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Variations in Chinese Vocabulary Pronunciation among the Youths in Kisaran City

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Abstract

The Weibo post on 21st February 2023 showed the phenomenon of pronunciation variants in several Chinese vocabulary spoken daily by Chinese people that are different from the standard Chinese dictionary. It was also found in Kisaran City, North Sumatra, especially in the youths of Chinese people, who are numerous and often use the Chinese Language in their communities and vernacular languages such as Hokkien and others. The method used is qualitative research. It uses phonology theory as the basis for research and uses the PRAAT application and native speaker assistance in data classification and analysis. From 60 vocabularies referred to from Weibo 人民日报, 20 respondents, 1200 data or vocabularies were produced. Data was obtained using the Bungin calculation system, and 33% of respondents pronounced according to the Chinese Dictionary, while 67% of respondents did not pronounce according to the dictionary. The factors that cause the youths of Kisaran City not to follow the dictionary pronunciation are the influence of respondents' learning sources, lack of knowledge of polyphonic characters, using radicals to guess how to pronounce vocabulary, and the similarity of Chinese characters.

Keywords: Chinese Language; variations; pronunciation; vocabulary; Kisaran

1. Introduction

Weibo post (人民日报, 2023) showed the phenomenon of pronunciation variants in several Chinese vocabularies that are different from the standard Chinese dictionary with those often spoken daily by Chinese people. Netizen's comments also show that many Chinese people are less aware of correct pronunciation. Therefore, the pronunciation they use does not match the dictionary. It opens up a discussion space about pronouncing it correctly or standardly.

The variations in Chinese Language in China also occur due to various factors, such as dialects. The Chinese Language has many dialects. Each region in China has a different dialect, including pronunciation. The same word can sound different when spoken by speakers of other dialects (Ifeanyi Odinye, 2015). Chinese language includes elements of vocabulary, grammar, and phonological. The pronunciation standard for learning Chinese is Beijing pronunciation. In learning process, mastering Beijing's standard pronunciation is not easy. There are some factors that become obstacles, it can come from the teacher and students such as the perspective and habits of the learning process. But it can also come from external factors. Lack of knowledge and ability, difficulty level of pronunciation can also cause difficulties in mastering Chinese phonology (Wikarti et al., 2019). However, the Chinese government has set Putonghua (common speech language), or the northern dialect, as the standard Chinese Language (宋, 2021). Nevertheless, the influence of local dialects remains strong, especially in rural areas or among older people.

This variant also negatively impacts standard Chinese Language and Chinese Language learners, especially foreign language learners. According to Sun, Chinese Language learning for foreign learners is divided into five aspects in terms of the content, namely phonetics teaching (语音教学yǔyīn jiàoxué), script teaching (文字教学wénzì jiàoxué), vocabulary teaching (词汇教学cíhuì jiàoxué), grammar teaching (语法教学yǔfǎ jiàoxué), and cultural teaching (文化教学wénhuà jiàoxué) (Yoga Pratama et al., 2022).

Zhao Yuanren, in "Language Problems," pointed out that the content of foreign language learning is divided into three essential parts: pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Pronunciation is the most complex and vital part because the language itself and the texture of the language are pronunciation. If the pronunciation is wrong, the grammar and vocabulary will be incorrect. Each tone has its meaning in the Chinese Language, and different tones can cause misunderstanding (Hari & Elisa Yanggah, n.d.).

One of the causes of Chinese Language pronunciation errors is the presence of polyphonic characters. Even native Chinese Language speakers also often misunderstand polyphonic words (干 & 赖, 2021). For Chinese Language learners, these polyphonic words are obstacles to learning Chinese. In the morning reading class for international students, the researchers found that intermediate Chinese Language learners tend to mispronounce the character "重" as "zhòng" when pronouncing the word "重新 Chóngxīn."

