

# Language Attitude of Interlocutors Towards Dialect Users by Means of Verbal Guise Test and Interview

Linxin Zhang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Education and English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China, Ningbo, Zhejiang 315000, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: heylz4@nottingham.edu.cn

## ABSTRACT

In China, the co-existence of various kinds of regional dialects is relatively noticeable. Since the promotion policy of Mandarin declared by the Chinese government, the amount of the speaker of Mandarin has been experiencing a tremendous increase. Therefore, the contact between Mandarin and different local dialects is unavoidable during this process. As a consequence, the mandarin articulation of these speakers is likely to be influenced by their regional dialects. Based on this premise, the interlocutor of these dialectal Mandarin speakers may generate different attitudes towards them, comparing to those towards the standard Mandarin speakers. Therefore, this research dissected the attitude towards one dialect accented Mandarin by employing the techniques of verbal guise test and interview, whose participants mainly consist of the students at the university of Nottingham, Ningbo, China. Through the result of the test and interview, this research discovered that the utterance of the speaker did not affect the impression of social status and the dispositional features of the speaker. However, the non-standard speech of the accented mandarin may result in the negative feeling of unintelligibility and unattractiveness.

**Keywords:** Language attitude, Chinese dialect, Verbal-guised test, Baotou dialect.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Attitude can be understood as a form of affection attached to an object [1]. As human beings, people tend to generate diverse opinions of various things and phenomena, such as people and their behaviour. In the area of sociolinguistics, the research focusing on the attitude towards languages and accents has been quite prevalent since the publication of a work of Labov, which investigated the attitude towards the speech found in New York City [2]. From there on, scholars of different countries and regions in the western world have been endeavouring to discover the underlying attitude towards various languages or accents. In China, this kind of research is worthwhile conducting as well, given the complex diglossia situation here. According to Ferguson, diglossia is a linguistic phenomenon in a specific region or country, in which two or more varieties of languages of different social prestige are used simultaneously for different purposes [3]. In China, the standard Mandarin and various regional dialects

altogether form a vast system of diglossia on this continent. Standard Mandarin, as the formal national language confirmed through laws, is promoted across the whole country by the government. Therefore, standard Mandarin is employed in most formal situations, such as for education and news reports [4]. As for the dialects, most citizens would still use their local dialects in their daily lives. In such circumstance, the pronunciation of their dialect may be highly likely to generate an interfering effect on their Mandarin, which means their local dialect might modify their Mandarin phonological system. In addition, the scale of population spread across provinces in China is continually enlarged. For instance, in 2020, 169,956 citizens went out of their hometown for better-paid occupations, taking a substantial proportion of the whole population of China [5]. During the communication between the outsiders and the locals in a particular region, the accented Mandarin of the outsider may be reasonably salient. Hence, this research will utilise the techniques of Verbal guise test and individual interview to

discover the attitude towards an accented Mandarin in Inner Mongolia, mainly influenced by the Baotou (a city in Inner Mongolia) dialect. In detail, it will concentrate on the attitude towards this accented Mandarin and investigate the underlying reasons for the formation of the attitude, using the techniques of VGT questionnaire and individual interview.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1 Attitude and Language Attitude***

Referring to Thurstone, attitude can be defined as an affectional preference of favouring or abhorring a specific object, which can be both emotionally positive or negative [1]. Similarly, this concept can also be understood as an emotional inclination while evaluating an object or phenomenon [6]. Hence, while hearing an utterance in a certain language or accent, the human may also possess some affectional feeling of the utterance or the speaker themselves.

