

THE ATTITUDE OF NIGERIAN LEARNERS OF CHINESE LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Language attitudes are opinions, ideas and prejudices that speakers have with respect to language. Attitude may have an effect on second or foreign language learning. Since attitudes cannot be studied directly, the assessment of language attitudes requires asking such questions about other aspects of life. The measurement of language attitude provides information which is useful in language teaching and language planning. This study investigates the attitude of Nigerian learners of Chinese language. A research question is raised which says, “do Nigerian learners of Chinese language have positive or negative attitude towards Chinese language?”. To find the answer to the question, a questionnaire survey as a data collection method is employed. At the end, a conclusion was drawn.

Keyword: Nigeria, attitude, learner, Chinese language

INTRODUCTION

The word “China” is derived from *Cin*, a Persian name for China popularized in medieval Europe by the account of 13th-century Venetian explorer Marco Polo. The Persian word, *Cin*, is derived from Sanskrit word *Cina*, which was used as a name for China as early as AD 150. The first recorded use in English dates back to 1555. China is called ‘*Zhongguo*’ in Chinese, literally meaning ‘middle kingdom’. China, officially the People’s Republic of China (PRC), is the world most populous country, with a population of over 1.3 billion. Covering approximately 9.6 million square kilometers, China is second-largest country by land area, and the third- or fourth-largest in total area, depending on the definition of total area.

It is a single-party state governed by the Communist Party of China. China has 22 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, 4 directly controlled municipalities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Chongqing), and 2 mostly self-governing special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macau). Beijing is the capital of China. There is controversy over Taiwan, though China sees it as its 23rd province but it is governed by separate political entity, Republic of Taiwan. The current president of China, Xi Jinping, was elected on 14 March, 2013. Chinese people celebrate October 1 as a National Day in honor of the founding of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949. China has 56 recognized ethnic groups but 91.6% of Chinese people are from Han ethnic group. The non-Han population includes 55 ethnic minorities, of which the major groups are the Zhuang, Manchu, Hui, Miao, Uyghur, Yi, Tujia, Mongolian, and Tibetan. It has many languages but adopts only one language as standard language, Mandarin, which is also called Putonghua.

China has a long recorded history which dates back to 1600BC. Among the elements that characterize Chinese history are the consistent rise and fall of dynasties, intermittent aggression from northern aliens, varying degrees of openness to the outside world, Cultural Revolution, invasions from other countries, opium war and the rest. Chinese history can be summarized in a sentence. It began with first dynasty (Xia: 2100-1600BC) and ended with last dynasty (Qing: 1644-1912), following the formation the Republic of China which was soon followed by the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 after a civil war.

China-Africa relation is not limited to trade but of recent it includes the study of Chinese language (Mandarin) and culture in many African countries. In Nigeria, there is growing interest to learn Chinese language among the citizens. The high demand to learn Chinese language and culture is what led to the establishment of Confucius Institutes all over the world. As of now, there are two Confucius Institutes and other Confucius classrooms in Nigeria for teaching and learning Chinese language and culture. With the rise of China, many people around the world are

coming to China for one thing or the other. There are many Nigerian students and traders in China. Many Nigerians are interested in learning Chinese language.

CHINESE LANGUAGE

It is good we understand what Chinese language is and the particular dialect we are interested in this study. According to Chinese traditionalists, Chinese is one language with different dialects. They believe that all Chinese people read and share the same writing system called *Hanzi* (character-based), despite speaking in different ways. But western linguists do not agree with the above beliefs. The western linguists see Chinese as a language family with different languages which are not mutually understandable. There are so many arguments on this issue and we are not going further. In division, Chinese language is usually perceived by their native speakers as dialects of a single Chinese language, rather than separate languages, although this identification is considered inappropriate by some linguists and sinologists (Mair, 1991).

