

## **The Vernaculars of the City of Wuhan A Sociolinguistic Case Study of the Use of Local Slang**

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This paper examines the dialect of the City of Wuhan, China using sociolinguistic research methods with a focus on the use of local slang. The subjects' responses to their own language behavior and that of the other members in the same speech community clearly reflect a current common psychological trend in the city of breaking away from worldliness in the pursuit of elegance in everyday language. The trend, reflecting a conflicting mentality resulting from the influence of the traditional language consciousness, may be considered a potential factor leading to an imbalance between language reality and language behaviors. Such an imbalance appears to have given rise to psychological tension among the members of the same speech community. The resultant pressure may force the speech community to change their language attitude or behavior in order to maintain a stable state of the city's everyday language.

To many Chinese, Wuhan is a city characterized by its "commonness" – a life style and daily parlance representing the common people. Traditionally speaking, this characterization implies a lack of so-called "elegance" in speech and manner advocated and admired generally by the Chinese. Due to technological advances in recent decades, the city residents appear to be breaking away from this "commonness" in many ways. For example, Wuhan is known as one of the "furnaces" in China for its hot and humid summer. In the days when indoor air-conditioning was unavailable, the city residents, regardless of age and gender, had to spend their summer nights sleeping out in the open air on bamboo or wooden beds – amusing scenery in the eyes of people from other parts of China. With the popularization of the electric fan followed by air conditioners in recent decades, such scenery has become history. Nevertheless, in contrast to this drastic change, the style and manner in which the Wuhan dialect is spoken basically remains the same as it has always been, and so do the local customs, such as eating out for breakfast and snacking late at night. Hence, the city is still reputed as "the city of common people" in terms of the common way of life and the everyday language. Unlike the complete change that occurred as a result of the introduction of air-conditioning to almost every household in the city, the local culture established over decades does not seem to change as easily. When we examine the old image of Wuhanese and envision and intend to devise a new image, we find that the city dialect and parlance is a natural aspect to be focused on; it is a dialect and parlance full of slang, with an acute and unique regional flavor. The slang is one of the most renowned characteristics of the vernaculars of the City of Wuhan, not only because it is widely used in daily conversations by people from all walks of life – manual workers, officials, doctors, teachers, students, and so on – but also because it is found to be frequently used in literary and artistic works, newspapers and magazines, so much so that the Wuhan dialect may be called a *slanguage*. This paper reports a study, using sociolinguistic methods, of the Wuhan dialect by examining

the use of the local slang in conjunction with the local culture. Such a connection can help us to understand the language awareness of the modern citizens as well as the close relationship between language and society.

### The Vernacular and Language Attitudes of Wuhan Residents

The focus of the study is on the vernacular of the City of Wuhan and the language identity. The term vernacular in this study refers to the everyday native language spoken by those who live and are considered members of the city as a whole, as opposed to the national standard Chinese – Putonghua. The city vernacular obviously constitutes the main body of the local dialect. In the modernization process of Chinese society, along with the structural migration of population, the daily parlances in some parts of the city have developed into what may be considered as unique “language islands,” such as Wuhan’s “Wu-Gang dialect,” railroad workers’ “road speech,” etc. – interesting linguistic phenomena emerging in today’s China.

The subjects of the study include the local residents of the City of Wuhan. The respondents’ evaluation of their own and others’ language behaviors is used to analyze the psychological tendencies relating to their daily language. One hundred slang terms (such as “*Diao dizi*, *Diaodeda*, *Xiliaosui*, *Wa dilaoke*, *Zadaoguo*, *Maolai*” etc., most of which have three syllables) were selected as a sample to examine the language usage and language identity. Demographic information including age, education level, birth place, length of time living in Wuhan, the geographic area of longest residence, and occupation were collected as well. The summary of the subjects’ demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 2 presents a summary of the respondents’ evaluation of their own usage of the slang terms.

We analyzed the usage of slang based on the respondents’ evaluation and impression of how others around them used the slang. A large proportion of the respondents said affirmatively that they frequently hear other people using such slang terms, and believe that he/she who doesn’t use any local slang is not Wuhanese, so local slang has become the distinctive feature of the Wuhan dialect. Some people believe that the use of local slang is the mark that can distinguish a native Wuhanese from a pretender. Most of the respondents claimed that they were familiar with most of the slang terms included for the study. Although some of the respondents said that they did not socialize that much, hence rarely heard the selected slang terms spoken, none of the respondents claimed to have never heard any Wuhanese person using slang terms. The results are summarized in Table 3.

