

# Language Code Choice, Language Ability, and Language Attitude Status of the Elderly Aged 60 or Above in Hefei City, China

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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the current situation of language use among the elderly over 60 years old in Hefei city, which is of great practical significance for creating a high-quality aging service and product supply system and promoting infrastructure construction in the city. This study is aimed at analyzing the language code choice, language ability, and language attitude status of the elderly aged 60 or above in the urban area. The results show that the elderly tend to choose dialects in both the family domain and the public domain, and have strong dialect ability. The willingness of older adults to learn Mandarin from their offspring is very strong, with 93% of them believing that they are "proficient" in Mandarin; at the same time, the willingness of elderly people to learn dialects is also strong. Communities should help older people rebuild their social roles, create a Mandarin learning atmosphere, provide convenient language learning services, enhance their sense of identity with Mandarin, and achieve learning in old age. It should also pay attention to the language use characteristics of the older people and continue to deepen the promotion of Mandarin in a targeted manner, while encouraging and protecting dialects.

**Keywords:** Language code, Language ability, Language attitude.

## 1. Introduction

The aging of population is becoming more and more prominent in the development of the times. Data from the Seventh National Census Bulletin of Anhui Province shows that the population aged 60 and above accounts for 15.26%, and the aging of population of Hefei is more prominent. Language is the most important communication tool between people. By exploring the current status of language use among the elderly, this study helps to further investigate and analyze the aging trend in the city, which is of great practical significance for creating a high-quality aging service and product supply system and promoting infrastructure construction in Hefei City.

## 2. Survey and Research

The subjects of this survey are mainly elderly people aged 60 or above in Hefei city, who are able to communicate fluently using a certain language (language variant), without language barriers, hearing impairment and psychological barriers. The survey was conducted by random sampling and 90 questionnaires were distributed in elementary school, kindergartens and elderly activity centers, and 75 valid questionnaires were collected.

## 3. Analysis of Survey Results

### 3.1. Older adults' code-switching situation

Fishman divided code-switching into five domains to be studied: family domain, friend domain, religious domain, educational domain, and work domain (Ehala, 2019). This survey examines and analyzes both the family domain and the public domain.

#### 3.1.1. Family domain

Linguistic communication in the family domain is mostly

informal, usually between elders, peers, and juniors. When talking with their elders, the 75 respondents used a very low proportion of Mandarin, and basically all of them used dialect. The elderly and their elders have lived in Hefei for a long time, and the demographic structure within the family is relatively stable. Most of these groups have not received formal Mandarin training, and their Mandarin level is not high. When talking with their peers, both husband and wife and relatives tend to "not use Mandarin", because their Mandarin ability is relatively low and their choice of language code is consistent. The percentages of "not using Mandarin at all" and "almost not using Mandarin" when communicating with their juniors have decreased, indicating that the elderly have a tendency to move closer to their juniors in terms of language code choice, thus increasing the frequency of using Mandarin.

#### 3.1.2. Public domain

According to Fishman's domain theory, the survey classifies the friend domain and the life domain as public domains. In the friend domain, "chatting with neighbors and friends" was set, and in the life domain, "at the food court and kiosk" and "at government offices, hospitals and banks" were set. In the "chatting with friends and neighbors" and "at the vegetable market and kiosk" domains, most of the older adults used the dialect exclusively. The food market and kiosk are more casual and closely related to people's daily life. When buying goods, they need to communicate with suppliers and negotiate prices, so it is easier to express themselves in their familiar language. Neighbors and friends are the second closest relationship after family members in terms of socialization, living environment and upbringing similar to the survey respondents, more accustomed to use the language that both sides are familiar with to communicate, which can close the emotional distance between the two sides. "In government offices, hospitals or banks", the proportion of older people using dialect has decreased and the proportion using Mandarin has increased. Older people tend to talk about

important events, such as seeking help, life safety and economic property, so they prefer Mandarin, the language of authority.

## **3.2. Language proficiency of older adults**

The level of a person's language ability is a visual representation of the quality of language use (Fang & Yang, 2017). This survey divided language ability into five levels: proficient, relatively good, average, poor, and not at all. On the whole, the Mandarin proficiency of older people in Hefei is average with a mean value of 2.9, but the dialect proficiency is strong with a mean value of 4.6.

The main reasons for this are:

### **3.2.1. The language identity**

The language identity of Mandarin is not strong among older people due to various factors such as their education level and time spent learning Mandarin. They usually have very limited language communication places, mostly family domains and informal life domains, which also makes the older people's language identity of Mandarin less than that of dialects.