Polyphonic characters have multiple pronunciations, each with a specific meaning, which is a significant challenge in Chinese Language pronunciation. For instance, the character '模' can be pronounced as 'mó', 'meaning 'standard, imitate, exemplary,' or 'mú', 'meaning 'form, shape, style,' depending on the context. This demonstrates that the same pronunciation with different tones can convey different meanings. The presence of polyphonic characters is one of the primary reasons for the emergence of pronunciation variants (异读词 Yìdúcí) (冉, 启斌 & 杨, 2018)

Pronunciation variants are extraordinary pronunciation phenomena, referring to a word (or morpheme) that usually has two or more different pronunciations when expressing the same meaning. In addition, pronunciation variants also refer to words with several different pronunciations in habit (邓, 2022). Li and Zheng divide pronunciation variants into four types: Wenbai Pronunciation Variants, Dialect Pronunciation Variants, Surname and Place Name Pronunciation Variants, and Mispronunciation. On the one hand, different pronunciations make teaching and learning the Chinese Language difficult. On the other hand, it also has a certain degree of negative impact on the use of standardized Chinese Language and foreigners learning the language (李 & 郑, 2021).

It also happens in Indonesia, where the development of Chinese Language learners has increased quite rapidly, even in small cities like Kisaran. The researchers chose the youths of Kisaran as the subject of the study because the Chinese community in Kisaran uses the Chinese Language a lot to communicate with family and friends in everyday communication besides the vernacular language. They use various learning media sources. Apart from schools/universities, parents, or grandparents, the youths are a generation that is more active as internet and gadget users because these two things also influence the Chinese Language learning process. Most of the younger generation in Kisaran also learn Chinese Language through gadgets and social media such as TikTok, Youtube, Instagram, online dictionaries, and other social media. So, there is a difference in pronunciation between what they use at home and what they learn from social media or even at school/courses.

One of the words given is the word or character 模. The word 模 in the dictionary has two pronunciations: "mú" and "mó". It is pronounced as "mó" when it means "standard, imitate, and model." It is pronounced as "mú" when it means "form, appearance, shape, style." And in the dictionary, the character 模板 is pronounced as "múbǎn," which means a board used to form concrete, usually made of bamboo or steel. However, the Weibo post shows that many people tend to pronounce it as "móbǎn." Based on the researchers' initial observations of three youths people in Kisaran City with 60 words given, it showed that the three respondents pronounced the character 模板 as "móbǎn" (人民日报, 2023)

The data above shows that the difference in pronouncing methods will be seen in pinyin. Pinyin, or the Romanization system phonetic notation or transliteration system, is used to write and read Chinese Language using the Latin alphabet, which is one part of Chinese Language pronunciation. Therefore, the theory of phonology, which is a study that places language sounds as the object of study, becomes the theoretical basis of this study. What are considered to be language sounds are the sounds produced by the human speech organs or articulators that indicate a meaning (Xing, 2007: 44). The function and condition of language sounds, specifically in the sound system of the language concerned, in this case, Chinese Language, also becomes the basis for phonological studies.

Therefore, this study was conducted based on the interrelated phenomena above to determine how much variation in Chinese vocabulary pronunciation is in the youths of Kisaran City and what factors underlie it because it can impact the use of the standard Chinese Language, one of which is in the Chinese language proficiency test (HSK). This is also supported by the statement, "Phonological learning in the Chinese language is the basis for teaching Chinese Language as a foreign language." (Sukarto et al., 2019).

The Modern Chinese Dictionary is a modern language dictionary compiled after the founding of New China. Authoritative dictionaries such as the Xinhua Dictionary, represent the highest achievement in the compilation of contemporary language dictionaries in China and have played an important role in popularizing the national common language and promoting the standardization of language and writing (邓, 2022).

Moreover, (宋, 2021) states that a review of the pronunciation of Chinese variant words plays an essential role in the standardization and promotion of the Chinese Language. The Modern Chinese Dictionary is recognized as extraordinarily authoritative regarding Chinese phonetic standards. The results of the review of the pronunciation of Chinese word variants are reflected entirely and comprehensively in the dictionary, especially the first edition (1978).

2. Method

The research method used in this study is qualitative research. The researchers provided a questionnaire to obtain information from respondents regarding personal data (age, duration of learning the Chinese Language, status, HSK level, and sources of learning the Chinese Language). The researchers used 20 respondents from the youths of Kisaran City aged 15-35 years who came from high school students, college students, and workers.

