Ideologies and Identities
As “Different” Mandarin-Speaking People:
Folk Conceptualization of Taiwan Mandarin and Boundary Maintenance

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Every society has its own unique and complex geopolitical history that contributes to and transforms its contemporary belief system about itself and its language(s). Scholarship of language ideologies underscores the ways in which speakers make use of language beliefs and practices as semiotic resources to reflect and achieve their sociopolitical interests and goals. In cross-border regions, community members’ conceptualizations of language and community not only mirror their concurrent sociopolitical reality but also contribute to their construction of semiotic boundaries separating them from their adjacent neighbors. With the rise of China as a global economic and political power, the role and status of Mandarin Chinese is changing vastly within and beyond Chinese communities. Due to decades-long political separation since 1949 between Taiwan and China, in the eyes of the majority of Taiwanese, Chinese in Mainland China are socioculturally and linguistically similar and dissimilar.

Employing the theoretical framework of language ideologies and language in society to this Taiwanese background, this paper provides examples indicating that Taiwan Mandarin is utilized as a resource to construct geopolitical identities as well as maintain semiotic boundaries with those who speak a variety different from theirs. Moreover, the paper highlights the multiplicity and mutability of language ideologies about Taiwan Mandarin as the linguistic reflections of the intricate nature of Taiwanese’ self-identification as TAIWANESE and/or CHINESE. The data for this study come from two short-term ethnography conducted in Taipei, Taiwan, in the summer of 2014 and 2015. Forty-two Taiwanese (age 19-66) were consulted for their perspectives on speakers of Mandarin variations. Field notes and audio-recordings from participant-observation are used to illustrate the discrepancy between their linguistic perceptions and actual language practices.

This paper demonstrates that retroflex initials [ʈʂ, ʈʂʰ, ʂ, ʐ, ɹ] and rhotacization Erhua [ɻ], along with variety-specific prosodic contours, have been selectively enregistered as the cardinal indices of linguistic boundaries between varieties of Mandarin. In addition, the perceived linguistic boundaries are intentionally loosely configured to reflect respondents’ volatile ideologies towards (trans)national identities vis-à-vis political borders. On the level of national identity, the described linguistic boundary corresponds to the actual geopolitical border between Taiwan and China. Mandarin varieties are dichotomized simply as r-less Taiwan Mandarin vis-à-vis r-colored “China Mandarin”. On the level of communal identity, the internal variational heterogeneity of Taiwan/China is valorized through the emphasis of variation boundaries. The dyad of r-less/r-colored sounds is reconfigured into the retroflex continuum to capture folk categorizations of regional differences within and across Taiwan/the PRC.
Finally, this paper adds to the linguistic anthropological literature linking sociocultural effects of transnational political economic interactions to the transforming indexicality of language variations in relation to linguistic identities. It demonstrates the ways in which languages and identities are concurrently subject to change to mirror the multiplicity and volatility of participants’ language ideologies and attitudes toward the complicated relationship between language and the sociopolitical environment they inhabit.