

## **Perception and use of variation in Mandarin Chinese among local and expatriate children in Singapore**

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Singapore is a multiracial nation in which almost three quarters of the population is ethnically Chinese. Although only 35% of residents speak Mandarin as their primary home language (SingStat 2015), all Chinese Singaporeans are required to study Mandarin in school regardless of linguistic background; children of expatriates living in Singapore also commonly study Mandarin as a second language, in both local schools and private 'international' schools. While standard Mandarin is promoted in schools, Singapore Mandarin typically includes non-standard features due to transfer from Southern Chinese dialects (e.g., /ɕ/ → [s]) (Chen 1986). A recent influx of workers from Mainland China in low-skill professions has resulted in an asymmetry between the high status of the Mainland Mandarin accent and the relatively low status of Mainland Chinese immigrants (Chong & Tan 2013). Children who are learning Mandarin in Singapore, including both locals and expatriates, encounter a complex sociolinguistic landscape in which the Mandarin presented as standard in schools is also stigmatized as foreign and lower-class in the local community. The present study examines how these children acquire and evaluate variation in Mandarin, and in particular how children attending local schools versus international schools differ in their sociolinguistic development.

45 children ages 5 to 18 learning Mandarin in Singapore completed a matched-guise task in which they identified the national origin of speakers from Northern Mainland China and Singapore using regional versus standard accents. The participants also judged whether these speakers were likely to be Chinese teachers or coffee shop workers. Participants were then recorded reading a Mandarin word list to evaluate their own use of regional features.

In the accent identification task, Singaporean children of all language backgrounds were more accurate than expatriates in distinguishing Singaporean versus Mainland Chinese speakers. Expatriate children attending international schools labeled all speakers across guises as being from Mainland China at high rates, indicating their unfamiliarity with Singapore Mandarin. International school students showed a similar Mainland orientation in the occupation task, rating Mainland speakers in the Northern regional guise as more likely to be Chinese teachers. Among students attending local schools, expatriates rated Singaporeans in their regional accent guise as more likely to be coffee shop workers, while Singaporean students did not link non-standard local accents and low-skill employment.

In the reading task, expatriates learning Mandarin in international schools used more standard pronunciation than peers in local schools. Across groups, children who do not speak Mandarin at home were found to acquire some local Mandarin features (e.g., /ɕ/

→ [s]) but avoid others (e.g., retroflex-dental merger), suggesting that these features are becoming stigmatized markers of social class as families of higher status have decreasing exposure to local Chinese varieties.

This study demonstrates how children's experiences in and outside of school influence their sociolinguistic knowledge and use of Mandarin Chinese. While expatriates in local schools pattern more closely with Singaporeans, their diverging everyday experiences crucially shape their perceptions of the sociolinguistic landscape.

## References

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