In this study, sample determination was carried out using purposive sampling techniques, or, in Creswell's terms (Robot & Kalangi, n.d.), purposefully select. In purposive sampling techniques, researchers choose places, participants, and even materials that can help them understand the problem and phenomenon being studied, along with answers and explanations. The respondent selection process was meticulously designed to ensure the validity and reliability of the research. The more detailed respondent criteria are:

1. The youths of Kisaran City aged 15 to 35 years.
2. Minimum of 3 years of learning Chinese Language (calculation based on HSK books, because some of the vocabularies studied is in HSK books 6A and 6B).
3. Often use the Chinese Language in the surrounding environment.

The researchers employed a comprehensive data collection process to ensure the study was thorough (Rofiah et al., n.d.). We gave 60 words to read and recorded the pronunciation spoken by the youths of Kisaran City. The primary data was sourced from references to 60 vocabularies based on the Pronunciation Variation Post from Weibo. Data collection or recording results were carried out in July - August 2024. The data obtained was classified into two types, namely, according to the standards of the seventh edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary and those that did not comply with the standards of the Chinese dictionary. To obtain this classification, the researchers used the PRAAT application. PRAAT allows you to record a sound with your microphone or any other audio input device, or to read a sound from a sound file on disk. You will then be able to have a look 'inside' this sound (Boersma et al., 2007). The researchers also used the help of native speakers' pronunciation recordings, which were then compared with the results of the respondents' recordings so that the differences in word pronunciation and tone would be seen. The data percentage was presented using the Bungin calculation system (Rofiah et al., n.d.). The data was analyzed using the seventh edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary (中国社会科学院语言研究所词典编辑室, 2016) as a reference.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Based on 60 vocabularies and 20 respondents, 1200 vocabularies were obtained. The data results show that of the 60 vocabularies studied, the majority were pronounced not according to the dictionary, and there were words that all respondents did not pronounce according to the dictionary pronunciation, such as the words 模板, 鞭笞, 剽悍, 潜力, 拘泥, 拖累, 繁文缛节, and 数见不鲜. However, there are also words that more respondents pronounced according to the dictionary pronunciation, such as the words 脊梁, 嘈杂, 豆豉, 粗犷, 慰藉, 针灸, 倏忽, 箴言, 角斗场, 吹毛求疵, 不容置喙, 泾渭分明, 苦心孤诣 as shown in the following table.

Tabel 1. Respondents' Pronunciation Result (1-10)

Words	脊梁	模板	龋牙	嘈杂	鞭笞	掣肘	豆豉	包扎	堤岸	胴体
True	18	0	3	16	0	9	11	7	8	2
False	2	20	17	4	20	11	9	13	12	18

Tabel 2. Respondents' Pronunciation Result (11-20)

Words	脊梁	模板	龋牙	嘈杂	鞭笞	掣肘	豆豉	包扎	堤岸	胴体
True	18	0	3	16	0	9	11	7	8	2
False	2	20	17	4	20	11	9	13	12	18

Tabel 3. Respondents' Pronunciation Result (21-30)

Words	脊梁	模板	龋牙	嘈杂	鞭笞	掣肘	豆豉	包扎	堤岸	胴体
True	18	0	3	16	0	9	11	7	8	2
False	2	20	17	4	20	11	9	13	12	18

Tabel 4. Respondents' Pronunciation Result (31-40)

Words	脊梁	模板	龋牙	嘈杂	鞭笞	掣肘	豆豉	包扎	堤岸	胴体
True	18	0	3	16	0	9	11	7	8	2
False	2	20	17	4	20	11	9	13	12	18

Tabel 5. Respondents' Pronunciation Result (41-50)

Words	脊梁	模板	龅牙	嘈杂	鞭笞	掣肘	豆豉	包扎	堤岸	胴体
True	18	0	3	16	0	9	11	7	8	2
False	2	20	17	4	20	11	9	13	12	18

Tabel 6. Respondents' Pronunciation Result (51-60)

Words	脊梁	模板	龅牙	嘈杂	鞭笞	掣肘	豆豉	包扎	堤岸	胴体
True	18	0	3	16	0	9	11	7	8	2
False	2	20	17	4	20	11	9	13	12	18

From the table above, it can be seen that respondents tend to pronounce words that do not match the pronunciation in the dictionary. From the table above, it can also be seen that out of 60 vocabularies studied, there are 13 vocabularies that the majority of respondents pronounced according to the pronunciation in the dictionary and 45 vocabularies that the majority of respondents did not pronounce according to the dictionary. There are two words where 10 respondents pronounced it according to the dictionary, and 10 respondents did not pronounce it according to the dictionary. The following is the percentage of respondents who pronounced it according to the dictionary and not according to the dictionary.

