

○ SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SOUND CHANGE: THE CASE OF *WO* IN SHANGHAINESE

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Research has shown that language change is driven on one hand by forces internal to language itself such as grammar-internal systematic pressure, and on the other hand by social motives such as social identity. Language contact presents new features, but why is it that some of them are incorporated as variation and evolving into language change, while others are not? This paper reports a study on a sound change in Shanghainese, a dialect of the Chinese language. Data were collected in natural contexts of conversation followed by a brief interview with informants to gain identity related information about them. It has found that previously negative perception of status attached to a new sound induced by language/dialect contact changed into a positive perception, and people started to identify positively with this new sound. Further, there were differences in various different age and gender groups in taking up the new sound. As a result, this sound has evolved from a non-native alternative to a systematic variation and it is being established as a sound change. This study has thus further confirmed that social identity plays a pivotal role in driving language features into language variation and language change.

KEY WORDS: language contact; language variation; language change; sound change; social identity

INTRODUCTION

Shanghainese is a dialect of the Chinese language. It is the dialect of metropolitan Shanghai in China. Several years ago, a sound variation in Shanghainese caught my attention. On a visit to Shanghai, I once walked past a group of students chatting in Shanghainese outside the gate of a college. I noticed that they consistently pronounced the word *wo* (meaning ‘I’ and ‘me’) as [u:], instead of the usual pronunciation [ɲu:] that I am familiar with.

I grew up in Shanghai and speak the local dialect. I left Shanghai in my late 20’s in 1985, but still use my native dialect daily when I speak with my family and friends originally from Shanghai. On my regular visits to Shanghai, I use Shanghainese to get by and converse in Shanghainese with friends and family. I knew that the pronunciation of [u:] for *wo* had long existed in Shanghainese, but only as a non-native alternative used by non-locals from other parts of China. During the time when I lived in Shanghai, this pronunciation was considered a marker of non-native speech used by migrants to Shanghai. Local people associated this

pronunciation with low social status and regarded it socially undesirable. To me, those students outside their college looked like local Shanghai youths, and they sounded like native speakers of Shanghainese apart from their use of [u:] instead of [ɲu:]. Hearing them pronounce [u:] was therefore a surprise to me. I then observed that use of the sound [u:] was widespread. I became curious whether this formerly non-native pronunciation had developed into a sound change in the Shanghai vernacular and association of it with low social status had disappeared. My curiosity evolved into a research project. I sought to find out under what circumstances this non-native sound became a systematic variation and what propelled this sound variation into a sound change.

This paper reports some findings of the study. Firstly I will outline research into linguistic pressure and social motives for sound change to provide a context for discussion; I will then present data collected for this study; and finally I will provide a discussion on how this variation of sound in Shanghainese was triggered and what contributes to propelling it into a sound change.

EASE OF ARTICULATION, LANGUAGE CONTACT AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Languages are ‘inherently unstable’ (Croft, 1995, p. 524), and they are under constant pressure to change. Research has found that language change is related to many factors, ranging from internal pressure of phonology and grammar to external social motives (Aitchison, 2001; Chambers, 2001). Here I would like to outline what is most relevant to this study - ease of articulation, language contact, and social identity.

Languages are subject to pressure from their internal systems to be rationalised. The process of rationalisation usually involves simplification and economisation (Aitchison, 2001, p. 153), and ease of articulation in sound output (Lindblom et al., 1995). The changing pronunciation of the word ‘Saturday’ in English is an example of such simplification and economisation. In some dialects of English, this word is increasingly pronounced as ‘Satday’, with a syllable being omitted. Another example is the word ‘particularly’ which is becoming ‘particuly’, again with a syllable dropped. An example of such changes in Chinese is the sound [an], as in *haitan* (beach), with the vowel [a] nasalised and the final nasalised consonant [n] dropped off (Chen & Wang, 1975). However, desire for ease of articulation on the part of the speaker is constrained by the demand for clarity on the part of the listener, resulting in a balance of ‘competing motivations’ (Newmeyer, 2003, p. 29). That is, language cannot change too dramatically, and speakers cannot use too much efficiency. However, this balance can be upset by an external motive, such as language contact.

