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Hypercorrection in Taiwan Mandarin

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In spite of a widening acceptance of attenuated retroflexed initials (*zh-*, *ch-* *sh-*) in Taiwan Mandarin today, there is a parallel movement in seemingly the opposite direction: a growing use of the retroflexed initials in certain contexts. A conflict between the two trends often surfaces in the form of hypercorrection, that is, incorrect substitution of the retroflexed initials for the corresponding dental initials (*z-*, *c-*, *s-*). Labov (1973) observed a trend toward a similar kind of phonetic hypercorrection in New York City English, mainly among the upwardly-aspiring lower middle class. Though this group is also especially susceptible to the use of hypercorrect forms in Taiwan, people in all walks of life with all levels of education have been observed to use hypercorrect forms. This demonstrates, first, that the textbook forms of the retroflexed vs. dental initials are learned imperfectly by a wide spectrum of speakers of Taiwan Mandarin; second, that the retroflexed initials retain a certain cachet in marking speech as more prestigious and authoritative; and third, that retroflexion, hypercorrect or otherwise, has for many people taken on the function of simply marking formal discourse, in addition to its use for disambiguation, highlighting, and stylistic effect.

Background

It has been widely observed that the Mandarin spoken in areas where southern Chinese dialects dominate, including Taiwan and Singapore, differs in some features from the Mandarin spoken in Beijing (Chen 1999:41–49). One of the most notable differences is a merging of the retroflex series of the consonant initials [ʈʂ], [ʈʂ^h], [ʂ], represented as *zh-*, *ch-*, *sh-* in Pinyin, into the dental/apical series [tʃ], [tʃ^h], [ʃ], or *z-*, *c-*, *s-* in Pinyin. This is usually attributed to the lack of retroflex initials in the dominant local dialects, mainly Southern Min (and to a lesser extent, Hakka) in the cases of both Taiwan and Singapore. According to Zhu (1998:56), however, this also occurs in many northern dialect areas such as China's northeast (Dongbei), Tianjin, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Henan, Shandong — even Beijing. And as Chen (1991) points out, this kind of phonological merging is nothing new; it goes back at least to Middle Chinese.

Wu (2003:3) notes that officials sent to Taiwan from the mainland in the early years after retrocession in 1945 were mainly from China's heartland; they looked down on the "riffraff" from Beijing (see also Chen 1999:21), and did not use or care to use retroflexed initials, or to distinguish $-[n]$ and $-[ŋ]$ ($-n$ and $-ng$) properly, in their own speech. This set the pattern for the version of Mandarin that was popularized in Taiwan, "Taiwan Mandarin" (TM) 台灣國語 *Tai²wan¹ guo²yu³*, also referred to as "common Mandarin", though strictly speaking this latter term is not restricted to Taiwan Mandarin. School textbooks, however, followed Beijing standards.

The difference between the Mandarin presented in Taiwan textbooks and everyday speech becomes readily apparent soon after children begin school. In order to transcribe character pronunciations in Mandarin Phonetic Symbols (注音符號 *zhu⁴yin¹fu²hao⁴*), pupils must often memorize by rote which characters begin with a retroflex $zh-$, $ch-$ or $sh-$, since many of them cannot distinguish these from the $z-$, $c-$, $s-$ series, based on their own speech. The same is true of other sounds, such as final $-n$ and $-ng$ endings, which they also in part "confuse". Yet somehow it is the retroflexed initials that are most strongly associated with Beijing-based Mandarin. The retroflexed initials have come to be a canonical index or, as Labov (1972:292–3) calls it, a "stereotype" feature of "standard", "correctly" pronounced Mandarin, as opposed to "Taiwan Mandarin".

In this paper, the Beijing-based Mandarin taught in Taiwan schools will be referred to as "textbook Mandarin" or "standard Mandarin". It is Taiwan's "national language", corresponding to the *Putonghua* 普通話 *pu³tong¹hua⁴* promoted on the Chinese mainland. Textbook Mandarin is still the standard for most Mandarin-language media broadcasting in Taiwan. Beyond broadcasters and a minority of people who have rather idiosyncratically adopted textbook pronunciations in their own everyday speech, plus a few natives of Beijing and other mainlanders, however, textbook Mandarin exists mainly as an **idealized language** that is studied and exists in one's consciousness, but is seldom consistently practiced. One side-effect of the current education standards is a feeling of insecurity and even inferiority about one's own natural speech.