The Chinese language is a language or language family consisting of varieties which are mutually intelligible to varying degrees (Crystal, 1987). Chinese is distinguished by its high level of internal diversity, although all varieties of Chinese are tonal and analytic. There are between seven and thirteen main regional groups of Chinese (depending on classification scheme), of which the most spoken, by far, is Mandarin (about 850 million), followed by Wu (90 million), Cantonese, locally called Yue (70 million) and Min (50 million). Of these varieties of Chinese language, Mandarin, also called *Putonghua* or *Guoyu* and *Hanyu* is the official language of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan, as well as one of four official languages of Singapore. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Cantonese is popular in Guangdong Province and Cantonese-speaking overseas communities, and one of the official languages of Hong Kong and Macau. Min is widely spoken in southern Fujian, in neighboring Taiwan and in Southeast Asian, known as Hokkien in Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia.

In this study I am only interested in Mandarin Chinese. Mandarin is a standardized form of spoken Chinese based on Beijing dialect, called *Beifanghua*. Mandarin is known as *Putonghua* in Mainland China, *Guoyu* in Taiwan and *Hanyu* in Singapore. Mandarin Chinese history can be dated back to the 19th century, particularly by the upper classes and ministers in Beijing. The English word 'mandarin' (from Portuguese *mandarim*, from Malay *menteri*, from Hindi *mantra*, from Sanskrit *mantrin*, minister or counsellor), originally meant an official of the Chinese empire. In everyday, 'Mandarin' refers to Standard Chinese, which is often called simply 'Chinese'. In study, Mandarin and Chinese language are used interchangeably. Mandarin is now used in education, media, and formal situations both in China and Taiwan. It can be spoken intelligibly by younger people in Mainland China and Taiwan, with various regional accents.

All varieties of spoken Chinese use tones. A few dialects of north China may have as few as three tones, while some dialects in south China have up to six or ten tones, depending on how one counts it. One exception from this is *Shanghainese* which has reduced the set of tones to a two-toned pitch accent system much like modern Japanese. Mandarin has four major tones with neutral tone making it five in number. A very common example used in to illustrate the use of tones in Mandarin are five tones applied to the syllable 'ma'. The tones correspond to these five characters.

Table 1: Mandarin Tones

S/N	Tone Mark	Meaning	Example	Character	English Meaning
1	—	High level	Mā	妈	Mother
2	ˊ	High rising	Má	麻	Numb
3	ˇ	Low falling-rising	Mǎ	马	Horse
4	ˋ	High falling	Mà	骂	Scold
5	(no mark)	Neutral	Ma	吗	Question particle

LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

According to the *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, language attitudes are the attitudes which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other's languages or to their own language. Language attitudes are opinions, ideas and prejudices that speakers have with respect to language. For example, it is often said that in order to learn a language, it often helps to have a positive attitude towards that language.

Researchers in attitude studies have a number of theories that focus on two major competing approaches to attitude, the "mentalist" and the "behaviourist" view of attitude. The mentalist view is the most represented one and has three components, the "cognitive" (individual's belief system, knowledge and perception), "affective" (emotional reactions and feelings) and "conative" (behavioural intentions and interest) (See Lambert, 1967). As such, the mentalist view defines attitude "as an internal state aroused by stimulation of some type and which may mediate the organism's subsequent response" (Williams, 1974:21). Following the behaviourist view, attitudes are to be found simply in the responses people make to social situations, which implies overt behaviour. This kind of behaviour is much easier to observe and analyse, but it cannot be used to predict other kinds of behaviour (Fasold, 1984:147).

Since attitudes cannot be studied directly, the assessment of language attitudes requires asking such questions about other aspects of life. For example, a person can be asked about their opinion of a person whose speech sample they just heard. The responses reveal attitudes about people and their language. Opinion and attitudes are noted about how those being interviewed might be willing to accommodate to the people and languages that they just heard on the recordings. Language attitudes can be identified by simply asking why certain languages are in use (or not).

Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc. Attitudes towards a language may also show what people feel about the speakers of that language. Attitude may have an effect on second or foreign language learning. The measurement of language attitude provides information which is useful in language teaching and language planning. How we develop attitude is stated by Brown (2000:180) thus:

"Attitudes, like all aspects of the development of cognition and affect in human beings, develop early in childhood and are the result of parents' and peers' attitudes, of contact with people who are 'different' in any number of ways, and of interesting affective factors in the human experience"

The study of language attitudes is important for sociolinguistics because it can, as Marina S. Obiols writes: "predict a given linguistic behaviour: the choice of a particular language in multilingual community, language loyalty, language prestige" (Obiols, 2002). Suzanne Romaine says that the basis of attitude measurement is that there are underlying dimensions along which individual attitudes can be ranged. However, she also points out that "the translation of attitude from the subjective domain into something objectively measurable is common problem in any research that involves social categorization and/or perceptual judgements" (Romaine, 1980:213)

Gardner and Lambert's (1972) studied the effect of attitudes on learning. After studying the interrelationships of a number of different types of attitudes, they defined motivation as a construct made up of certain attitudes. The most important of these is group is the 'attitude' learners have towards the members of the target language culture. "The roots of the motivations are deep within the student's own cultural background relates to the background projected by the L₂ culture" (Cook, 2008:140). Lambert (1981, 1990) made an important distinction between 'additive' and 'subtractive' bilingualism. In additive bilingualism, the learners feel they are adding something new to their skills and experience by learning a new language, without taking anything away from what they already know. In subtractive bilingualism, on the other hand, they feel that the learning of a new language threatens what they have already gained for themselves. In summary of the view, Cook (2000:141) states "successful L₂ learning takes place in additive situations; learners who see the second language as diminishing themselves will not succeed". In conclusion, Brown (2000:181) says: "It seems clear that second language learners benefit from positive attitudes and that negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and, in all likelihood, because of decreased input and interaction, to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency."

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

Data collection in second language research is multidimensional. There is no single prescribed elicitation measure, nor is there a 'right' or 'wrong' elicitation measure. The choice of one over another is highly dependent on the research question asked and may also be related to the theoretical framework within which research is conducted (Mackey and Gass, 2005). This study is non-experimental. It was designed on the conceptual framework of mentalist point of view. The data of this study were collected through a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire survey method was preferred because (i) this method is suitable for empirical research; (ii) the data collected through this method is easily quantifiable; (iii) this method gives informants enough time to provide well thought out answer; (iv) this method offers greater anonymity to the informants; and (v) this method requires low cost and saves time.

One of the most common methods of data collection in second language research is to use questionnaires of various kinds. The popularity of questionnaires is due to the fact that they are easy to construct, extremely versatile, and uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processable. Brown (2001) defines questionnaire as "any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting them among existing answers". In addition to different varieties of questionnaire, two types of questionnaire items may be identified: closed and open ended. In this work, closed-ended questionnaire is employed. The questionnaire is constructed in line with research question: do Nigerian learners of Chinese language have positive or negative attitude towards Chinese language.

In construction of this questionnaire, two considerations were made: (i) wording of statements, care was taken to write the items so that they could be easily understandable and quickly answered by the respondent in order to avoid confusion and the questionnaire response time within a 10-15 minutes time frame. In an effort to convey a friendly stance with the respondents, the researcher used a simply and unambiguous words. (ii) Five-point Likert scale, in order to compel respondents to think about the statements, in addition to incorporating reserve-coded items and to randomizing item order, I chose an odd-number five-point scale to include a neutral option. The questionnaire is designed and constructed in a closed-ended format on a five-point Likert scale.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher during a regular class session. The students were told that all the information they would provide was for research purpose only and would be kept confidential. The survey was totally anonymous and their participation was voluntary. Before they took part in the survey, they were instructed to read carefully the notes and instructions by hearts while the researcher read them out aloud. No incentives were offered. Answering the questionnaire took approximately about 10-15 minutes. Although 70 questionnaires were distributed to the students learning Chinese language at the Confucius Institute, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; at the end 61 copies of questionnaires were returned but only 52 copies of questionnaire were appropriately answered. The 52 copies of the questionnaire were used for data analysis. Out of the 52 students, 32 are female and 20 are male. Below is the result and calculation of the questionnaire.