It is shown here that most respondents said that they heard other people around them using slang more often than they used it. Results in Table 2 and 3 indicate that there are clear differences between the respondents’ evaluation of their own and that of others’ usage behavior. About 36% of the respondents claim that they use slang constantly and frequently (Table 2), while 96% of the respondents claim that they hear slang used by others (Table 3). This represents a difference of 60%. Who uses the slang most in their daily conversation then? According to our observation and experience, the city residents do use slang all the time, and they find even more enjoyable the use of local slang in literary and artistic works, newspapers and magazines. In this study, 96% of the respondents believe that the popularity of slang is accurate. On the other hand, 41.4% of the respondents claimed that they and their families

Table 1: Summary of the Subjects' Demographic Features (n = 225)

Sample features	percentage (%)	Sample features	percentage (%)
Sex <sup>1</sup>		Place of birth	
Male	60.9	Old city	54.7
Female	39.1	New city	20.9
Age (years)		Local province	20.0
15-29	41.3	Other provinces	4.4
30-39	21.8	Length of stay in Wuhan <sup>3</sup> (years)	
40-49	21.3	Less than 9	23.6
50-75	15.6	10- 19	11.6
Education		20-29	22.2
Primary	9.3	30-39	17.8
Intermediate	24.0	40-49	16.9
High school	18.7	Over 50	8.0
College	13.3	Place of residence <sup>4</sup>	
Bachelor	33.3	Hankou	39.5
Masters	1.3	Wuchang	32.5
Occupation <sup>2</sup>		Hanyang	28.0
Student	22.7	Main occupation of family <sup>2</sup>	
Official	23.6	Official	24.0
Laborer	21.8	Laborer	32.4
Independent worker	31.6	Independent worker	25.8
None	0.4	Farmer	10.2
		None	7.6

Notes: 1) The percentage of male respondents is higher than that of female respondents, due to the clear dominance of men in particular occupations;

2) The occupational distribution of respondents is rather wide, hence the respondents' and their relative family members' occupations are combined into six groups, including: officials (such as teachers, doctors, government officials, various managers, engineers and technicians, etc.); laborers (including industrial workers); service personnel (such as rail officers); sales personnel (hair dressers, sailors, chiefs, drivers, etc.); and independent workers (including independent small business owners and freelance workers).

3) The shortest stay of respondents in Wuhan is one year, and the longest 75.

4) The respondents' residential distribution relating to Wuhan's urban development.

Table 2: Respondents' Self Evaluation of Slang Usage Behavior (n=225)

Evaluation of slang usage behavior	Percentage (%)
Constantly	10.2
Frequently	26.2
Occasionally	22.2
Rarely	26.2
Never	15.2

Table 3: Overall Evaluation about Others' Slang Usage Behavior (n=225)

Overall evaluation of others' usage behavior of slang	Percent (%)
Frequently	96.4
Including: All Wuhanese uses	59.5
Youth, males use slang more than older people and females	8.0
Casual occasions more than formal occasions*	4.9
Other people use more than family members	15.1
Average civilians more than educated people	8.0
Older people more than youth	0.9
Rarely	3.6

\* *Formal occasions* indicates conference speech, teaching etc.

rarely use slang terms because they think that slang terms are not very refined language elements, and it is rude to use them; 22.2% of the respondents indicated that all Wuhanese use slang terms. Any Wuhanese would thus be lying by claiming that s/he never used slang. However, they also indicated that if they admitted to using slang, they might be considered unrefined and without class. Therefore, many only admit that they use slang occasionally. The two groups of the respondents constitute about 64% of the sample who may be considered as belonging to those who value "elegance." The language attitude of this group of people suggests a sort of prejudice against the use of slang in daily language.

However, attitudes toward slang differ between the native residents and the non-natives who have lived in the city for an extended period of time. The difference is reflected in an instance during an interview with a business owner from another part of the province, who had lived and done business in Wuhan for over 20 years. He claimed that in over 20 years in Wuhan, he had never used these slang terms because he regards them as coarse. A few people nearby – obviously native Wuhanese – immediately refuted, saying that the slang terms were anything but rude or lacking in refinement. Instead, they contended that the use of slang in the Wuhan vernacular is a unique Wuhanese language habit that non-natives can not understand and appreciate. This instance at least indicates some variation in the acceptance of use of the local slang.

