**Attitude towards sound change features in Hong Kong Cantonese: A preliminary study**

Manson Chun Man Wong[1], Peggy Pik Ki Mok[1]
[1]*The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR*

Previous studies on Hong Kong Cantonese (HKC) sound change have primarily focused on production and perception of various features, while considerably less attention has been paid to its sociolinguistic dimension, such as language attitudes. Existing sociolinguistic studies often group these changes under the umbrella term 'lazy pronunciation', a stigmatized linguistic label commonly used in the speech community. However, it remains unclear whether these features also exhibit variation *sociolinguistically*. To address this gap, this cross-sectional study examines the language attitude towards different sound change features across HKC young adults and seniors. Specifically, it investigates six ongoing sound change features (see Fig. 1) and asks: 1. Do listeners exhibit different attitudes towards the sound changes? 2. Are there any generational differences? This exploratory study hypothesizes that attitudes towards each sound change feature will be both feature-specific and generation-specific, reflecting each feature's merger status.

16 young adults (8M, 8F; age 23.9 ± 5.0) and 16 seniors (8M, 8F; age 70.0 ± 3.7) were recruited. A matched-guise technique was employed to assess their covert attitudes towards each sound change feature. In each trial, they listened to two sentences, each containing a monosyllabic target word in the medial position. The two words in each round were uttered in either the conservative (e.g., [n-]) or emerging form (e.g., [l-]) of a sound change feature (e.g., [n-]–[l-] merger). Then, the speakers rated the stimuli across three dimensions (oddness, standardness, and acceptability) using a 4-point Likert scale. Using Principal Component Analysis, a score was calculated, in which higher scores indicated more favourable evaluations of a form. A linear mixed-effects model was fitted to examine the effects of age, merger, and phonetic form, as well as their interactions.

Our results showed that young adults were more likely than seniors to distinguish between the forms in mergers. While seniors rated the forms differently in only two mergers, young adults did so in four. Also, although both groups generally preferred conservative over emerging form, the two age groups differed in their evaluations of specific phonetic forms. Compared to young adults, seniors showed a stronger preference for the conservative form of [ŋ]–[m̩] merger (i.e., [ŋ]). Unexpectedly, seniors also evaluated the emerging forms of [kʷɔː-]–[kɔː-], [-n]–[-ŋ], and [n-]–[l-] mergers (i.e., [kɔː-], [-ŋ], and [l-] respectively) more positively than the young adults did. While it remains unclear why the young listeners exhibited higher sensitivity across sound change features, their lower preference for the specific emerging forms suggests [kʷɔː-]–[kɔː-], [-n]–[-ŋ], and [n-]–[l-] mergers have not reached full community acceptance. This may reflect their current incomplete merger status. Overall, this study shows the importance of adopting a feature-level sociolinguistic lens when examining the varying developmental trajectories of ongoing sound changes in HKC.

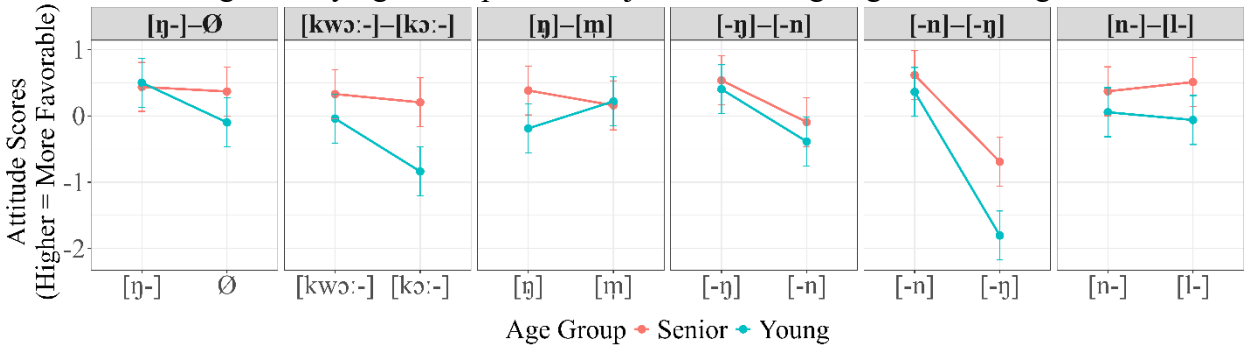


*Figure 1. Attitudinal ratings of the conservative (left) and emerging (right) forms across the six sound change features in HKC.*