S/N	Survey items (statements)	SD 1	D 2	N 3	A 4	SA 5
1.	I like Chinese language.	3	7	10	24	8
2.	I think Chinese language is difficult.	5	31	4	8	5
3.	I wish to speak fluent Chinese.	0	1	2	12	37
4.	If I study Chinese, it means I don't like our local language.	4	19	1	6	2
5.	The study of Chinese will make me forget English language.	15	20	3	10	5
	TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS	27	78	20	60	57

Table 2: Questionnaire sample

After the instruction: “the above is a number of statements with which some people agree and others disagree. Please indicate your opinion after each statement by putting an X in the box that best indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement”, the students were asked to choose only one of the Likert five-point scale responses: strongly disagree (SD- 1 point), disagree (D- 2 points), neither disagree nor agree (N- 3 points), agree (A- 4 points), strong agree (SA- 5 points). The questionnaire is analysed based on the questionnaire statements.

“I like Chinese language” is the first statement on the questionnaire. Attitude is expressed in likes and dislikes. “Like” is equalled to a positive attitude while “dislike” is invariably a negative attitude. The students’ attitude towards Chinese language is shown by their like and dislike of Chinese language. Thirty two students out of fifty two students agreed to like Chinese language while ten students disagreed to like Chinese language. It means that Nigerian students like Chinese language.

“I think Chinese language is difficult” is the second statement on the questionnaire. Attitude is also expressed in feeling (I think, I feel, etc). Positive feeling is same as positive attitude while negative feeling is same as negative attitude. Thirty six students disagreed that Chinese language is difficult to learn while only thirteen students agreed that Chinese language is difficult to learn. It is quite right that every language is difficult to learn as a second or foreign language but one’s attitude is the measure of its difficulty.

“I wish to speak fluent Chinese” is third statement on the questionnaire. Wish is another way to express attitude. Positive wish is tantamount to positive attitude and negative wish is invariably negative attitude. Success in life begins with a positive wish. The same applies to second or foreign language learning. Forty nine students agreed that they wish to speak fluent Chinese while only one student disagreed.

“If I study Chinese, it means I don’t like our local language” is the fourth statement on the questionnaire. In additive bilingualism, learners believe that learning another language is an addition while in subtractive bilingualism learners believe that learning another language is a subtraction. From the table above, twenty three students disagreed to the statement that says, “If I study Chinese, it means I don’t like our local language” while only eight students agreed. It means that many students believe that studying and speaking Chinese language is an addiction.

“The study of Chinese will make me forget English language” is the last statement on the questionnaire. In Nigeria, English language is the dominant foreign language which is equally a national language. Without a credit in English language, student cannot be admitted in a higher institution in Nigeria. English language is the medium of teaching and learning in Nigeria. These are some of the reasons why English language is very important in Nigeria. The introduction of Chinese language into Nigerian schools received different reactions. Many think it is a welcome development while others see it as a distraction to the students already learning English and French. However, many students (35) disagreed that the study of Chinese will make them forget English language while 15 students agreed to the statement.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this study, I raised a research question which says, “do Nigerian learners of Chinese language have positive or negative attitude towards Chinese language?”. To find the answer to the question, I chose a questionnaire survey as a data collection method. The questionnaire has five statements: I like Chinese language; I think Chinese language is difficult; I wish to speak fluent Chinese; if I study Chinese, it means I don’t like our local language; and the study of Chinese will make me forget English language. From the questionnaire, students were asked to choose one of the following answers: strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree nor disagree; agree; and strongly agree. Students’ responses were counted and calculated based on the points assigned to each of the answers.

Having stated the research question, carried out data collection, and done with the data presentation and analysis; the conclusion is drawn based on the findings of the research question. From the analysis of the data above, it is obvious that Nigerian students (learners) have positive attitude towards Chinese language.

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