In this increasingly globalised world, language/dialect contact has become part of daily life for a large proportion of the world’s population through migration and learning of a second language. As noted by Thomason (2003), language change in most cases can be attributed to language contact. Language contact induces changes to a recipient language in a number of

ways. It may cause its language system to lose some features; it may add new features to the language system; and it may result in old features being replaced by new ones. Language contact leads to feature borrowing by the recipient language and feature imposition by the source language. It has been found that whether people introducing new features into a recipient language speak this language fluently impacts significantly on resulting changes. When native speakers of a language introduce features from another language, non-basic lexical items are initially borrowed, followed by structural features and basic lexical items (Moravcsik, 1978; Thomason & Kaufman, 1988). Conversely, if learners of a language introduce features to this language but they do not speak this language fluently, they initially bring philological and syntactical features into this language, rather than lexical items. They will be able to bring in new vocabulary only if speakers of the source language are considered more prestigious (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; van Coetsem, 1988).

Language contact does not automatically lead to adoption of features of another language. Social factors such as age, gender, social status etc. affect sound change as well as other types of language change (Chambers, 2003; Labov, 1994, 2001). For a feature of another language to establish itself in a receiving language, it has to be accepted by some sections of the speech community of this language. Language features carry social images and reflect social status of people who use them. The relationship of social identity with language variation and change has been studied in order to provide sociolinguistic explanations. At one level, social identity refers to membership of particular socio-demographic groupings, such as age, occupation, socio-economic class, education, language/dialect background, etc. At another level, social identity refers to how people define their relationship with others, that is, who they identify with (Milroy, 2002). At both levels, identity is reflected in the type of language that people use (Garrett, 2010; Tajfel, 1982; Turner, Hogg et al., 1987). For instance, ethnolinguistic variation displayed by speakers from various linguistic and ethnic backgrounds is a way for them to construct and express their ethnic identity (Hoffman & Walker, 2010). Linguistic features that people use are closely related to their social identity and values (Eckert, 2008; Mufwene, 2008; Podesva, 2006; Silverstein, 2003). For example, Zhang (2005, p. 458) has found that a new cosmopolitan variety of Mandarin and English are more highly valued than other varieties of Mandarin in transnational companies where Chinese employees and expatriates from other countries work together.

A SOUND CHANGE IN SHANGHAINESE

In its 160-year history, Shanghai has largely been a city of migrants. In the first 100 years, 80% of the local population were migrants from other parts of China. Since the mid 1980s, Shanghai has been experiencing rapid economic growth, and consequently it has again been attracting a large number of migrants from the rest of the country. At the end of 2009, the size of the permanent resident population was 19.21 million; 5.42 million were ‘new Shanghai residents’, or migrant residents, and this was 28% of the total population (Shanghai

Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2010). In addition, there were several million temporary residents living and working in Shanghai, primarily from less developed inland provinces.

Shanghainese, the dialect used by the Shanghai urban population, has always been in contact with other dialects of Chinese spoken by migrants of various dialect backgrounds. In recent years, Shanghainese has also come under great pressure from *Putonghua* (Mandarin), the official dialect of China, due to strong push by the government for people to use *Putonghua* as a standard dialect across the country. For these reasons, Shanghainese is always undergoing changes. Just as noted by Qian (2003, p. 3), enormous changes have taken place in Shanghainese while Shanghai has been going through great economic and cultural changes. To illustrate these changes, the number of vowels and compound vowels, 63 in the year of 1853, decreased to merely 32 in 2003. Thus, Shanghainese presents an interesting case for studying language change.

