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Between the standard and non-standard: Accent and identity among transnational Mandarin speakers studying abroad in China

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on three American¹ students with histories of using non-standard Mandarin, this study uncovers the ways in which bi/multilingual learners may engage in negotiations of accent and identity when they study abroad and encounter different sets of language standards. The promotion of standard Mandarin in mainland China is achieved through a clear set of linguistic standards that prescribe how Mandarin should sound. However, in Chinese diaspora communities in the U.S., multiple norms continue to co-exist. Drawing from the language socialization theory, this study focuses on how these students and their Chinese hosts use or reject one stereotypical nonstandard Mandarin feature, the retroflex/dental merger, in their everyday discourse. The findings illustrate how they become socialized into the concept of standard Mandarin while studying in China. As they responded to the notion of standard in divergent ways, the results highlight study abroad as a potential space for bi/multilingual learners to (re)interpret and (re)negotiate accent and identity.

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1. Introduction

In applied linguistics, study abroad is typically conceptualized as a temporary educational sojourn in a foreign country where the target language is spoken. However, this conceptualization overlooks one important fact: For some learners, the target language may not only be spoken in the foreign destination; also, it may be spoken at home. Over 20% of the U.S. population come from homes that speak a language other than English, such as Spanish and Mandarin (Ryan, 2013). For many speakers of Spanish or Mandarin in the U.S., they may not use the standard variety that is promoted in Spain or China. Sometimes they may not even share the same ideas about what should be considered as the standard. Thus, the bi/multilingual reality is that (1) learners are not always monolingual speakers with no prior exposure to the target language, and (2) sometimes learning a second language should rather be described as learning a second dialect (Ortega, 2013). For these students, studying abroad in these countries may present complex questions regarding accent, identity, and ideologies. Yet still missing in the study abroad literature is an analysis of these students' experiences and negotiations with different linguistic varieties, dialects, and accents (Tullock & Ortega, 2017).

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¹ "American" in this study refers to "U.S. American."

It is necessary to first identify who these learners may be. It seems natural to assume that many of them will be heritage language learners, and they have already been shown to undergo complex identity development when they study abroad (Jing-Schmidt, Chen, & Zhang, 2016). Yet the term “heritage language learners” involves such a diverse population that there is not yet a shared consensus on how to define the term (Wiley & Valdés, 2000; He, 2011). Typically heritage language learners refer to those with “an ethnolinguistic affiliation to the heritage” and with a range of proficiency in oral or literacy skills (He, 2011, p. 588). But this emphasis on ethnolinguistic affiliation may also engender a racialized gaze that equates linguistic knowledge with one’s ethnic background (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Duff (2015) urged applied linguists to conceptualize languages such as Mandarin and Spanish as “transnational languages,” which means that these languages are spoken not only in one foreign country, but also outside of that country among diaspora communities.

Therefore, this study uses the term “speakers of transnational Mandarin” rather than heritage language learners, and it focuses on the case of Mandarin to illustrate related complexities. Using Duff’s (2015) definition, we can think of speakers of transnational Mandarin to not be limited to those with direct ethnolinguistic affiliations. Mandarin speakers with intimate family and community ties in diaspora Chinese communities may come from various ethnic backgrounds, and their relationship with Chinese diasporas may take place in a range of forms, including ethnolinguistic heritage but also interracial dating/marriage, or childcare services, to name just a few.

It is also important to conceptualize which linguistic varieties may be involved in the negotiation of accents. In the case of Mandarin, many overseas Chinese communities and families use a variety that is not mutually comprehensible with Mandarin, such as Cantonese (Wong & Xiao, 2010). Even though China’s recent success in promoting Mandarin has made Mandarin more desirable to learners outside of mainland China (Zhu & Li, 2014), unlike within China where a clearly set of standards are in place, there continue to be inconsistencies in what standard should be selected for the use, learning, or teaching of Mandarin in a transnational setting, such as the U.S. (Starr, 2017). In light of this sociolinguistic reality, this study focuses on learners of transnational Mandarin who had to negotiate their Mandarin accents, rather than the use between Mandarin and other Chinese varieties such as Cantonese. The study examines the learners’ use of one nonstandard Mandarin feature – the retroflex/dental merger – as an example to illustrate the ways in which these learners negotiate sociolinguistic norms and identities when they study in China.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sociolinguistic development among study abroad students

Sociolinguistic variations have received some attention within the study abroad literature. Researchers have mostly focused on sociopragmatic variations, such as the *ne* deletion in French (Regan, Howard, & Lemée, 2009), the second-person T/V forms in German (Barron, 2006), and the style shift in Japanese (Cook, 2008; Iwasaki, 2008). Yet as pointed out in the review article by Howard, Mougeon, and Dewaele (2013), the focus continues to be on how learners behave differently from native speakers, with inadequate attention to how learners engage in meaning negotiation and construction, or how they may acquire complex variations that exist within the target language. Furthermore, although sociophonetic variations are crucial to sociolinguistic inquires, literature on the topic remains scant within the study abroad research. Ohara (2001) remains to be the only published study to date that is relevant to the discussion. Though her research did not focus on study abroad, the results showed that some female learners of Japanese became aware of the Japanese women’s use of higher pitch to construct gender after they had spent some time in Japan.

As we follow the multilingual turn of the applied linguistic research (Ortega, 2013) and shift our focus to transnational learners who have an existing history with diaspora communities that speak the target language, study abroad may entail possibilities to encounter sociophonetic patterns and norms that differ from the diaspora communities. Furthermore, as sociolinguistic research has shown, accents are not simply products of one’s group membership. Rather, speakers may utilize sociophonetic variations to express their relationship to the talk (e.g., how certain they are about their assertions) or to the interlocutors (friendly, dominating, etc.) (Kiesling, 2009). In other words, sociolinguistic variations are central to the process of stance expression and identity construction, and they index membership in communities (Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson, 2006).² How, then, do transnational learners become aware of different patterns for stance and identity expression when they study abroad, and how do they negotiate in day-to-day interactions between the new patterns and their existing ones? These questions may lead us to begin our enquiry into the process rather than the product of sociolinguistic development in the study abroad setting. To address these concerns, this study draws from the language socialization theory as its framework.

² Both Kiesling (2009) and Johnstone et al. (2006) provide a thorough discussion about how sociolinguistic variations can index multiple layers of social meanings (e.g., stance, identity, membership, etc.). While the concept of multiple indexicalities is critical to a theoretical discussion of how social meanings are linked to linguistic forms, the focus of the current article is how learners become aware of sociophonetic variations and negotiate their accent and identity.

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