Times are of course changing, politically and socially. Other Han dialects and aborigine languages of Taiwan, once forbidden in schools, are now becoming elective or even required subjects. And people seem to be becoming more comfortable with the way they speak Mandarin, just as it is. Radio programs geared toward a younger audience are often hosted in Taiwan Mandarin rather than "broadcast-ese", which has the effect of narrowing the distance between the DJ and his or her listeners. Taiwan Mandarin is beginning — although it may be a while before school textbooks get around to saying it — to replace textbook Mandarin as the *de facto* standard language of Taiwan in more and more contexts. As Kubler

(1985b:174) points out, a monolingual speaker cannot regularly be wrong when speaking his native language.

Definition of hypercorrection and data collection

In spite of this increasing comfort with Taiwan Mandarin just as it is, some people in some situations still aspire to the Beijing standard; yet they may not be familiar enough with the forms of Beijing or textbook Mandarin to produce them correctly and consistently.

Hypercorrection is defined as the use of linguistic forms that exist in the language but that are applied in a context where they do not belong. Hypercorrect speech forms are chosen based on their **association with a prestige group** and not for their inherent superiority. Montgomery (1986:66) observes that “it is social evaluation solely that confers prestige or stigma upon certain patterns of pronunciation” and that “the prestige form of one language area can turn out to be stigmatized in another.” An English example of this is absence of postvocalic *r*'s: this feature is prestigious in standard British English (RP), but stigmatized in New York City speech. The most common form of hypercorrection in Taiwan Mandarin is the substitution of a retroflex initial, *zh-*, *ch-* or *sh-*, where a dental, *z-*, *c-* or *s-*, is called for, e.g. saying *shi*⁴ instead of *si*⁴ for 四 ‘four’, while also perhaps saying *si*² for *shi*² 十 ‘ten’.

Not everybody uses hypercorrect forms, and those who do use them do not generally use them all the time. In fact, **inconsistency** is perhaps one of the chief defining characteristics of hypercorrection. We are studying not a constant feature of Taiwan Mandarin, but a **variable** one. Labov (1973:122) notes that “This type of variant structure thus becomes a new type of invariant at a more refined level of observation”.

Several researchers (e.g. Lin 1983, Wu 1984, Kubler 1985, Li 1995, Zhu 1998) have mentioned in passing the phenomenon of hypercorrection in Taiwan Mandarin, and given a few examples of it, though no specialized study of it seems to have been done so far.

The data collected for this paper come largely from personal experience — from conversations I have had with people or overheard on the street, from lectures and conferences I have attended, and from TV and radio broadcasts. Some were reported to me by sources I judged to be reliable, such as family members, colleagues and students. This is not the kind of data that can be elicited on demand or via interview from an informant, or in a laboratory situation; it is best collected when it occurs spontaneously, with the other person unaware that their speech is receiving any special attention (Labov 1998:9–10). I did not record any

conversations, out of ethical considerations. But I often took extensive notes on forms I heard, recording the type of person who said them, in what context, and in this way collected data from a broad range of people in different situations. The main goal of this study is to establish what kind of person in what kind of role and situation with what kind of interlocutor is likely to produce hypercorrect forms, and not to collect large quantities of examples, or to analyze the precise phonetic value of each hypercorrect form; these are only incidental to the subject at hand. Furthermore, I have refrained from including large portions of the data in this paper in order to protect the privacy of the speakers. So while the data may seem anecdotal, I believe that this collection method satisfies the requirements of authenticity, reliability and ethics, and suits the purposes of the subject under examination. In fact, I believe it is the **only** reliable method to collect valid and truly representative data of this type.

The status of retroflexed initials in Taiwan Mandarin

Retroflexed initials have a fairly broad range of realization in Taiwan Mandarin. The degree of tongue retraction may vary considerably (as it does in Beijing Mandarin too, though a different range is covered), from highly retracted, through the palato-aveolar area [ʧ], [ʧʰ], [ʃ], all the way to dentals that are indistinguishable from the dental/apical *z-* [t̪s̪], *c-* [t̪s̪ʰ], *s-* [s̪] series. Ladefoged & Maddieson (1996:152–156) point out that what are widely called “retroflexes” in standard Chinese do not involve contact or approximation between the lower surface of the tongue tip and the palate, and are thus technically not retroflexes at all, but “laminal (flat) post-alveolar sibilants”. We continue to follow convention and refer to these sounds as “retroflex” out of convenience. In fact, however, the articulatory and acoustic details are not extremely relevant in the overall picture. What matters more is whether the retroflex and dental series are clearly **distinguished** through some sort of tongue retraction or not.