$$\text{Percentage according to dictionary} = \frac{\text{correct}}{\text{total}} \times 100\% = \frac{396}{1200} \times 100\% = 33\%$$

$$\text{Percentage not according to dictionary} = \frac{\text{correct}}{\text{total}} \times 100\% = \frac{804}{1200} \times 100\% = 67\%$$

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. The Variations of Respondents Pronunciation

Due to page limitations, the researchers can only display 10 examples of data analysis results as representatives. The data analysis can be seen in the following example.

1. 脊梁 (Jiliáng)

The character "脊梁" is pronounced "jiliáng," which means "back, spine, a metaphor for someone who acts as the backbone of a country, nation or group." The character 脊 only has one pronunciation: "ji," which means "the middle bone in the back of humans and animals, backbone; part of an object shaped like a spine."

Both Weibo posts and the data obtained show that many respondents tend to pronounce it as "jiliáng." Based on the data obtained from 20 respondents with 60 vocabularies provided by the researchers, it shows that 18 respondents pronounced the character 脊梁 as "jiliáng" and two respondents pronounced it as "jǐliáng." The majority of these pronunciation variations occur due to the influence of learning sources from teachers or instructors, such as at schools or tutoring centers.

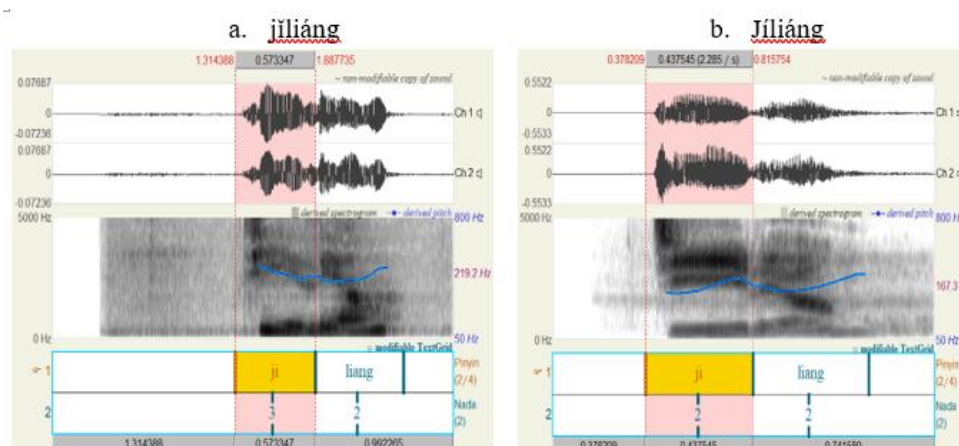


Figure 1. Spectrogram of native speaker and respondents pronouncing (a) "jiliáng"(according to the dictionary) and (b) "jǐliáng"

2. 模板 (Múbǎn)

The character 模板 is pronounced as "múbǎn," which means "a board used to form concrete, usually made of bamboo or steel." The character 模 in the dictionary has two pronunciations: "mú" and "mó." It is pronounced as "mó" when it means "standard, imitate, exemplify, model, and example." It is pronounced as "mú" when it means "form, appearance, style." The data shows that 20 respondents indicated the same thing as in the Weibo post, pronounced the character 模板 as "móbǎn," which is not according to the dictionary. The majority of these pronunciation variations occur due to the respondents' lack of knowledge of the character 模, which is a polyphonic character. In addition, the fact that the character 模 has a basic component 莫 which is pronounced as "mò" can also influence the Chinese Language learners.

