Gender and second language style: American learner perceptions of Mandarin sajiao.

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Gender has been shown to be a salient factor in second language (L2) learner acquisition of target language variation (Adamson & Regan, 1991; Major, 2004; Schleef, Meyerhoff, & Clark, 2011; Rehner, Mougeon, & Nadasdi, 2003). This paper examines the perceptions of a highly gendered Mandarin Chinese speech style called sajiao (撒嬌) by American Mandarin learners in Taiwan. Sajiao has been described in the popular media and scholarly articles as a style of communication in which a (typically female) speaker acts like “a spoiled child” or “pretends to be angry or displeased” (Farris, 1988, p. 301) in order to win the affections of a typically male interlocutor (Chan, 1997; Chuang, 2005; Hunt, 2011; Larson-Wang, 2011; Lin, 2005; Zhai, 2010; Zitong, 2013).

Given the fact that the notion of sajiao does not exist in English (Yueh, 2012), the central research question of this paper was as follows: Would American Mandarin learners in Taiwan acquire native-like perceptions of sajiao? To investigate this question, interviews with 12 American Mandarin learners and a perception experiment with 68 American and Taiwanese Mandarin speaker participants were conducted in Taiwan. Results showed that the American learners, like the Taiwanese participants, associated sajiao with femininity, a lack of masculinity, a lack of dominance, and a lack of professionalism. However, unlike the Taiwanese participants, the American learners did not associate sajiao with cuteness, friendliness, or pleasantness. The interviews illuminated possible explanations for the experimental findings. Taken together, the results of this study confirm the assertion that gender is a salient category in the acquisition of L2 variation, yet they also point out that some social/cultural meanings associated with target language styles may be acquired before others or not at all. Thus, this research demonstrates the important relationship between cultural learning in a host country and language acquisition. As such, it addresses conference question 2 (“What is cultural learning on study abroad and its relationship to language acquisition?”).

References


