

Navigating Standard English in China: University Administrators' Attitudes and Language Policy Implications

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Abstract: This study explores the attitudes of university administrators towards Standard English (SE) in China's public universities, analyzing its implications for language policy and educational practices. By examining how SE is perceived compared to Mandarin, the research highlights the ideological underpinnings and practical impacts of promoting SE in higher education. Using a robust 28-item questionnaire, the study gathers empirical data to inform future language planning and policy decisions. The findings provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in the dynamics of language standardization in a globalized context. These insights are particularly relevant for China's public university administrators, offering a foundation for developing coherent and culturally responsive language policies and educational strategies.

Keywords: Standard English (SE); Language Attitudes; Language Policy; University Administrators; Language Standardization

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Introduction

English as a world language has a long history and an extraordinary development process. Old English developed into World English. English serves as a lingua franca in international communication. Hertling (1996) notes that English teaching and learning are among the most aggressive and thought-provoking campaigns in Chinese history. Similarly, language attitudes are essential to explore because China has a large number of English learners. With the trend of globalization and the development of English varieties globally, research into how people comprehend and recognize Standard English (SE) and the factors influencing their attitudes is gaining practical significance. It is well known that English in China develops rapidly and plays an essential role in various aspects of life, especially in the education system. Public universities in China are pivotal in enforcing national English policy. This paper closely examines administrators' attitudes towards SE across four aspects: English language groups, English language policy, the English language itself, and Mandarin (Standard Chinese).

1. Literature Review

Over the past years, studies on language attitudes towards SE and China Standards English (CSE) in China have been carried out by many scholars (Liang 2015; Xiang 2013; Pan & Block 2011). These studies highlight the significance of understanding language attitudes in various fields.

More and more scholars in China begin to notice the shortcoming of promotion SE. Wang (2013), in her study of Chinese students' language perception, found that Chinese speakers of English aspire to the "social capital assigned to Standard native English". Therefore, SE as the most important foreign language in China is treated as the main instruction language for the acquisition of the second language. Cai (2012) figures that SE does not fit the situation in China and the movement to promote SE would definitely be harmful to education.

Along with the rise of the new notion of SE, the political role of SE attracts more attention recently. Cushing (2021: 2) aptly states "...it is important to foreground that language discourses do not reside in policy mechanisms alone and are not insulated from classroom practice, but get "lived" through interpretations, enactments, and resistances by policy "doers", such as students, teachers, and management". Therefore, the administrators in this study are the policy doers including decision makers, officers and teachers. and it is their interpretations and enactments that are of interest for further study in as well as whether there is resistance or compliance to SE.

Besides, the promotion of a standard language, namely the process of language standardization, the so-called

non-standard languages are in a danger to some extent. Regional dialects are often acknowledged as ignorant not only by privileged groups, but also by the speakers sally, and speaking the standard language could be treated as the authority of the upper class (Cushing, 2020). This situation persists in that the Chinese government does not nominate any variety of English with priority (Pan, 2015).

As for the situation in China, the process of language standardization involves mainly the promotion of Mandarin and meanwhile, the bad impacts have been done to the languages of the minorities. Scholars find that with the promotion of Mandarin in China, other varieties of Chinese language are under the “shadow” of SLI and are being treated as non-standard languages (Zhao & Liu, 2020:882). And it has been well-acknowledged that China is conducting a strong language policy by the promotion of Mandarin which seems the only standard Chinese language (Zhao & Liu, 2020:882). Accompanied with popularizing Chinese Han language and English language across the country, some minorities' language are disappearing from use in China (Liang, 2015).

In recent years, language standardization is being treated as an ideology with a sack of abstract norms (Milroy and Milroy , 2012). Further, this ideology would unavoidably lead to the notion that the standard language is superior and unchanging(Walsh, 2021). Definitely, standard language ideology has been influencing people’s language attitudes towards ‘non-standard’ language varieties (Walsh. 2021.)

Based on all the above analysis, however, recent global shifts in language education emphasize the increasing acceptance of World Englishes and the decolonization of language curricula. World Englishes challenge the hegemony of SE by recognizing the legitimacy of diverse English varieties that have evolved in different cultural contexts (Kachru, 1992). For instance, Indian English and Singaporean English reflect the linguistic creativity and cultural specificity of their speakers, contributing to the global tapestry of Englishes (Crystal, 2007). The issues of Language policy in higher education have been rarely talked by Chinese scholars according to the data of CNKI and major journals in China (Tang, 2023). Therefore. This research calls for a new view on the notion of SE in the higher education from the perspectives of administrators including policy-makers, officers and teachers who are all vital intakes in the applications of English language policy.

