree of uniformity in their use frequency of local variants, in contrast to greater variability in the oldest age group. This levelling of sub-dialects within Dalian is consistent with 'the tyranny of the speech community', where the younger generation shows little attachment to the preferred variants of their primary caregivers (Labov 2012; 2016).

Globally, interviewees tend to characterise Dalian Mandarin as a positive, independent entity associated with the pride of being a "Dalianer". We show evidence of vectors of changes linked to the social salience and evaluation of each variable. The link, however, is an indirect one: e.g. while the lack of retroflex fricatives commands high social awareness, the loss of local variants appears to be slowed by the difficulty in acquiring a split (Payne 1976).

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