Table 4 shows that over 90% of the respondents believe that the local slang is a distinct characteristic of Wuhan dialect. The result indicates that the use of the local slang is widely accepted.

The overall analysis of the data indicates that the respondents' language attitudes and behaviors are somewhat contradictory. This contradiction seems to be a possible factor that causes an imbalance between the language behavior and the language reality.

In actuality, the local slang is popularly used consciously or subconsciously. That is apparent, and may result from a natural language pattern or habit. But how do we explain the difference found between the attitude of most of the respondents toward the use of the local slang and their behavior in terms of their use of slang?

It is recognized that cognition and sentiment are the two major components of the construction of an attitude. The attitude toward language is no exception. Viewed from the

Table 4: Respondent's Acceptance of the Local Slang (n=221)

Degree of Acceptance	Percent (%)
Characteristic of Wuhan	90.1
Not elegant	5.4
Rude and Unrefined	4.5

sentimental perspective, most of the Wuhanese identify themselves with and accept their local parlance and the slang terms. From the cognitive perspective, the view of the people from Wuhan regarding slang is generally still rather traditional. This is probably the reason why some respondents cannot truthfully evaluate their language behavior, to the extent that they fail to readily admit to their actual use of the slang terms. This seems to reflect a sociolinguistic and psychological trend of placing more value on “elegant” language and behavior by urban residents in the rapidly modernizing society of China.

#### The Vernacular and Language Consciousness of the Wuhan Residents

The psychological trend indicated in this study regarding the use of everyday language in aspiring toward elegance reflects a significant change in terms of the language consciousness that is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture as well as the progress of the society.

In Chinese, “*Li* (俚)” (Vulgarity) is opposite to “*Ya* (雅)” (Urbanity). In both ancient and contemporary Chinese dictionaries such as *Shuowen*, *Zi Hui*, *Kangxi Zidian*, *Hanyu Da Zidian*, *Zhonghua Da Zidian*, *Hanyu Da Cidian*, *Da Cidian*, *Ci Yuan*, *Ci Hai*, “*Li*” is defined as coarse, low in taste, or unrefined. Therefore, some of the specific words or phrases spoken by the ordinary people are called “*Liyu*” (slang) such as “*Da waner*” (big wrist – nouveau riche, or superstar), “*Di ge*” (cab brother – taxi driver [male]), etc. The definitions and explanations of the word “slang” in Chinese dictionaries connote a traditionally derogatory sense about the language used by the ordinary people.

Wuhan is a city with a long history and culture. In feudal times, there were many differences in politics, economy, and culture between the ordinary people and the scholar-bureaucrats, which were reflected in language use. Slang is opposite to the elegant words used by the scholar-bureaucrats. Traditional attitudes that consider the language spoken by the scholar-bureaucrats as “*Ya*” (elegant) and that spoken by the ordinary folks as “*Li*” (unrefined), still influences contemporary Chinese attitudes toward language use. This is probably an explanation of why the local slang in the Wuhan dialect is still considered “unrefined” in society today.

Social stratification of the modern society leads to social mobility. All people want to move up the social ladder. From a psychological point of view, they identify their language behavior with those of a higher “class.” Therefore, language evaluation is not consistent with language reality.

It is an interesting social phenomenon that slang now thrives in all walks of life, rather than disappearing with the rise in education levels in today’s Chinese society. Slang is widespread and popular for its added vividness, humor, conciseness, and novelty. More slang terms come into being and gain ready acceptance by the general population.

According to the Webster Collegiate Dictionary, slang refers to words that are informal, non-standard, or outside the confines of the recognized language standard. The nature of slang is in its widespread use. As far as the definition of slang is concerned, the widespread use of slang is a fact of language use – something objective – while the recognized language standard is subjective and can change with the development of society. As a result, the subjective standard can be adjusted in order to adapt to objective reality.

Great changes have taken place in the structure of Chinese society in comparison to the traditional society. The concept of “*shimin* (*city dwellers, city residents, or citizen*)” has expanded from referring only to people of a lower status to people of all walks of life. The openness of today’s Chinese society provides more chances to bring different groups of Wuhanese into frequent contact with each other, which results in the diversification of the local culture. However, such social, cultural, and linguistic change may not yet necessarily be realized by the Wuhanese who have been experiencing it.