A recent change in Shanghainese is pronunciation of the word *wo* (meaning 'I' and 'me'). The new pronunciation [u:] for *wo* in Shanghainese has been around for a long time. It can be seen as an obvious natural candidate for simplification of the original pronunciation [ɲu:], involving the elision of an initial nasal consonant. The nasal consonant [ɲ], in initial position, occurs in Shanghainese and some other Wu dialects around Shanghai but is a difficult sound to be mastered by speakers of many other dialects of Chinese, Mandarin speakers in particular, because [ɲ] simply does not occur initially in those dialect varieties. The new pronunciation is easier to pronounce than the original, and it will not cause ambiguity as it will not be mistaken for any other word in Shanghainese in context (Liu, 2007). However, it was regarded as a marker of non locals (Gu, 2005), an undesired feature that was looked down upon by the local resident population. This perception is known to local Shanghai people of 40 years of age and older, including me. It is a feature risen from language contact between Shanghainese and other dialects, especially Mandarin. Although easy to pronounce, it was not adopted or accepted by the local population in the past, because they did not identify with this less prestigious feature. However, in recent years it has been accepted and adopted by local young people. From impressionistic observations of use, it appears that the new pronunciation [u:] is replacing [ɲu:] in the vernacular.

In the remaining part of this paper, I will present data collected to investigate this in more detail, and I will discuss the extent to which the formerly non-native pronunciation of [u:] has been adopted in the vernacular replacing the original pronunciation [ɲu:]. I will also address how ease of articulation, language contact and social identity have promoted such variation and change.

THE DATA

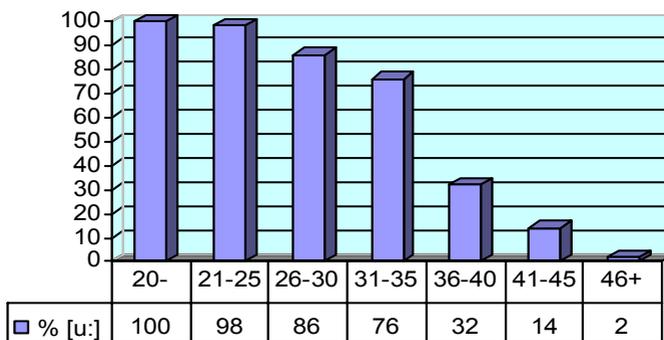
Data were collected between November 2003 and November 2006. Informants were local Shanghai residents who spoke the local dialect; they were second or third generation migrants to Shanghai and had been living in Shanghai all their lives, as confirmed in the data collection process.

Inspired by Labov's department store study (Labov, 2006 [1966]), data were collected from people in natural conversations at public locations such as shopping malls, coffee shops, bus stops, subway stations, the train station, airports, eateries, etc. In eliciting data on pronunciation of the word *wo*, I approached potential informants to start a brief conversation in Shanghaiese, e.g. asking for direction or seeking help, in an attempt to induce them to say the word *wo* on a number of occasions in natural contexts of conversation. When I established that an informant used the pronunciation of [ɲu:] or [u:] or both, I then explained to the informant that I was collecting data on language change, and started a mini interview about the informant's age group, her/his social network, residential environment, and how s/he viewed new Shanghai residents. Only data from second or third generation migrants to Shanghai were included in this study.

In analysing the data, informants were grouped into seven age groups of under 20, 21–25, 26–30, 31–35, 36–40, 41–45 and 46+, with 50 (25 males and 25 females) informants in each age group.

Among these informants, some pronounced [u:] in natural context of conversation, as shown in Figure 1 below.

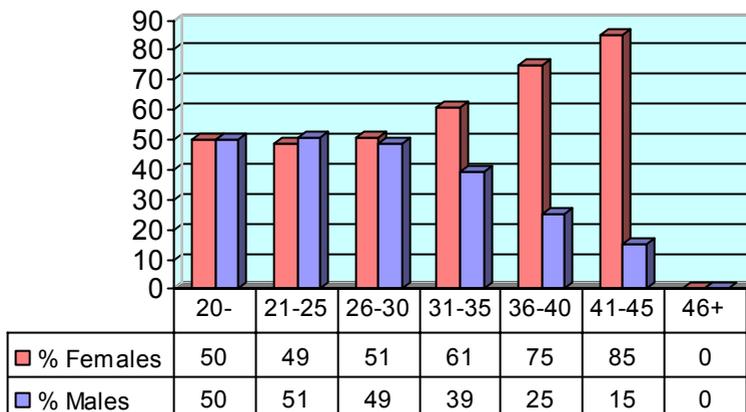
Figure 1: Proportion of informants pronouncing [u:] in natural context