### ***2.2 Previous Research on Language Attitude***

For the research that aims at discovering the attitude of a group of people towards a language, the direct approach is quite prevalent [7]. In this approach, questionnaire and interview that explicitly interrogate the emotional preference of participants are the primary methods. For instance, in a study conducted by Garrett, the Likert scale and open-ended questionnaires are employed to investigate the preference, perception of vitality, and application domain of the Welsh language [8]. Similarly, BBC also conducted an online survey to analyse the preference of the audience for the English accents used in radio and television [9]. In this research, the method is even more direct, which requires participants to score the social prestige of each accent and then compare the average values. Through the two studies, the strength of the questionnaire to acquire an enormous amount of data can be showcased. Nevertheless, the direct approach may not allow the research to obtain full access to the authentic attitude. This phenomenon may result from that attitude is a crucial constituent of human's psychological construction, which means that it can hardly be directly measured [10]. In addition, questions that directly ask preference to a language may be highly possible to lead to the answer that is "socially desirable" [11]. Hence, solely operating direct approach may not

effectively dig out the authentic attitude towards a language or accent. Apart from the direct approach, many scholars in this area tend to utilise two methods of the indirect approach: Matched-guise Test (MGT) and Verbal Guise Test (VGT). In the area of language attitude, a multitude of studies have provided adequate evidence for the proficiency of these two techniques. For instance, Ball utilised MGT to scrutinise the attitude towards different English accents in Australia and discussed the necessity of the immigrants to learn the local accent [12]. As for VGT, it is adapted from the MGT method, which is also frequently employed for language attitude analysis. As a case in point, both El-Dash and McKenzie utilised this tool to dissect the hierarchy rank of different accents in a region based on the attitudinal analysis [13, 14]. In the former one, the research selected various varieties of Arabic and English, which are all authentically used in Egypt. Comparatively, McKenzie focused on several world Englishes and investigated the attitude of Japanese people towards them. For one identical aim, these two studies both concentrated on how the hierarchy relationship amongst different varieties of languages was constructed. Through these studies, the applicability and reliability of the indirect approach for language attitude analysis, especially the VGT and MGT techniques, may be attested.

### ***2.3 Previous Studies on Baotou Dialect***

The existing attitudinal studies on the dialects in China mainly focus on Cantonese and its corresponding accented Mandarin, and the dialects of some autonomous regions for ethnic minority in China are rarely brought to the table, such as Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang [15]. In Inner Mongolia, there are three major dialectal branches: Western, Eastern, and the Alxa [16]. Amongst these dialects, the phonological distinction between the Baotou dialect and Mandarin might be rather significant [17]. Referring to Wang, the most significant phonological difference between Baotou dialect and Mandarin is that all retroflexed sounds (E.g. /dʒi/) are replaced by blade-alveolar sounds (E.g. /ʒi/) [18]. In addition, there is no front nasal sound (E.g. /Rən/) in the Baotou dialect, and all the nasal sounds are articulated in the back form (E.g. Rəŋ). Similarly, in the research, Shen also found that the initial consonant, following vowel and the lexical tone in Baotou dialect are also distinctive [17]. Referring to Hu, these differences can be traced back to an immense population diaspora from Shanxi to Inner Mongolia occurred in Ming and

Qing dynasty [19]. In general, the previous research mainly focuses on the phonological differences between Baotou dialect and Mandarin and endeavours to figure out the historical reason for them, rarely paying attention to people's attitude. Therefore, this research will investigate the attitude of people from different regions of China, except for Inner Mongolia, towards the Baotou-dialect-accented Mandarin (BAM) assisted by the VGT and discuss the reason for this attitude.

### **3. STUDY PROCESS**

#### **3.1 Research Question**

- What is the difference between the attitudes towards the Baotou-dialect-accented Mandarin (BAM) and standard Mandarin?
- What is the reason for this difference?

#### **3.2 Methodology**

In this research, a mixed method is utilised, which can reinforce the advantages, avoid drawbacks of different methods and hereby buttress the validity of this research [20]. Given that the VGT requires authentic speakers to record the audiotape instead of solely using one speaker to 'imitate' different accents in MGT, therefore, VGT method were selected in this paper for the quantitative part. Hence, the validity of this research can be hereby reassured. As for the qualitative method, a semi-structured interview was conducted.