While language must be studied as it is actually spoken, it must also be analyzed and understood in terms of its many **potentials**, or underlying forms, which for many varied reasons appear on the surface in an array of concrete realizations. The English voiced stops /b/, /d/, /g/ are often devoiced when word-initial, but the voiced versions are one possible set of allophones and exist as potential forms. In a similar way, the retroflexed initials in Mandarin exist more as a potential than as a consistent reality of actual speech.

The set of phonetic options associated with the retroflex series offers a certain amount of flexibility of pronunciation, and a speaker may choose one over another depending on the situation. They do not however occur in free allophonic

variation. As Chambers & Trudgill (1998:49–50) point out, free variation... “is usually not ‘free’ at all, but is constrained by social and/or linguistic factors.”

We will summarize here Rau and Li’s (1994) findings regarding actual use of retroflexing in Taiwan Mandarin:

1. **Phonological conditioning:** (a) Retroflexing is somewhat more common when the following vowel is /o/ or /u/, e.g. 豬 *zhu*¹ ‘pig’ 瘦 *shou*⁴ ‘thin’, perhaps because the back round vowels cause anticipatory tongue retraction; and (b) retroflexed initials are more often realized as dentals if the syllable immediately preceding begins with an dental initial, e.g. 資助 *zi*¹*zhu*(*zu*)⁴ ‘financial assistance’ (vs. 幫助 *bang*¹*zhu*⁴ ‘help’), due to perseverative assimilation;
2. **Speech style or purpose:** Retroflexing is most frequent in formal and self-conscious styles of speech, e.g. highest in reading minimal pairs (though this often elicits more mistakes than reading in context or free speaking), next in phrase reading, next in passage reading, and least frequent in casual speech; phonological distinctions are most blurred in casual speech, in which the intermediate forms [tʃ], [tʃ^h], [ʃ] are the most common in the speech of both males and females of all educational levels;
3. **Sex:** Females retroflex more (though they overestimate how much they retroflex) than males in situations perceived as more formal, i.e. females manifest more style shifting, but there is little or no difference between the speech of males and females in casual conversation; males tend to shift more to the stigmatized dental forms in all styles but casual conversation, in which the intermediate forms predominate for both sexes, though females used a slightly higher percentage of dental initials in casual speech, which Rau calls “a puzzle”;
4. **Age:** The oldest speakers (41–55 years) surveyed in this study use the lowest percentage of retroflexes and the highest of dental initials, and they also used the intermediate variants more often than the other groups in the careful style, while the second oldest speakers (25–40) have the highest occurrence of retroflexes and lowest of dentals in the careful style; the youngest group is most likely to use dental variants in the casual style, the oldest group is most likely to use dentals in the formal style;
5. **Educational level:** Speakers with a higher level of education retroflex with higher frequency and use fewer dentals than those with lower levels of education; frequency of use of the intermediate forms in the casual style is about equal for all educational levels;
6. **Home language use:** Speakers whose home language is Mandarin use more retroflexed forms than speakers of other dialects; native speakers of Southern Min use more dental initial forms; both groups use the intermediate forms in casual speech.

Labov (1973:130ff) notes that “the New York speaker perceives his own phonic **intention** [emphasis added], rather than the actual sounds he produces...” One university student, who felt very confident that she retroflexed consistently in the right places, was surprised when listening to herself on tape that her “retroflexing” was hardly audible at all. Speakers often do not speak as they **believe** they speak; they mistake intentions and impressions with actual performance.

If a speaker at some level of consciousness has perceived the relatively fluid borders of the retroflex series of initials, this perhaps “primes” him or her for doing the same with the dental series, which does not have such a large range to work with, and this may result in hypercorrect pronunciations.

Retroflexed initials: Options and functions

A Mandarin speaker must take a stand regarding how to deal with retroflexed initials. One choice is to simply not retroflex at all, or to use intermediate [tʃ], [tʰ], [ʃ] initials. This is the default setting of Taiwan Mandarin; it sounds natural and unaffected.

Another option is to learn the textbook pronunciations, or pick them up from a parent or other native “retroflexer”, and use them consistently in conversation. Though this is an acceptable alternative, it will tend to draw considerable attention, both positive and negative, because it is not the norm for Taiwan; some people may find it a bit off-putting, affected, and show-offy. Sometimes finding the right level of “correctness” to match listener expectations and a desired comfort level can be the result of explicit negotiation. One university student told of a professor who gave her lectures in carefully retroflexed Mandarin. When the students complained to her that it made them uncomfortable, she changed to “plain” unretroflexed Taiwan Mandarin, and this solved the problem. In another example, a woman calling into a pro-DPP radio program **apologized** for her retroflexed speech, which she said she grew up with and “couldn’t help”. However, a fair number of people, a minority to be sure, do retroflex consistently, so it is not so unusual, and it tends to be something one gets used to after getting to know such a person better.