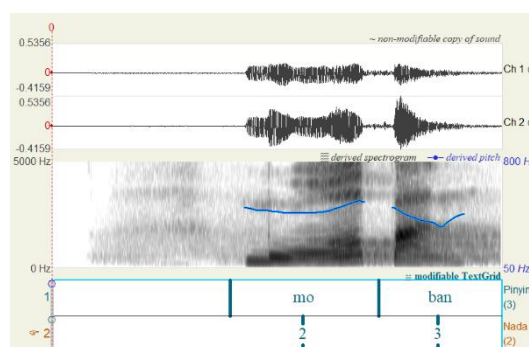


Figure 2. Spectrogram of respondents pronouncing "móbǎn"

3. 龅牙 (Bāoyá)

The Weibo post shows that many people tend to pronounce the character 龅牙 as "bàoyá." The character 龅牙 is pronounced as "bāoyá," which means "teeth protruding from the lips." The character 龅 in the dictionary only has one pronunciation: "bāo." However, the data obtained shows that only three respondents pronounced the character 龅牙 as "bāoyá" (according to the dictionary), and 17 respondents tended to pronounce it as "bàoyá." The same thing happened with the Weibo post. This pronunciation variation occurs due to the influence of learning sources, such as Chinese films or dramas, which tend to pronounce "龅牙" as "bàoyá", causing most respondents to pronounce it as "bàoyá".

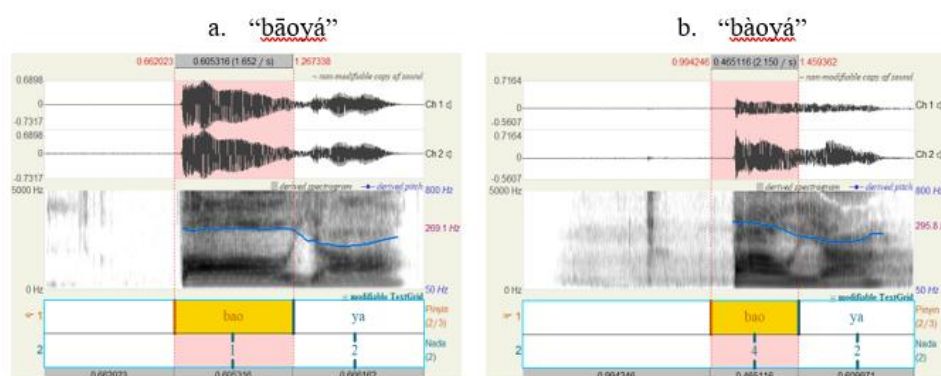


Figure 3. Spectrogram of native speaker and respondents pronouncing (a) "bāoyá" (according to the dictionary) and (b) "bàoyá"

4. 嘈杂 (Cáozá)

The character 嘈杂 "cáozá" means "noisy, rowdy (sound)." The character 嘈 in the dictionary only has one pronunciation, which is "cáo," which means "chaotic (sound)." The data shows that the majority of respondents pronounced it according to the dictionary, where 16 respondents pronounced the character 嘈杂 as "cáozá," and four respondents pronounced it as "cāozá." However, the Weibo post shows that many people tend to pronounce it as "cāozá." This variation in pronunciation occurs due to the influence of learning sources, such as Chinese films or dramas, which tend to pronounce "嘈杂" as "cáozá."

5. 鞭答 (Biānchī)

The character 鞭答 "biānchī" means "beat with a whip or board." The character 答 in the dictionary only has one pronunciation: "chī," which means "beat with a whip, stick or bamboo board." However, the Weibo post shows that most people tend to pronounce it as "biānchì." Based on the data obtained, all respondents also pronounced it the same thing as in the Weibo post, "biānchì." This

pronunciation variation occurs due to the influence of learning sources, such as Chinese films or dramas, which tend to pronounce “鞭答” as “biānchì.”

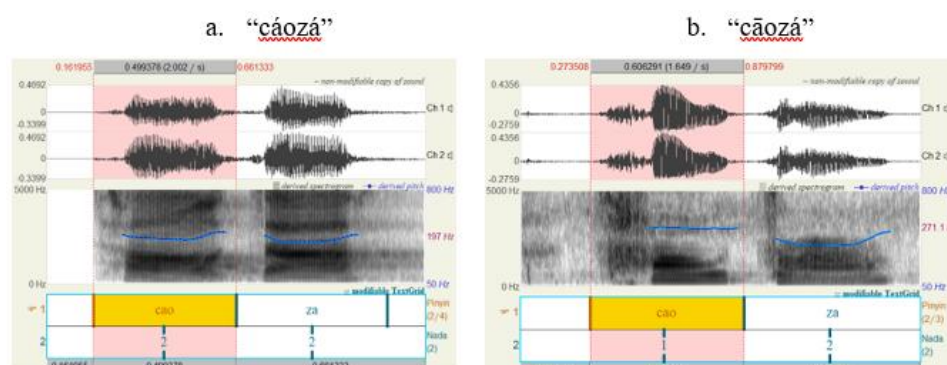


Figure 4. Spectrogram of native speaker and respondents pronouncing (a) “cáozá” (according to the dictionary) and (b) “cāozá”