##### **3.2.1 Quantitative Research — Verbal Guise Test & Questionnaire**

In this part, two authentic speakers of Baotou dialect and Beijing standard Mandarin are invited to record the audio. For the Baotou dialect speaker, he is required to try his best to speak Mandarin. Hence, his utterance can effectively reflect how the Baotou dialect influences the pronunciation of Mandarin. In comparison, the Beijing speaker only needs to speak in a relatively natural way while avoiding using any local expressions, considering that the phonological system of Standard Mandarin is based on and adapted from the dialect of Beijing. In order to avoid the interference of the context and content of the recording, both of the two speakers are asked to read a prepared text, which is a piece of news in colloquial language [7]. Hence, the

variable between the two pieces of audio is the accent per se, which can ensure the validity of this research.

In the VGT, 51 UNNC students from different regions of China (see "Figure 1"), who have already systemically learnt and mastered standard Mandarin, are recruited, and they need to complete the questionnaire while listening to the audio. In this questionnaire, the research provides nine labels for participants to judge (see "Table 1"), based on the four dimensions of labels in VGT research used by [21], namely, power, competence, solidarity, and status. In addition, the research also devises a novel dimension: intelligibility, which is used for describing the degree of standard and efficiency of information transmission. Considering that the dialects of china may be quite famous for the unintelligibility amongst different dialectal regions. Therefore, this dimension is indispensable in such circumstances.

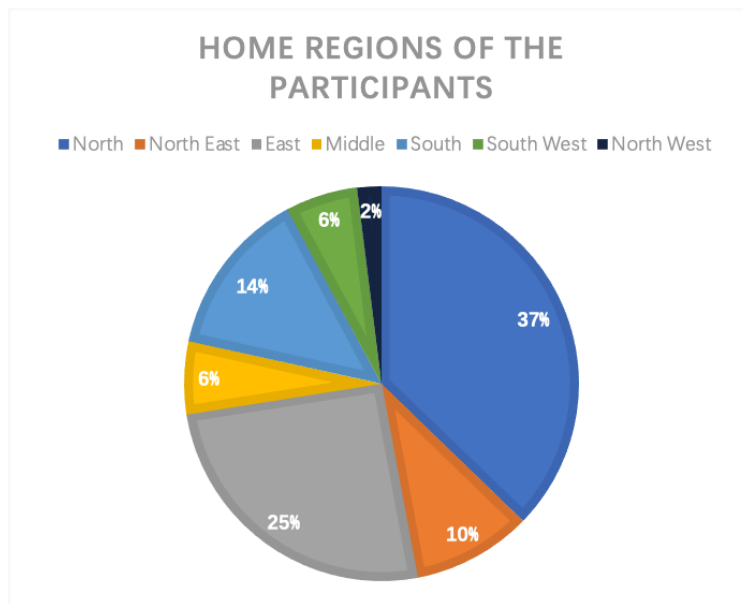


Figure 1 The proportion of the home region distribution of the participants of VGT questionnaire.

Table 1. Dimensions and labels used in the VGT questionnaire

Label	
Dimension	Type
Utterance	Standard
	Efficiency
Social Status & Power	Education level
	Richness
	Authoritativeness
Solidarity	Attractiveness
	Friendliness
	Politeness
	Energy

With this questionnaire, the research can acquire a large amount of data that may contribute to forming a generalised conclusion of a certain population. Nevertheless, solely utilising this method may only obtain a fairly superficial result, ignoring individuals and their diversity. In addition, specific reasons for the formation of their attitude may be still obscured with only quantitative analysis.

### 3.2.2 Qualitative Research — Individual Interview

In order to ameliorate the drawback of the quantitative part above, this research also randomly selects 9 participants for individual interview, which is effective in discovering the opinion and feeling of the individual participant. Additionally, the research can also be able to dig out the reason for their judgement in the questionnaire based on their answer in the interview. For the question, the

research also endeavours to avoid directly asking the attitude of participants. Specifically, the

research provides three contexts of questions for participants to consider (see "Table 2").