This graph shows that the younger a person was, the more likely it was for him/her to use [u:]. No informant above 45 years of age pronounced [u:], whereas nearly all informants in under 20 and 21–25 age groups used [u:]. The age groups between 26 and 45 years can be seen as transitional from [ɲu:] to [u:]. That is, only 14% informants used [u:], compared to 86% in the age group of 26–30, which indicates completion of this transition. Age groups of 31–35 and 36–40 seemingly constitute a demarcation block separating the old and new pronunciations.

Females and males pronounced [u:] to different extents, as shown in Figure 2 below:

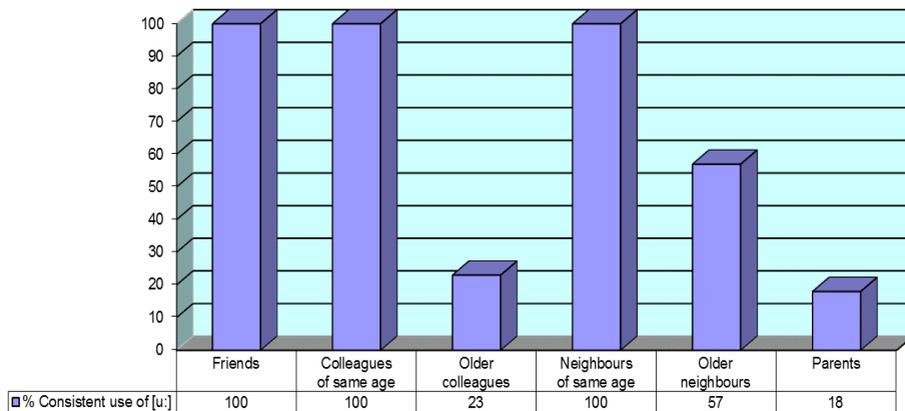
Figure 2: Proportions of males and females pronouncing [u:] in various age groups



As this graph indicates, proportions of females and males pronouncing [u:] in natural contexts are similar in age groups of under 20 to 30. In age groups from 31 to 45, more females (61%) pronounced [u:] than males (39%); and the older the female informants were, the more likely it was for them to pronounce [u:] than males in the same age groups. It appears that females led this sound change in higher age groups; for instance, 85% females used [u:] in the age group of 41-45. A possible explanation is that mothers interact with their children more than fathers do, and mothers more readily identify with their children and use children's language features than fathers do. However, caution needs to be exercised when interpreting this, as only 7 people used the new sound [u:] in this age group.

In interviewing informants, five different groups were mentioned to them as the bulk of their social networks, and they were asked who they identified with amongst these groups. Table/graph 3 below shows different extents to which informants identified with various groups of people in their social networks:

Figure 3: Identified social networks of people under 20 and 21-25



With regard to language use, this identification refers to the willingness to ‘speak the same language’ or use the same language features with their interlocutors. As the table/graph indicates, young people under 20 and 21-25 years of age completely identified with their friends, colleagues of similar ages and neighbours of similar ages. On the other hand, few informants identified with their older colleagues or their parents. Only 23% indicated that they would use similar language features that their older colleagues use, and only 18% informants said that they would use similar language features that their parents use. A surprisingly interesting phenomenon emerged, that is, a fair proportion (57%) of the informants seemed to be willing to identify with older neighbours as well, which warrants a closer look.

Table 1 below shows the extents to which informants in age groups under 20 and 21-25 maintained contact with their neighbours.