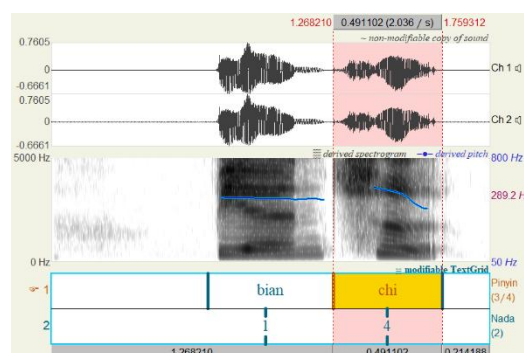


Figure 5. Spectrogram of respondents pronouncing biānchì”

6. 掣肘 (Chèzhǒu)

The character 掣肘 is pronounced “chèzhǒu,” which means “holding an arm to prevent someone from doing something.” The character 掣 in the dictionary only has one pronunciation: “chè,” which means “to pull, to pluck, draw; to pass quickly.”

However, the Weibo post shows that many people tend to pronounce it as “zhìzhǒu.” The data also shows that nine respondents pronounced it as “chèzhǒu,” and the majority of respondents pronounced it not according to the dictionary, where 11 respondents pronounced it as “zhìzhǒu.” This pronunciation variation occurs due to the presence of the radical “制” in the upper component of the character “掣” which causes some respondents to pronounce “掣肘” as “zhìzhǒu.”

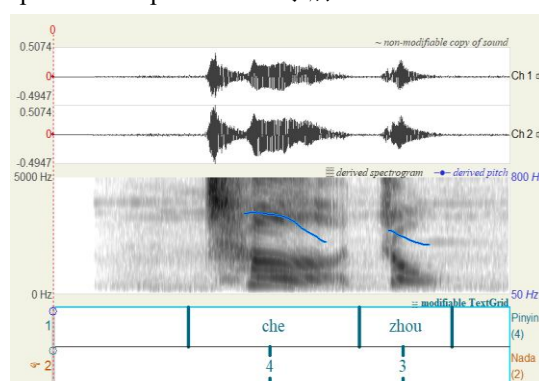


Figure 6. Spectrogram of native speaker and respondents pronouncing chèzhǒu

7. 豆豉 (Dòuchǐ)

The character 豉 in the dictionary only has one pronunciation: “chǐ.” The character 豆豉 is pronounced as “dòuchǐ,” which means “food; soaked, steamed or cooked soybeans or black beans, then fermented.” Based on the data obtained, 11 respondents pronounce the character 豆豉 as “dòuchǐ” and nine respondents as “dòugǔ” because the character in the word 豉 “chǐ” is very similar to the character 鼓 gǔ which means “drum.”

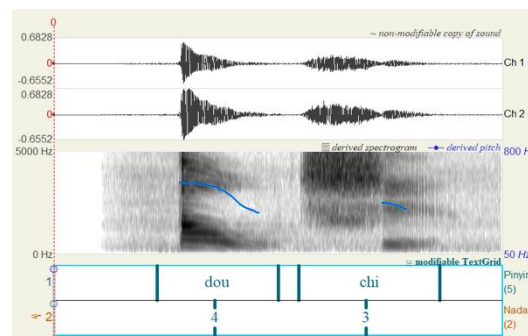


Figure 7. Spectrogram of native speaker and respondents pronouncing dòuchǐ

8. 包扎 (Bāozā)

The character 扎 has three pronunciations in the dictionary, namely "zā," "zhā," and "zhá". It is pronounced "zā" when it means "to tie, bundle, wrap." It is pronounced "zhā" when it means "to stab, enter (into), accommodation." And it is pronounced "zhá" to indicate the surname or can be combined with the word 挣扎 "zhēngzhá". Meanwhile, in the dictionary, the character 包扎 is pronounced "bāozā," which means "wrap and tie." Based on the data obtained, it shows that there are seven respondents who pronounce the character 包扎 as "bāozā," and 13 respondents pronounce it "bāozhā." The Weibo post also shows that many people tend to pronounce it "bāozhā." The closeness of the pronunciation method and the many forms of pronunciation (polyphonic) can be the reason for the character's pronunciation variation.