A third option is to retroflex when the occasion seems to call for it. Again, some people may do this on demand fairly consistently, and this is not hypercorrection; it is simply adoption of a **formal register** of speech. This is also quite common in Taiwan.

Retroflexing may on some occasions also be used to **disambiguate homophones** or near homophones. A similar situation is found in US English when, for example, one uses an aspirated [tʰ] rather than the usual tap [ɾ] distinguish *latter* from *ladder*. In Taiwan Mandarin retroflexing might be used to distinguish, for

example, 層 *ceng*² and 成 *cheng*², which can occur in similar contexts, like 一層 *yi*¹⁽⁴⁾*ceng*² ‘one layer’ and 一成 *yi*¹⁽⁴⁾*cheng*² ‘one tenth’.

Retroflexing may also be used as a kind of “oral boldface”. A student told of a professor who was discussing ‘the mentally handicapped’. When he wished to stress his main theme, he would say *zhi*⁴*zhang*⁴ 智障; but when the word occurred in flowing discourse without special focus he reverted to *zi*⁴*zang*⁴, his more accustomed and “ordinary” pronunciation.

Another speaker, who was giving a talk to a small group, did not retroflex throughout most of the presentation, but in one portion emphasized the number ‘thirty’; it came out as *shan*¹*shi*², but she quickly corrected it to *san*¹*shi*². On another occasion the same thing happened with 實在 *shi*²*zai*⁴, which came out *shi*²*zhai*⁴ ‘solid’. This was not hypercorrection, but use of the “boldface” function of retroflexes, plus a small slip of the tongue in a non-retroflexed word as the speaker prepared or retained her tongue position to highlight the second syllable or first, respectively, with retroflexing. This kind of anticipatory and perseverative assimilation of initials close to retroflexed initials is fairly frequent in Taiwan Mandarin, and may sometimes also be a factor in hypercorrection.

Yet another possibility when faced with making a choice between retroflexing or not is inconsistent and **misplaced retroflexing**, which usually occurs in response to a situation that seems to call for some kind of formality. This is the specific situation we are dealing with in this study. This falls into the category of hypercorrection, because the retroflexing rule is overgeneralized to contexts where it is incorrect by any standard. Indiscriminate retroflexing is the ordinary Taiwan Mandarin speaker’s shortcut to prestigious textbook Mandarin.

The sources of hypercorrect forms

Hypercorrection is **conscious behavior**. It is not something one does when speaking freely and unguardedly. Retroflexing for many speakers of TM is like putting on one’s “Sunday best”, clothes one does not wear very often unless the occasion calls for it, ones that look nice but are stiff and not terribly comfortable, and that are sometimes a bit overdone.

Hypercorrect forms develop from forms that have been **prescriptively taught** in school. This kind of prescriptivistic teaching produces mental “echoes” that lead to uncertainty, and in some cases, the production of hypercorrect forms, just as frequent correction of forms like *Me and Jim are going* can lead to hypercorrect usages such as *between you and I* in English.

Mandarin speakers may produce a “prestigious” hypercorrect retroflex initial while leaving an “incorrect” (but common in Taiwan) nasal final (Li 1992; Yueh

1992:115). Kubler (1985b:159) gives the example of *chen²jin¹* for *ceng²jing¹* 曾經 ‘before, previously, ever’. The [t_s^h]- initial is hypercorrected to [t_s^h]-, but the final velar [-ŋ] is incorrectly articulated as an alveolar [-n]. Yueh (1992:113) notes that the phenomenon of hypercorrection does also occur in the case of [-ŋ]/[-n], with some television or radio announcers, for example, hypercorrecting mainly toward the [-n] variant. She found however little correlation between a formal style of speech and more “accurate” differentiation in production of the [-ŋ] and [-n] endings (104–5). In fact, it would seem that many people are not even aware of the difference between the two nasal syllable endings. This is one outcome of students being conscientiously made aware of the one feature, but “nagged” less about the other.

Hypercorrection and accommodation

Hypercorrection is conscious behavior intended to **accommodate** to the listener according to the degree of intimacy or distance the speaker shares with him or her. Accommodation may mean trying to talk more like the other person talks, making our speech either more formal or more casual, sometimes to the point of carefully mincing words at one extreme; or of vulgarity at the other.

In other situations, a speaker may consciously adopt a **different** style from that of the listener, out of a desire to come across as more educated or authoritative than he or she actually is. As Spolsky (1998:42) puts it, “Rather than converging, one may choose to stress features that connect one not to the other person present, but to an absent but valued hypothetical audience, such as a peer group or an admired outsider.”