Table 1: Types of housing of informants under 20 and 21-25 who did not pronounce [ɲu:]

	Number	Proportion
Older housing with contact with neighbours	0	0%
New housing with no contact with neighbours	26	100%

As this table indicates, 26 informants did not pronounce [ɲu:] fluently, and these informants all reported that they lived in new types of housing, where neighbours do not have much contact with one another. In contrast, the older type of housing is an environment where neighbours maintain close contact with one another.

DISCUSSION

On the basis of the data presented in the previous section, we can establish that the pronunciation [u:] has probably evolved from a non-native sound to a variation of [ɲu:] in the vernacular in Shanghai. Along with this development, there has been a decline of status attached to the old sound [ɲu:] and an elevation of status attached to the new sound [u:].

The original pronunciation [ɲu:] in Shanghainese is a sound difficult to learn to pronounce for non locals who speak some other dialects, as the initial sound [ɲ] exists in few other Chinese dialects. In contrast, the new pronunciation [u:] is easy to pronounce for most people, irrespective of their dialect backgrounds. Typically, people from other dialect backgrounds pronounce the word *wo* as [u:] when they initially learn to speak Shanghainese. Therefore, adoption of the new pronunciation in Shanghainese seems logical, since it is a feature in language contact between Shanghainese and other dialects, and it is a natural outcome of simplification, in which [ɲu:] is reduced to [u:]. In the process of this change, we can see social identity at work at various levels.

Language variation usually starts with young people, language change is a result of adoption of new language features by young people, and younger generations use variants more frequently than older generations (Chambers, 2001). This appears to be true of this new pronunciation. It has also been confirmed that use of language becomes stabilised during late teens (Cukor-Avila, 2000; Labov, 1994). Therefore, it is conceivable whether to use the new sound or the old one becomes a generation marker, as some older informants remarked that the new sound young people were using was not an authentic Shanghainese sound. However, a high proportion of young people using [u:] indicates that this variation has been established. We know that synchronic variation may lead to diachronic change (McMahon, 1994), and young people were using the new sound instead of the old one, pointing to the fact that a diachronic change was taking place and [u:] will eventually replace [ɲu:] as a permanent sound change.

The change from [ɲu:] to [u:] is an obvious case of simplification. However, the new sound [u:] has been around for a long time only as a non-native alternative sound, not as a variation in Shanghainese. It did not become a variation until recently. In the past, the new sound was not accepted in the local dialect and it was merely regarded as a non-native variation because of its lower status and a lack of identification by speakers of Shanghainese. Accepting it as a variation indicates that its status has now changed and local people are starting to identify with it.

This change in status of the new sound can be linked to relentless promotion of the national dialect Mandarin in Shanghai since 1990s at the expense of the local dialect. There has been no opportunity for children to speak Shanghainese during the day, as kindergartens and primary schools have banned the use of Shanghainese. Pupils until very recently had to speak

Mandarin during the day when they stepped into their kindergartens and schools at 7:30am until around 5:30pm when they went home. A slogan that I saw at a school entrance reflects this strong promotion of Mandarin: ‘As soon as you enter the school, you are in Beijing’ (Mandarin is largely based on the Beijing dialect). They could not speak Shanghainese to their teachers, and they were not allowed to use the local dialect with their peers during recess. Consequently, children have been cut off from their own local dialect for most time of the day. At present, few children can speak fluent Shanghainese, and many parents attribute their children’s inability to speak their local dialect to a lack of Shanghainese-speaking environment (Youth Daily 2011). Along with this, status of the local dialect has experienced a decline. For the last two decades, it is a common practice for schools to treat speaking Shanghainese as ‘uncivilized’ misbehaviour, as reflected in the slogan ‘Speak Mandarin and be a civilized person’ (Qian, 2011). As a result, children simply do not speak Shanghainese, not even with their parents. In turn, parents have to speak Mandarin to their children in order to accommodate them in interaction (Luqiu, 2010), further limiting children’s opportunity to learn and use the local dialect.

