Sociolinguistic Meanings of Syllable Contraction in Mandarin: Region and Gender

Syllable contraction has been found in many dialects/languages of Chinese including Mandarin (Chung 1997). For example, in Taiwan Mandarin, [tʃɤjaŋ] 'like this' becomes [cjaŋ] or [tʃjaŋ] in casual and fast speech. The online news reports and blogs have been using contracted words to quote (imaginary) speech of cute, childish, whiny and sometimes silly southern women. It reveals that lay listeners tend to relate speech featuring syllable contraction to a certain accent of Mandarin and to attach gendered meanings to it.

To study what syllable contraction in Mandarin indexes, a two-part perceptual mapping survey was conducted using Preston's (1989) 'draw-a-map' method. Informants were given two blank maps of China, and asked to draw borders identifying the locations where differences exist. On the first map, borders were drawn where participants believed accents of Mandarin are different. On the second map, participants circled areas where they think syllable contraction exists. They were also asked to comment on the speech in the identified areas on both maps. The maps were then aggregated using ArcGIS 9.3.

The perceptual map of Chinese dialects (Figure 1) shows that participants (20 college students from mainland China) were able to identify the dialectal regions of Chinese. Similar to the perceptual dialects of the United States (Preston 1989), there is a perceptual south/north divide of Chinese dialects (Figure 3). First, participants have the basic knowledge of a southern/northern difference in dialects/accents, shown on the maps as lines drawn across middle China. Second, the comments on the maps show that participants tend to think that northern accent is more tough and manly while southern accent sound more soft and feminine. The concept of south and north lays the foundation for analyzing the maps of syllable contraction use.

The maps of syllable contraction (Figure 2, Figure 4) show that participants' beliefs about the location and gender characteristics of contraction users are in line with public opinions. First, Figure 2 shows that participants were able to identify Fujian-Taiwan and Beijing-Tianjin areas as major places of syllable contraction use, where dialects are salient (Figure 1). Second, dialectal region and gender of the contraction users have great influence on participants' attitudes toward their contraction use. Contraction in the northern area sounds simply casual; in the south, however, male speakers sound "sissy" and female speakers sound "sweet", as shown in Figure 4.

This project is the first study of syllable contraction using perceptual maps. It links Chinese speakers' knowledge of dialects and that of syllable contraction and reveals the sociolinguistic meanings of syllable contraction in Chinese. Broadly, by implementing perceptual maps, this study extends the methodology of sociolinguistic studies of Chinese, and contributes to a more general understanding of the nature of sociolinguistic perception.

Selected reference:
Figure 1. Perceptual boundaries of Chinese dialects, aggregated from 20 maps.

Figure 2. Perceptual boundaries of syllable contraction use, aggregated from 20 maps. Numbers in the legend indicate how many participants circled the area.

Figure 3. Map of Chinese dialects by a female northerner.

Figure 4. Map of Chinese dialects by a female southerner.