Retroflexing — and sometimes hypercorrection — in Taiwan Mandarin is sometimes elicited in response to retroflexing by the other person. But often it seems to fall into the category of identifying with “an absent but hypothetical audience... or an admired outsider”, to achieve a certain effect or make a particular kind of impression on the listener.

Who uses hypercorrect forms and why

In his pioneering 1964 study on hypercorrection in New York speech, Labov observed that hypercorrect forms were most frequently heard among lower middle-class speakers (1973:138). While the use of hypercorrection in Taiwan Mandarin is easily noticeable among the upwardly-aspiring lower middle-class who have frequent contact with the public, it is also very common in other social classes, all the way up to the highly educated.

As with use of the retroflexed initials, sex is another a parameter to consider as regards hypercorrection. Like Rau and Li, Tse (1998) also found a higher incidence of retroflexed initials among the female university students in his test group than among the males, and Li (1992) noted that a higher ratio of women preserve more of the Beijing-based $[-n]/[-\eta]$ distinctions than men, who tend in casual speech to use the more “stigmatized” $[-n]$ endings where $[-\eta]$ is called for. This accords with Labov’s observation that “In stable sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of non-standard forms than women.” (1998:7). This may be partly conscious behavior for both sexes: the women wish to communicate an image of being sophisticated and well-educated, while the men may talk less clearly and carefully or adopt stigmatized forms in order to come across as more “macho” and to underline their group identity and solidarity with their “mates”.

However, while it is true that female speakers of Taiwan Mandarin tend to speak more carefully and avoid stigmatized forms more than men in formal speech registers, men still use hypercorrect forms with high frequency under certain conditions. In a situation that calls for formality and projection of authority, men may be just as likely to use hypercorrect forms as women.

In the next section some of the more representative data gathered will be summarized to illustrate the above observations. Only data that qualify as hypercorrection are numbered.

Data

A common example is that of a shop clerk who may wish to project a more sophisticated and businesslike image to customers (Thatcher 1995:17), though hypercorrection is found in many other occupations as well. It is also frequently observed in media interviews. Here are a few sample fragments.

1. A young female clerk in a convenience store telling a customer the price of photocopies said *shi⁴kuai⁴* 四塊 ‘four dollars’, instead of *si⁴kuai⁴*.
2. A young saleswoman talking to a customer at Mitsukoshi department store said *ku⁴zhi* 褲子 ‘pants’, instead of *ku⁴zi*.
3. A young woman in a photocopy shop asked a customer to choose a color for the cover of a book he just had copied; he pointed to one, and she confirmed his choice by saying, clearly and deliberately, *sen¹lan²she⁴* 深藍色, instead of *shen¹lan²se⁴*.
4. A relatively well educated, middle-aged woman working at a community postal station said *er⁴shi²shi⁴hao⁴* for 二十四號 ‘the 24th’ instead of *er⁴shi²si⁴hao⁴*. She belongs to an upwardly mobile middle class family, has lived abroad, and

- sometimes also uses English words in her Mandarin, in addition to hypercorrect forms. Both the hypercorrect retroflexes and the English seemed intended to demonstrate a higher than average education and knowledge level.
5. A doctor from Taiwan University Hospital was asked to discuss “how to overcome alcoholism” for the TV news. He spoke at some length, with inconsistent retroflexing, which sometimes landed in the wrong place.
 6. A woman commenting in a TV interview on the clothes worn at President Chen Shui-bian’s inauguration ceremony said one of the outfits was *you³yi¹⁽⁴⁾dian³fu⁴zha²* (instead of *fu⁴za²*) 有一點複雜 ‘a bit busy/overdone’.
 7. A woman demonstrating beauty products on a midday women’s program produced many hypercorrect retroflex forms while speaking very slowly and distinctly, apparently in an effort to appear elegant, poised and authoritative.
 8. Some radio and TV broadcasters (three specific ones are referred to here) retroflex correctly most of the time, incorrectly some of the time, and they often “forget” to retroflex when particularly excited or spontaneous (see also example no. 11).

Hypercorrect forms are common when reading aloud from a text. Writing tends to belong to a more formal register, and reading aloud is a kind of performance which may make one more self-conscious. Hypercorrection has been observed in *karaoke* singing as well, another performance situation. Educators speaking to students may also indulge in inconsistent retroflexing.

9. One university student reported having to listen to a rather tedious four-hour lecture on speech impediments. In order to fend off boredom, she and her classmates began jotting down every instance of retroflexing they heard. Their conclusion: some of the retroflexes were correct, seemingly by chance, many were not.