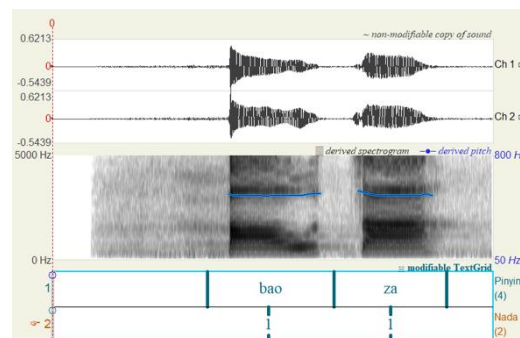


Figure 8. Spectrogram of native speaker and respondents pronouncing bāozā (according to the dictionary)

9. 堤岸 (Dī'àn)

The character 堤 in the dictionary has only one pronunciation: "dī," which means "a watertight building along a river, lake or coastal area mostly made of earth and stone." The character 堤岸 is pronounced "dī'àn," which means "embankment". Based on data obtained from 20 respondents with 60 vocabularies provided by the researchers, the results showed that eight respondents pronounced the character 堤岸 as "dī'àn" and 12 respondents pronounced it as "tí'àn." This variation can occur because of the similarity of the spelling of the word 堤 with 提tí. The difference in the right component or radical is what distinguishes the characters. The Weibo post also shows that many people tend to pronounce it as "tí'àn."

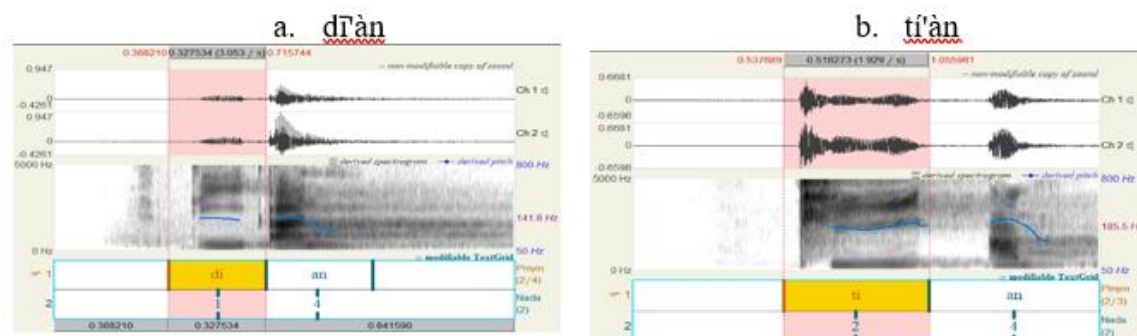


Figure 9. Spectrogram of native speaker and respondents pronouncing (a) dī'àn (according to the dictionary) and (b) tí'àn

10. 胴体 (Dòngtǐ)

The character 胴 in the dictionary has only one pronunciation: "dòng," which means "torso, large intestine." The character 胴体 is pronounced "dòngtǐ," which means "torso, referring to the human body." Two respondents pronounced the character 胴体 as "dòngtǐ" and 18 respondents pronounced it as "tóngtǐ." It is because in the word 胴 there is a right component that comes from a frequently used root word, the word or component 同 tóng, which refers to the meaning of "same, similar." Based on Weibo posts, the same thing also happens in Chinese society, who tend to pronounce it as "tóngtǐ."