Table 2. Contexts and corresponding questions in interview

Context	Question
Education	1. If you encounter a teacher speaking Chinese in this accent during your learning process, how would you react, and what would you say/do? Why?
Region judgment	2. What features of the utterance did you base on to make the judgement on the region of this speaker? 3. Can you give a brief introduction to the region you think this accent belongs to? (3-5 sentences) 4. Do you think your impression of the region, which the accent belongs to, would influence the answer to the questionnaire? Why?
Suggestion for speaker	5. Do you think the speaker should try to learn standard Mandarin to mediate his accent? Why?

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

Before the VGT test starts, the research has assured that all the participants can distinguish standard Mandarin amongst other dialects. For the initial question, the research asks the participants to guess which provinces the speakers are from. For the BAM audio, 27.5% of the participants gave the correct answer. As for the standard Mandarin

speaker from Beijing, the correctness ratio is 35.2%. Therefore, it can be seen from these two data that it is quite challenging to infer the region where the speaker belongs only from the speaker's words. Moreover, the interview participants also state that they did not presume the home regions of the speakers during the VGT. Consequently, the result of this test is unlikely to be influenced by the impression of the speakers' region.

Table 3. Paired samples T-test of the score of VGT questionnaire of accented and standard Mandarin

Label		Mean		Standard deviation		p-value
Category	Type	Accented	Standard	Accented	Standard	
Utterance	Standard	2.47	4.12	1.347	1.291	.000**
	Efficiency	4.04	4.51	1.296	1.138	.011*
Status and Social Power	Education level	2.76	3.94	1.050	1.103	.000**
	Richness	2.9	2.9	1.153	1.063	1.000
	Authoritativeness	2.55	2.27	1.501	1.313	.237
Solidarity	Attractiveness	2.14	2.57	1.296	1.063	.045*
	Friendliness	3.45	3.29	1.433	1.270	.420
	Politeness	3.41	3.71	1.169	1.301	.210
	Energy	2.33	2.69	1.337	1.140	.132

a \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.001

To compare the attitude towards the two varieties of Mandarin, a Paired Sample T-Test is conducted (see "Table 3"), which is efficient in comparing the differential between the mean (i.e. average value) of the two groups of score [21]. Starting from the Intelligibility dimension, the difference between the scores of the standard label may be relatively significant (P<0.001). According to several interview participants, the phonological system of the BAM speaker may reinforce the impression of non-standard. In detail, the retroflexed sound and the front nasal sound would be respectively merged into the blade-alveolar sound and back nasal sound, which is fairly different from the sound structure of standard mandarin. In addition, some people also think that

his intonation is quite fluctuating, which makes his utterance extremely "non-standard". Comparatively, the efficiency difference is not that significant but still quite noticeable (P=0.011). Some participants believe that it is the non-standard utterance that downgrades his communication efficiency. Apart from that, one participant also deems that the pauses, which appear when the speaker tries to determine which pronunciation is correct, may also lead to a low velocity of information transmission. Hence, the significant influence of the phonological difference, between Baotou dialect and standard Mandarin, on the hearers' impression of the degree of standard and communication efficiency may be revealed. In addition, this distinction between the two types of

Mandarin may also attest the necessity of establishing the intelligibility dimension in this analysis.