Academic conferences are another excellent opportunity for collecting data on retroflexed initials. The speech of three presenters at one particular conference was especially noteworthy. One presenter, who was born and grew up in Taiwan, consistently retroflexed in all the right places. Her speech stood out for being “careful”, “standard”, with no hypercorrect forms.

10. A second presenter retroflexed extremely inconsistently, yet very clearly, while speaking very fluently and quickly. He retroflexed and then did not retroflex the same syllables in the same utterance, back and forth many times. Some parts of the speech contained a higher proportion of retroflexed forms, both correct and hypercorrect, than others. Some examples: 算 *shuan⁴* (should be: *suan⁴*) ‘is considered’, 資料 *zhi¹liao⁴* (*zi¹liao⁴*) ‘data’, 第四 *di⁴shi⁴* (*di⁴si⁴*) ‘fourth’, 別的詞 *bie²de chi²* (*bie²de ci²*) ‘another word’.

11. A third presenter, also extremely articulate, retroflexed in the right places fairly consistently, though she also produced a few hypercorrect forms. What was interesting is that in the more functional parts of her discourse, for example in linking expressions such as *suo*³⁽²⁾*yi*³*shuo*¹ 所以說 ‘so, therefore’, she almost invariably did **not** retroflex (saying instead *suo*³⁽²⁾*yi*³*suo*¹. When I commented to this colleague afterwards about her attention to retroflexing, she proudly responded that she was trained as a Chinese literature teacher, and was very careful about her speech. Thus it seems that she is very conscious of her efforts to get the retroflexes right — but is probably unaware of the hypercorrect forms she produces, and even less aware of how she reverts to unretroflexed speech when she speaks quickly and un-self-consciously, even if it is only for brief moments scattered throughout her discourse. Examples of hypercorrect forms uttered by this speaker: 詞 *chi*² (*ci*²) ‘word’, 資料 *zhi*¹*liao*⁴ (*zi*¹*liao*⁴) ‘data’, 角色 *jiao*³*she*⁴ (*jiao*³*se*⁴) ‘role’, 查字 *ca*²*zhi*⁴ (*cha*²*zi*⁴) ‘to look up a word’, 有意思 *you*³*yi*⁴*shi*⁴ (*you*³*yi*⁴*si*) ‘interesting’, 字典 *zhi*⁴*dian*³ (*zi*⁴*dian*³) ‘dictionary’, 字數 *zhi*⁴*shu*⁴ (*zi*⁴*shu*⁴) ‘word count’.

Expressions like *suo*³⁽²⁾*yi*³*shuo*¹ 所以說 tend to be uttered quickly and mechanically, almost unconsciously, and thus it is understandable that they would come out with one’s “natural” phonetics rather than with a consciously-imposed “formal register” phonetic realization. They are the same kinds of connectors that tend to be slurred into contractions in Mandarin, e.g. [hau³an⁴] for *hao*³*xiang*⁴ 好象. This suggests that there are parts of our discourse that are produced on a less conscious level, operating on a sort of “automatic pilot” and inserted in ready chunks — what Wang (1991) calls “pre-fabs” — thus emerging before the process of hypercorrection has a chance to act on them.

One noticeable effect of both correct and hypercorrect retroflexing, illustrated in the conference referred to above, was that presenters who spoke later in the program tended to retroflex more than the ones who presented at the beginning. Apparently “optional” speech features such as [+retroflexed initials] are “contagious”, a further demonstration of the **accommodation** aspect of hypercorrection.

Foreigners tend to elicit quite a large number of hypercorrect forms in the people they speak Mandarin with; Rau (1996:123) refers to this as the “foreigner register”. Chinese who speak with foreigners will tend to suddenly become conscious of their language and try to speak a more “exemplary” brand of Mandarin, which opens the door for hypercorrect forms to slip in.

In contrast to example 11, function words like *suo*³⁽²⁾*yi*³ 所以 ‘therefore’ may sometimes be pronounced with hypercorrect retroflexes if they are stressed or enunciated carefully.

12. A military instructor responsible for administering a university speech contest spoke to the contest judges with both correctly-placed and hypercorrect retroflexing, e.g. he carefully pronounced *suo*³⁽²⁾*yi*³ 所以 as *shuo*³⁽²⁾*yi*³.

Sometimes highly idiosyncratic patterns in hypercorrect retroflexing are heard.