2.Method

In the pilot survey, this research applied a 28-item questionnaire to investigate the attitudes of administrators towards Standard English in four aspects namely the aspect of language groups, the aspect of language policy, the aspect of language itself and the aspect of Mandarin. The questionnaire was designed to explore the language attitudes of administrators. Questionnaires could guarantee qualitative and quantitative data, which is flexible for a wide range of research (Mackey & Gass, 2005). In total, there were 61 respondents including seven policymakers, 18 officers, and 36 teachers from this university. The questionnaire was originally drafted in English. Chinese translations of the questionnaire items were finalized after consulting a Chinese language lecturer at a public university in the same province. This was to ensure the reliability and validity of the research. Data analyses of the questionnaires were carried out with SPSS version 26. Each group of items under each aspect of language attitude was tested and most of their figures of Cronbach α are above 0.8. Finally, a total of 28 items were selected as the final draft of the main research questionnaire.

3.Results

Table 1.1 showed that, in general, the respondents had a positive attitude toward SE from the aspect of language groups. Almost half of the respondents showed their love or affection for native English speakers who were considered the symbol of SE. They tended to favour native speakers' pronunciation and their features. Almost 23.73% of the respondents agreed that the grammars of native English speakers were better than those of other English.

Table 1.1: Items for Attitudes towards Language Groups

Qs	1%	2%	3%	4%	5%	M	SD
Q1	7.55	11.48	32.93	23.87	24.17	3.46	1.191
Q2	6.95	8.16	22.36	28.7	33.84	3.74	1.205
Q3	20.24	17.82	32.93	12.08	16.92	2.88	1.332
Q4	5.14	8.46	29.61	26.59	30.21	3.68	1.141
Q5	4.83	4.53	23.87	27.49	39.27	3.92	1.116

Table 1.2 showed that, generally speaking, respondents have a positive attitude towards SE from the aspect of the language, and meanwhile, they have a negative attitude towards non-SE namely other varieties of English. Almost 66.1% of the respondents agreed that only original English books and original English movies could possibly improve one's English skills and abilities. Almost 66.1% of the respondents agreed that students should not be taught non-SE namely, China English. Almost 59.32% of the respondents agreed that when a teacher thinks his or her English is not standard enough, they might lose confidence in teaching.

Table 1.2: Items for Attitudes towards the Language

Qs	1%	2%	3%	4%	5%	M	SD
Q15	6.04	8.76	37.46	23.26	24.47	3.51	1.132
Q16	14.5	15.11	33.84	16.62	19.94	3.12	1.298
Q17	7.85	9.67	38.67	20.54	23.26	3.42	1.174
Q18	2.72	7.85	29.61	26.59	33.23	3.8	1.072
Q19	3.63	6.34	28.4	25.68	35.95	3.84	1.096
Q20	3.93	5.44	30.51	28.4	31.72	3.79	1.073
Q21	2.72	3.32	23.56	24.77	45.62	4.07	1.033
Q22	6.04	7.55	32.02	24.47	29.91	3.65	1.159
Q23	5.14	6.34	27.79	22.96	37.76	3.82	1.059

Table 1.3 indicates that 66.1% of the respondents agreed that students with more standard pronunciation tend to receive higher scores in oral examinations. Given that all respondents are administrators, this suggests a strong endorsement of this language policy among policymakers, officials, and educators. This data provides a basis for further exploration into other language policies within Chinese universities. Additionally, 59.32% of the respondents agreed that students should be informed that proficiency in standard English can significantly enhance job prospects.

Table 1.3: Items for Attitudes towards Language Policy

Qs	1%	2%	3%	4%	5%	M	SD
Q6	9.67	11.48	29.91	22.36	26.59	3.45	1.262
Q7	8.46	13.9	30.21	20.85	26.59	3.43	1.252
Q8	3.93	6.04	24.77	31.12	34.14	3.85	1.080
Q9	3.93	4.23	24.17	26.28	41.39	3.97	1.087
Q10	4.83	7.25	29.31	28.4	30.21	3.72	1.116
Q11	3.32	6.34	28.1	25.38	36.86	3.86	1.089
Q12	3.02	4.83	26.89	30.51	34.74	3.89	1.036
Q13	3.32	6.34	30.21	27.79	32.33	3.79	1.067
Q14	6.34	8.76	35.95	17.52	31.42	3.59	1.096

Table 1.4 reveals that over 50% of respondents considered Mandarin to be the most standard form of Chinese, and the policy promoting Mandarin was widely accepted by the majority. The respondents generally advocated for minimizing the influence of native languages on the learning and practice of English.