Language features are passed down from generation to generation, but at present children and youths in Shanghai have limited interaction with people of older generations outside their families, and they do not interact in the same dialect with people of older generations. In my own experience, the most influential language modelling in my childhood days was provided by young adult neighbours that children admired. Storytelling by some adult neighbours is still fresh in my memory. In those days, we had a tradition of spending hot summer evenings in alleyways cooling ourselves down in evening breezes while engaging in leisure activities, such as card playing and storytelling. Like other children, I was especially attracted to exciting and scary stories told by adults and imitated their language use when appropriate occasions arose. In old style housing in Shanghai, there is plenty of inter-generational language interaction among neighbours in shared kitchens, washrooms, courtyards and other communal spaces. Such an environment promotes children’s exposure to and acquisition of particular language features.

However, modern apartments in Shanghai, and to a similar extent in other major cities in China, are an environment which discourages people from developing close relationship with their neighbours. Typically, people in such housing do not know their neighbours, let alone interact with them. As observed by a blogger (Fengsheng, 2012) in China, it is common for youths in cities to have 200 to 300 telephone numbers stored in their mobile phones, but none of them are their neighbours’. Therefore, children in Shanghai are in some way deprived of exposure to the original pronunciation [ɲu:] used by older neighbours, and in terms of language acquisition this reinforces their adoption of the new pronunciation [u:].

Elevation of status of the new sound can also be linked to a change in how local people regard migrants to Shanghai, especially local youths’ identification with them. It is my own

experience as well as generally known that in the past migrants were largely from poor areas with little education, and when arriving in Shanghai they typically worked in low-paid jobs, such as labourers, factory workers and jobs in the service industry. In their attempt to learn the local dialect, they mis-pronounced the sound [ɲu:] as [u:] in their non-native like speech. In consequence, the new sound was linked to a low status in the population in Shanghai, just as users of this sound were linked to a low socio-economic status. In contrast, recent migrants who have gained residency status in Shanghai are almost exclusively skilled white-collar workers recruited by large companies, multi-national corporations and government departments, because only these people are eligible for residency in Shanghai where in-bound permanent migration is tightly controlled. New migrants to Shanghai are recent university graduates, young in age, highly educated and well paid. Their high socio-economic status commands respect. It appears that youth in Shanghai now readily give such respect. They look up to new migrants and identify themselves with new migrants, including adopting their non-native like pronunciation [u:]. Thus, the new sound has effectively been incorporated into Shanghainese as a variation. Given that the new sound is even preferred by youths to the old sound, it is obvious that a sound change is taking shape.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that language contact induced a new feature of sound simplification in Shanghainese; perception of the status attached to this new sound impacted on whether it was adopted as language variation; and local people's recent positive identification with the new sound pushed this language variation towards language change. The new pronunciation [u:] for *wo* (meaning 'I' and 'me') in Shanghainese is a change driven by social identity. Identity in this case seems to act as a filter, selectively introducing a non-native feature to be adopted by language users. When there was a lack of willingness in the past on the part of the local population to identify with people using [u:], this new pronunciation was blocked from entering the vernacular. When the local population, young people in particular, have started to identify with people using the new sound in recent years, it has been allowed into Shanghainese. A process of sound change is thus underway and the new pronunciation has been reinforced in the vernacular. We can conclude that social identity is at work in this case of language change: social acceptance of the new sound by some sections of the local population in Shanghai established it as a sound variation in the local dialect, and social identification by the local population with people who use this sound is propelling this feature of language variation to language change.

I am aware that there are limitations of this study. Due to its scope of inquiry, I did not examine speakers' and listeners' roles in inducing this sound change (Ohala, 1989, 1993), since the study focused on the issue of social identity without looking at speech production or speech perception. Further, this study only considered the sound variation and change from

[ŋu:] to [u:], i.e. dropping of the initial [ŋ]; it did not look at the next level of variation, i.e. whether there is variation of [u:] used by the informants, such as [wu:]. It would be possible that the informants produced some kind of [w] sound but it was either imperceptible to me or I overlooked it as I did not consider it to be relevant in designing this study or in collecting data for this study.

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