The Normative Standard of Mandarin in Taiwan: An Analysis of Language Ideologies and Variation in Metapragmatic Speech in Taiwan
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It has been argued for many years that a new standard of Mandarin is developing within Taiwan. Several linguists (Chen, 1999; Chung, 2006; Kubler, 1985; Kuo, 2005; Li, 1985), for instance, have claimed that localized features entail an emergent ‘de facto’ standard of Mandarin. However, the precise social and linguistic nature of this emerging variety, and the degree to which it exists in common language ideologies, is not clearly understood.

This paper argues that the social nature of the standard of Mandarin in Taiwan is in a state of ideological and behavioral change, and shows what form this potential new standard variety could assume. From participants’ metapragmatic reports derived in interviews conducted in Taipei (n=85) and Tainan (n=71), it is argued that the prescribed form of the retroflex initials [ʈʂ], [ʈʂʰ], and [ʂ] are considered in common ideologies to be a ‘superstandard’ form, or “too standard for everyday conversation” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006). Common usage of the full retroflex was described, for instance, as ‘weird’ or ‘strange’, as a marker of ‘otherness’, and instilling a sense of ‘distance’ within communication. The dental form of the retroflex initials ([ʦ], [ʦʰ], [s]) were commonly regarded as a marker of the ‘non-standard vernacular’, as well as non-prescribed pronunciation of the labial feature in the segments [w], [f], and [y]. Taking these segments as the outliers on a ‘continuum of standardness’ (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006), the inner area of the spectrum provides a sense of a new, normative, ‘informal standard’. A quantitative sociolinguistic analysis of these segments in the talk collected in the interviews was conducted as well. The logistic regression (R-brul) indicated that prescribed usage of the retroflex initials was associated with female speakers, participants with high SES, and those who identify with the northern region of Taiwan. There was also an apparent change over time – younger speakers showed higher usage of the prescribed form. Crucially, however, the youngest group of speakers (18-30) show a break from this pattern through a marked increase in usage of the non-standard dental form of the retroflex.

An intermediate category of the retroflex initials ([ʈʃ], [ʈʃʰ] and [ʃ]) (Baran, 2007; Chung, 2006) was included in the analysis as well, and was shown to pattern very similarly in society as the full retroflex form. However, the intermediate category was free of the negative associations ascribed to the full retroflex in the qualitative data. In fact, those who were able to describe an intermediate form portrayed it as the more normative or socially acceptable feature. Several speakers, as well, questioned the basic existence of a standard form of Mandarin, or explicitly asserted the existence of a new (non-prescribed) standard of Mandarin in Taiwan. Based on this evidence, it can be stated that the standard of Mandarin in Taiwan is indeed in a state of ideological and behavioral change.