13. A transportation engineer, giving a talk on Taiwan's new highways, retroflexed most of his *sh*- and *s*- initials, e.g. *gao*¹*shu*⁴ *gong*¹*lu*⁴ for *gao*¹*su*⁴ *gong*¹*lu*⁴ 高速公路 'freeway'; *shi*⁴ for *si*⁴ 四 'four'; and *gong*¹*wu*⁴*shuo*³ for *gong*¹*wu*⁴*suo*³ 公務所 'business office', while not retroflexing the *zh*-/*z*- and *ch*-/*c*- ones at all. He was an articulate speaker, and did not give the impression that he was showing off or nervous. One possibly relevant factor: Lin (1983:157) found that in spontaneous storytelling, college students correctly retroflexed the *sh*- initial most often, making *sh*- in some cases the "token" retroflex.

Hypercorrect forms may be used as a **stylistic device** in conversations between intimates. These are examples how, as Feng (1990:30) puts it, linguistic variation can be used to achieve an expressiveness that cannot be achieved with the standard language alone. Such stylistic variation is often humorous, sarcastic, or simply playful.

14. A student reported of a classmate who uses hypercorrect forms when talking in a facetious, flirtatious kind of voice; she once said almost in a baby-talk voice: *wo*³ *jin*¹*tian*¹ *mei*²*you*³ *xi*³⁽²⁾*zhao*³ *ye!* (instead of *xi*³⁽²⁾*zao*³) 我今天沒有洗澡耶! 'I didn't shower today!' In this case the retroflexing seems to have been a playful use of a pseudo-formal form for stylistic effect. Reactions to this might include amusement, or mild distaste for this kind of "baby talk".
15. A male university student who usually doesn't retroflex said *wo*³ *gao*⁴*shu*⁴*ni*³ 我告訴你 'I'm telling you...' and *shuo*³⁽²⁾*yi*³ *a...* 所以啊... 'so...' in a relatively deliberate way during a tutoring session with a jr. high school student, with the retroflexes apparently as a stylistic flourish for emphasis.

Stylistic retroflexing is enjoying a period of considerable popularity in the media now, and with it comes an increasing incidence of hypercorrect forms over radio and TV. One radio announcer apparently had her tongue in retroflex position throughout an utterance and kept it there when she code-switched from Mandarin to Southern Min — and produced forms like [ʈsai¹⁽⁷⁾ iã²] 知影 (instead of [tsai¹⁽⁷⁾ iã²]) 'I know!'; something that is theoretically impossible in Southern Min.

Markedness and value judgments

A casual survey among students in a phonetics class revealed that many of them had noticed the phenomenon of hypercorrection in Taiwan Mandarin, and possibly been annoyed by it or had a laugh over it, or as cited in a preceding example, made a game of collecting examples of it. Another informant, who is not a linguist, jumps on examples of it immediately when he hears it in the TV news, and derides it privately when he hears it in public. This is evidence that hypercorrect forms are indeed noticed at least some of the time by some people.

16. A Taipei eighth grader reports that a Chinese literature teacher at her school uses hypercorrect retroflexed initials, in addition to other pronunciation flaws, such as substituting initial [n]- for [l]-. The students see through her clumsy efforts at correct pronunciation and this contributes to their impression of her and her teaching.

So hypercorrect forms may well cause a listener to form a judgment about the speaker. This judgment may be positive, in cases in which the listener doesn't notice that the forms are inconsistent, or if one experiences favorable feelings upon noticing how hard the other person is trying to display formality and respect. The reaction might also be neutral, perceived simply as marking a more formal register, if noticed at all. Or it may be negative, that is, the listener may conclude that the speaker is trying impress somebody, without having enough skill to pull it off successfully, thus revealing insecurity. The key parameter is **control**. Hypercorrect forms, except when used facetiously, indicate a **lack of control** on the part of the speaker regarding the stylistic outcome of an utterance.

Language change

Labov (1973) identifies hypercorrective behavior as a source of language change. Conscious “correction” — including overgeneralized “correction” — of an existing linguistic form can lead to an overall change in the language.

Rau (1994) identifies a trend toward **more retroflexing** in the **formal** style and also **more use of dental initials** in the **casual** conversation style. While hypercorrect retroflexing is one possible direction of linguistic change, it is only one of many currents in Taiwan Mandarin today. The people of Taiwan are being exposed now as never before to mainland Chinese Mandarin through the media and travel. Bilingual (usually Chinese-North American) hosts have become popular in radio and television programs, especially those directed at younger people; and these hosts often speak foreign-accented Mandarin, perhaps with some odd or “un-Chinese”

grammatical constructions, word choices, and phonetic variants, such as a dark [ʈ]- for the Chinese clear [l]- as in 這裡 *zhe⁴li³* ‘here’. TV and radio broadcasters, pop singers (e.g. Chen Qizhen 陳琪貞), and some young people of the general public have been heard using the dark [ʈ] — the pronunciation has even turned up in media programming directed at young people on the Chinese mainland — so this suggests another possible source and direction of future sound change.