The analysis suggests that most administrators held favorable attitudes towards SE. Specifically, they showed positive views across all researched aspects of language attitudes related to SE, including perspectives on English language groups, English language policy, the use of SE and Mandarin. Administrators demonstrated a preference for organizing teaching and learning activities in strict accordance with national policies and standards, adhering to the guidelines established for traditionally recognized standards.

Table 1.4 Items for Attitudes towards Mandarin

Qs	1%	2%	3%	4%	5%	M	SD
Q24	3.02	4.53	25.38	19.64	47.43	4.04	1.088
Q25	2.42	3.93	26.89	23.26	43.5	4.02	1.040
Q26	1.81	2.72	24.17	19.94	51.36	4.16	1.002
Q27	5.44	6.65	36.56	20.54	30.82	3.65	1.144
Q28	2.72	4.53	26.89	18.13	47.73	4.04	1.084

4. Discussion

In the past years, many scholars have their own definitions of SE. Honey (1997) argues that SE is not merely one among many varieties but a uniquely valuable variety with qualities not shared by non-standard dialects. Trudgill (1999) explores SE historically, noting its association with social groups possessing the highest power, wealth, and prestige, elevating it as the educational dialect. This elevation entails discrimination against non-standard dialects and their speakers. Therefore, SE can be considered the most widely applied traditional English variety among non-native speakers and serves as a model for language instruction.

In the process of globalization, several scholars began to renew their notions on the understanding of SE. SE is an ideology. This ideology, shaped by specific social, political, economic, and historical conditions, can vary among different populations. Furthermore, these ideologies influence group members' evaluations of events, control their discourse, and shape their social practices (Van Dijk, 2008). Cushing (2020) provides a comprehensive definition of language policy, emphasizing that it encompasses all practices, beliefs, and management concerning language, enacted not just through texts but also through practices and pedagogy. SE is not merely a chosen pronunciation standard but a comprehensive policy affecting texts, practices, pedagogy, and even the hiring process.

As for the situation in China, Since the 1980s, research on language attitudes in mainland China has expanded. While many studies focus on native speakers' perceptions, the perception of SE is also crucial (Liang, 2015). However, SE's promotion does not always yield positive educational outcomes. Cai (2012) argues that SE may not suit China's context and that promoting it could harm education. SE, while not always the best model, is a significant element in the global English language education industry.

Therefore, it is the time to talk about language standardization in China. Chinese speakers share a unified written Chinese, with consistent word order, lexicon, and orthography across dialects in Mainland China. The promotion of Mandarin is constitutionally mandated. Language standards are not fixed; they evolve with time and place. In China, SE is the preferred model for English teaching and assessments.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the status of SE in China, highlighting current issues and contexts with a focus on higher education among university administrators. Through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), this research explores SE from both historical and critical perspectives. It

reveals the entrenched standard language ideology among Chinese individuals, underscoring the importance of SE as a concept warranting further investigation in future language policy research in China.

In China, English language teaching often adheres to native speaker norms as the teaching model, resulting in students being assessed negatively if they deviate from these norms. However, there is a general lack of awareness that significant variations in grammar and pronunciation exist even among native speakers, a situation that can be described as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1998). However, Hu (2024) has doubted the notion of linguistic imperialism because of its overstating on the cultural function of English language. In Chinese public universities, the dominance of native English speakers' norms persists in classroom discourse and language policies (Fang & Ren, 2018).

The analysis also explores the relationship between perceptions of Mandarin and attitudes toward SE, uncovering the influence of standard language ideology in China. This ideology guides Chinese speakers to adopt the most standard form of the Chinese language, which is integral to national identity (Pan, 2015:88). Consequently, under the influence of this ideology, Chinese speakers are inclined to master SE without question. Wodak (2016) also argues that language serves as a means of defining similarities and differences among speakers, shaped by ideological forces present in discourse, politics, academia, and culture.

This approach advocates for a more inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy. In the context of English language teaching, this means valuing local Englishes and incorporating them into the curriculum, thus fostering a more equitable and relevant educational system. By recognizing and integrating local varieties, educators can challenge the dominance of SE and support the linguistic and cultural identities of their students.

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