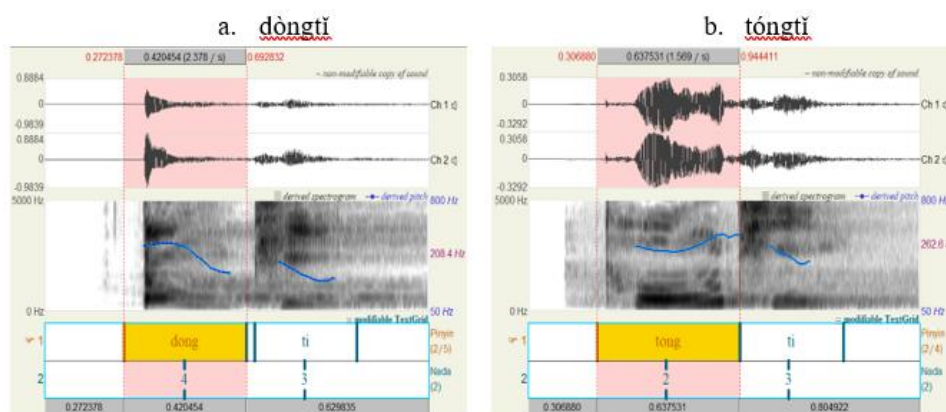


Figure 10. Spectrogram of native speaker and respondents pronouncing (a) dòngtǐ (according to the dictionary) and (b) tóngtǐ

3.2.2. Factors of the Kisaran City Youths Using Vocabulary Pronunciation Not According to the Dictionary

The researchers found the factors that cause the young generation of Kisaran City to use pronunciation of vocabulary that is not by the dictionary as follows:

1. Influence of Learning Sources

There are four types of pronunciation variants; according to Li and Zheng (2021), the kind of pronunciation variant found in this study is mispronunciation (讹读 é dú). Learning sources have a significant influence on respondents' pronunciation. From the questionnaire results, 20 respondents chose watching movies or dramas as the most influential learning source, followed by school, home, and social media. Li and Zheng argue that mispronunciation from films and social media will worsen the situation of mispronunciation (李 & 郑, 2021).

The audio results from the respondents revealed a significant influence of watching on vocabulary pronunciation. Those who are used to pronouncing vocabulary that does not follow the dictionary are primarily influenced by this. The diversity of tribes and dialects, as depicted in Chinese films or dramas, affected the mastery of vocabulary pronunciation for Chinese Language learners. This unique aspect of the study highlights the richness of Chinese regional languages and their challenges for foreign Chinese Language learners.

2. Lack of Knowledge of Polyphonic Characters

Yang Hua's (冉, 启斌 & 杨, 2018) research highlighted the difference in intensity of use between different polyphonic character sounds as a key factor causing mispronunciation. The lack of knowledge of Chinese characters with more than one pronunciation significantly contributed to mispronunciation. For instance, in the word 龟裂 (jūnliè), the character "龟" is polyphonic, and what the respondents knew was "龟" in the word "乌龟 wūguī" which means turtle. This finding underscores the need for a deeper understanding of polyphonic characters to improve pronunciation.

3. Using Radicals to Guess the Pronunciation of Vocabulary

When respondents encounter unknown vocabulary, some guess the language's pronunciation by looking at the hanzi radical (Chinese characters). For example, in the word 胴体 (dòngtǐ), most respondents chose the pronunciation "tóngtǐ" because the radical "同" in the character "胴" is usually pronounced as "tóng". Also, in the word 喟叹 (kuìtàn), most respondents chose "wèitàn" because the radical "胃" in the character "喟" is usually pronounced as "wèi".

From the questionnaire results, eight respondents looked at the radical to guess the pronunciation when encountering new vocabulary. According to Wan (李 & 郑, 2021), when people discover new characters, they usually pronounce the character by looking at the radical component or the pronunciation of similar characters they know. It also happens to the young generation of Kisaran City, such as in the word 喟叹 (kuìtàn).

4. The similarity of Han Characters (Hanzi)

Some respondents choose specific vocabulary pronunciation because one of the characters is similar to another, so they pronounce it with the pronunciation of the character they are more familiar with. For example, in the word 豆豉 (dòuchǐ), some respondents pronounced it as "dòugǔ" because of the similarity of the character "豉 (chǐ)" with the character "鼓 (gǔ)," so they

thought the character "豉 (chǐ)" was "鼓 (gǔ)." Based on the study results, some respondents knew several pronunciations of one character, causing them to be confused about using the correct pronunciation when pronouncing the word.

4. Conclusion

The researchers conclude that the identified factors contributing to pronunciation variations, which do not align with the standard Chinese dictionary, are prevalent among the youths in Kisaran City. While the Chinese government has established a standard pronunciation, the diversity of ethnicities and dialects is a foundation for these variations. While these variations are considered normal in everyday communication, they also have implications for formal or standardized Chinese Language, such as official language tests like HSK and other official and formal activities or conditions.

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