For now, retroflexing, including the hypercorrect kind, is for many speakers of Taiwan Mandarin a stylistic option. The main “change” that seems to have taken place so far is that “common” Taiwan Mandarin is now receiving more attention, recognition and perhaps acceptance, and is becoming less stigmatized, than was previously the case. The “new” categories of non-retroflexed initials and reshuffling of [-n] and [-ŋ] endings have been stabilizing and spreading to non-Southern Min speakers. But whether the increasing frequency of hypercorrection is indicative of further linguistic change and spread, sanctioned or not, is difficult to predict.

Conclusion

An examination of hypercorrect behavior has provided insights into what the retroflexed initial consonant series means to speakers of Taiwan Mandarin today, and has enriched our understanding of the particular kind of Mandarin spoken in Taiwan; namely, that:

1. **Taiwan Mandarin** is a **subdialect** of general Mandarin Chinese in its own right, and not simply a corrupt version of Beijing Mandarin, even if Taiwan Mandarin continues to be measured against Beijing standards in many contexts;
2. Retroflexed initials have a wide range of realization in Taiwan Mandarin depending on a number of factors, including the **sex, age, educational level, social class and mother tongue of both speaker and listener**;
3. Full retroflexing is now the **marked** form; intermediate forms are the default, covert prestige forms for all groups of speakers in casual conversation; the speech of younger speakers seems to be moving in the direction of a full merger of the retroflexed *zh-*, *ch-*, *sh-* initials into the dental *z-*, *c-*, *s-* initials;
4. Retroflexes still exist as **underlying forms** for most TM speakers; retroflexing sometimes “fades in and out” of the speech of many Taiwan Mandarin speakers, and this seems to be one index of how conscious a speaker is of his or her speech;
5. Retroflexed Mandarin is still the high form or **acrolec**t of Chinese as spoken in Taiwan; it is used in situations calling for some **formality, expression of authority**, or generally more **careful speech**; the tendency for retroflex use to

- mark formal speech styles seems to be establishing itself more firmly, and to be spreading;
6. Retroflexes may be reverted to when **disambiguation** is required;
 7. Retroflexes are sometimes used to **highlight** key words or concepts by calling extra attention to the words in question;
 8. Retroflexes can be used, often playfully, as a **stylistic device**.

The growth in the occurrence of hypercorrect forms underlines the increasingly firm position of retroflexed Mandarin as marking **formal** discourse, along with the other functions of disambiguation, highlighting, and stylistic effect. Because retroflexing is often not learned natively, or thoroughly, yet still occupies a distinct and important position in the Taiwan linguistic repertoire, a conflict between the two circumstances often emerges in the form of hypercorrection. And there seems to be considerable tolerance toward the phenomenon of hypercorrection; it is usually let by without much attention.

This is maybe not so surprising. As Yao (1998:7) cleverly sums up: ‘Although Chinese are not especially good at precise pronunciation, they are quite good at **understanding** a wide range of pronunciations.’ (「中國人雖然沒有“口才”,但是頗有“耳才”。」 *Zhong¹guo²ren² sui¹ran² mei²you³ kou³cai², dan⁴shi⁴ po²you³ “er³cai²”). Chinese are used to considerable variation in speech; misplaced retroflexes are nothing too unusual, and they present virtually no problem to comprehension. And this kind of laissez-faire attitude may contribute to allowing hypercorrect forms to proliferate, even to the point of limited fashionability. Young people are constantly looking out for suitable material from which to construct their own new and distinctive world, and bits of linguistic variation are always possible candidates as building blocks of this new world. The role of popular entertainers and the media is particularly crucial in making some of these choices, and transferring them to the general public.*

Hypercorrection is not something “bad” that needs to be stamped out. It is likely to turn up wherever a prestige form of speech is established and recognized, wherever prescriptive teaching and attitudes exist — that is, in just about any lettered society — and in situations where people are a bit insecure and try to impress other people.

Hypercorrection is often a source or at least an indicator of linguistic change; but it is currently only one of many sources of phonetic and phonological innovation in Taiwan Mandarin. For the moment it seems likely that there will be little overall phonological shift toward broader use of the retroflexed initials in relaxed, casual speech; however their use as markers of more formal or polite speech, and for disambiguation, highlighting, and stylistic flourish, will likely continue to gain strength, and this is sure to continue to foster the occurrence of hypercorrect forms.

Note

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