For the status category, there is an enormous difference between the two speakers' score for the Education label. Most participants think the BAM speaker is relatively uneducated, comparing to the standard Mandarin speaker ( $P < 0.001$ ). Similarly, several participants in the interview also mentioned that the utterance of this speaker might make them think that he is from a countryside region in which the educational resource is rather scarce. Nevertheless, when the participants are required to consider the BAM speaker as their teacher, the situation becomes quite different. Albeit few participants think this teacher would negatively affect their learning, most people still argue that what really matters is the teaching quality. Hence, they do not think it is necessary to replace him with a teacher who can speak standard Mandarin. To sum up, based on the utterance per se, most participants would presume the low-graded education level of the speaker. Nevertheless, when given that if the BAM speaker is a teacher, tolerance emerges among the participants. Additionally, several participants also said they would simulate the teacher's accent for hilarious purpose, which may indicate that they still possess a negative stereotypical image of the accented mandarin. Hence, for the label of education degree, the attitude of people tends to mutate if the occupation or proficiency level of the speaker is considered, although some people may still possess a disregarding attitude towards the speaker.

In contrast, the degree of richness ( $P=1$ ) and authoritativeness ( $P > 0.05$ ) does not present an apparent distinction between the two speakers. Most participants do not think their different accent can indicate their wealth level or social power. Furthermore, they also think that accent may generate different effect for people at a different social level. For instance, an interviewee believes that if the social status and personal skill of the speaker are relatively superior, then his/her dialect would be a salient personal feature for people to remember him/her. Also, the hearers will seldom suspect his/her status or skill based on his/her accent. Hence, based on these results, it can be summarised that the BAM accent may not affect people's attitude towards the social state and power of the speakers.

For the solidarity part, this category mainly consists of 4 labels related to the personal

characteristics of the speakers, including Attractiveness, Friendliness, Politeness and Energy. In this part, only the degree of attractiveness is marked distinctively ( $P=0.045$ ). For this label, more participants think the utterance in standard mandarin is more attractive. According to the interviewees, although the BAM speaker can transmit the basic meaning of the text, the fluency of his utterance makes the hearers have to slow down the speed of understanding in order to follow with his flow of communication, which may make them feel frustrated while listening to the audio. Hence, the overall speech may make them feel unattractive. In comparison, some participants deem that the speech in standard Mandarin is more natural and sounds beautiful, which they can follow up with much more easily. As a consequence, they are unconsciously being attracted by this speech. Therefore, this distinction showcased that degree of non-standard of the BAM speakers may negatively influence the flow of hearers' understanding process and make them think this speaker is dull and unappealing. Nevertheless, for the label of Politeness, Friendliness and Energy, the score is not negatively influenced by the accented speech. One possible reason might be that none of the participants is from Inner Mongolia, which means that it may be difficult for them to possess solidarity or affinity affection to the BAM speaker.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research investigated the attitude towards the BAM by utilising the VGT technique to analyse the general attitude and an interview to reveal the individual thought and opinion, which may assist in finding out the underlying reason for their judgement in the questionnaire. Initially, the phonological distinction between BAM and standard Mandarin would make people think the BAM speaker is non-standard and not proficient in information transmitting. Additionally, the research also discovered the presumed inferior perception of the education level of the BAM speaker and ascertained that their opinion might mutate if the occupation of the speaker is considered, such as a teacher. For the social status aspects, the correlation between the accent of BAM speaker and their economic and social authoritativeness was not found in this research. Finally, this research also revealed that the non-standard speech of the BAM speaker might also slow down the hearers' interpretation and hereby make them feel the utterance is tedious or even annoying. From a holistic perspective, the

negative attitude towards BAM chiefly results from the phonologically "distinctive" elements in their speech, which may make their hearers confused. Hence, the BAM speaker may need to modify some of the phonological differences to improve the overall communication efficiency. Nevertheless, it may be dispensable for them to learn the pure standard Mandarin unless their occupation requires it, considering that language or accent may also manifest the speaker's personal and cultural identity. In addition, there are still some inadequacies in this study. As a case in point, the participants of this study only include the university students of the young generation (from 19-23 years old), which means that the result may be inapplicable to the whole population. Hence, further research investigating the attitude of all-year-range participants may be needed.

### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Linxin Zhang.

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