### **3.2.2. Negative transfer due to code-selection**

Language competence and language use are closely related, and the more frequently a language is used in social interactions, the stronger the language competence. The results of the above analysis show that older adults only use Mandarin occasionally in formal public domains, which inevitably leads to difficulties in improving their Mandarin ability.

### **3.2.3. Influence of differences in language attitudes**

The relationship between language ability and language attitudes is also quite close. The higher the degree of identification with a language, the higher the evaluation of status, social influence and usefulness, and the higher the degree of emotional identification, the more willing one is to use the language, and the stronger the language ability. The increased national publicity on the promotion of Mandarin has raised the public's correct understanding of Mandarin and established a positive view of the language. As a result, more than 60% of the older adults interviewed have a mean Mandarin proficiency of 2.5 or higher. However, there are still a few older people who are unwilling to change and have strong language loyalty and pride in their dialects, which is one of the reasons for their weaker Mandarin ability.

## **3.3. Language attitudes of older adults**

Different users will have different perceptions, understandings, and emotions about a certain language, and will have different rational evaluations of the value of using a specific language and its social status (Gong,2022). This survey analyzes the attitudes of older adults toward Mandarin and dialects from three dimensions: affective, cognitive, and behavioral.

### **3.3.1. Affective factor**

The mean value of the interviewed older adults' attitudes toward dialects was the highest, followed by Mandarin, and English was the lowest. This indicates that they have the highest emotional identification with the dialect and are most emotionally loyal to it. Dialects carry a large amount of cultural information accumulated by an ethnic group over the course of its long history, and people pass on their regional culture through the use of dialects. The elderly have been immersed in regional culture for almost their entire lives, and

their emotional identification with the dialect is naturally very high.

### **3.3.2. Cognitive factor**

The mean value of the interviewed elderly people's attitudes toward Mandarin is the highest, followed by English, and the lowest is dialect. After years of promoting Mandarin, older adults have slowly deepened their understanding of Mandarin, and know that Mandarin, as a national legal lingua franca, has great conspicuous prestige and is also the most widely used language with the highest functional social status in China, and occupies a major position in general social life communication. As a result, older adults rate the status, social influence and usefulness of Mandarin more highly.

### **3.3.3. Behavioral factor**

Less than 13% of the older people in Hefei are "very willing" to learn Mandarin, nearly 47% are "willing" to learn Mandarin, 27% are "indifferent", and 27% are "indifferent" to learn Mandarin. Those who were "willing" to learn Mandarin accounted for 27%, and almost 13% were "unwilling" to learn Mandarin. During the interviews, some elderly people mentioned that they encountered many difficulties in learning Mandarin as they got older, such as not having the conditions to learn Mandarin and having to figure it out on their own, as well as declining hearing ability, fading memory, and a lot of differences between Mandarin pronunciation and dialect pronunciation. The willingness of the elderly to learn Mandarin from their offspring is very strong, with 93% of them believing that they are "proficient" in Mandarin; at the same time, the willingness of the elderly to learn dialect from their offspring is also strong, with 75% believing that they are "proficient" in dialect. They believe that their children and grandchildren should learn Mandarin and master the dialect at the same time, so as to pass on the local language and culture and not let the local dialect die out.

## **4. Analysis and Suggestions**

### **4.1. Language characteristics of the elderly in Hefei**

After analyzing the data on the language code choice, language ability and language attitude status of the elderly over 60 years old in Hefei urban area, the author found that the elderly tend to choose dialects in both the family domain and the public domain, and have strong dialect ability. Most of the elderly have average Mandarin ability, which can meet daily communication but not reach the proficiency level, and the elderly have very weak English ability. Older adults themselves have an average willingness to learn Mandarin and find the learning process difficult, but they have a very strong willingness to learn Mandarin for their offspring and have high expectations for their offspring's dialect learning.

### **4.2. Countermeasures and Suggestions**

Urban language planning should create a situation where Mandarin and dialects coexist, promoting the speaking of Mandarin in the public domain and the speaking of dialects in the living domain. It should also pay attention to the language use characteristics of the elderly and continue to deepen the promotion of Mandarin in a targeted manner, while encouraging and protecting dialects. Communities should help older people rebuild their social roles, create a Mandarin learning atmosphere, provide convenient language learning services, enhance their sense of identity with Mandarin, and

achieve learning in old age. At the same time, respect the language code selection habits of the elderly and take advantage of their dialects, so that the elderly can play their role in the cultural transmission level of dialects and realize the usefulness of the elderly. Family members should pay attention to the language use characteristics of the elderly and create a natural environment for Mandarin acquisition. Actively guide the elderly to tell traditional customs, proverbs and myths, and the history of their hometowns to pass on and preserve local culture while the dialect is passed on from generation to generation.

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