It is worth noting that in addition to the traditional and mainstream Chinese definition of slang, there are in fact other scholarly Chinese definitions of slang without the derogative connotation. In some Chinese dictionaries, slang refers to the local vernacular and folk expressions that are easy to understand. The results of this study indicate that this relatively objective definition of slang has not generally been accepted by the Wuhanese. People judge language use in today’s urban social environment from the traditional cultural perspective that contributes to the contradictory state of mind in the Wuhanese. On the one hand, most of the respondents accept and identify themselves with the vernacular in general and the slang terms in particular of the City of Wuhan. On the other hand, they tend to claim that they themselves keep a distance from the use of slang terms. This seems to suggest that there exists a psychological tension in the members of the speech community that forces them to seek a way to maintain the stability of language.

#### The Vernacular and Language Choice of the Wuhan Resident

The contradictory state of mind of the Wuhanese appears to cause the speech community to seek a balance between language attitude, language reality, and language behavior. The balance may be achieved by either changing their language attitude or changing their language behavior.

Sociolinguistically speaking, if the Wuhanese cannot identify themselves with the present language behavior from both cognitive and emotional perspectives, they might change their language behavior, which would lead to a change in the language reality. Language behavior may be changed in two ways. One is to change the language reality so that the local vernacular will become more “polished” with the not so “refined” elements, i.e. the slang terms removed from the local dialects. The other is to change the language usage in Wuhan drastically by having the residents speak the national standard language – Putonghua or Mandarin – instead of the local dialects. However, this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

If the local residents could develop a new language attitude toward the use of slang and the vernacular, such an attitude may lead to harmony between the emotional and cognitive factors in the language attitude. That is, they would fully recognize their language behavior – their own use of the local slang terms. As a result, a balance may be achieved between language attitude, language behavior, and language fact.

Meanwhile, such a change may give rise to a new understanding of the concepts of *citizen* and *vernacular urbanization*. In fact, urbanization comes with the modernization of society. With the developments of a new city, a great amount of slang will be added to city dialects after more and more people from rural areas inevitably become urban residents. Language constantly develops with the development of society. Due to the people's natural ability to adapt to language, it is not necessary for sociolinguists to be concerned about the standardization of slang usage. The aim of sociolinguistics is to study the relationship between language and society by exploring how they adapt to each other.

#### References

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#### Appendix

##### Currently one-hundred popular slang terms in Wuhan:

挖地脑壳 扯野棉花 荷包暖和 吓我 麻木 掉妖 毛赖 打哽 嘀哆 走场 搨肥  
 掉底子 闹豁子 撵兔子 做笼子 咏泡子 咏栅子 吃弹子 来黄子 杀签子 杀皮  
 子  
 起篓子 闹眼子 撮虾子 下叉子 赶场子 掀篦子 撞猴子 掉函子 扎台子 带把  
 子  
 打梭子 蓄条子 塞砣子 打晃晃 扎棒棒 撮短水 带一脚 下真马 耍套路 打撮  
 牌  
 占相因 打水漂 斗散放 闹醒黄 闹水响 有板眼 挂眼科 抹诈和 搞队伍 有情  
 况  
 晃情况 讲故事 跌眼镜 剃青皮 冇开和 抽跳板 吃软饭 钻烟囱 不中神 不怕  
 刮  
 掉得大 挖得老 玩得转 诈倒裹 码倒搞 听了头 洗了睡 熄了火 去了回 下了  
 课  
 招倒玩 掩倒点 铆倒搞 铆起玩 醒倒媚 媚倒玩 黄子大 胆子粗 滴滴答 破脑  
 壳  
 灶妈子 弯管子 两刷子 岔巴子 歪边子 一道汤 一把连 一湾子 潮水平 梗脑  
 壳  
 一角钱 一块钱 一颗钱 一撇钱 一方钱 麻脑壳 蓝精灵 土克西 洋天神 热干  
 面

Wa dilaoko; Ce yemianhua; Hobao lanhuo; He wo; Mamu; Diaoyao; Maolai; Dagen;  
 Diduo; Zouchang; Leifei  
 Diao dizi; Lao huozhi; Lian touzi; Zou longzi; Yun paozi; Yun zazi; Qi danzi; Lai

huangzi; Sa qianzi; Sa pizi;  
 Qi louzi; Lao yanzi; Cuo xiazi; Xia cazi; Gan cangzi; Xian douzi; Zuang houzi; Diao  
 dangzi; Za taizi; Dai bazi;  
 Da suozi; Xiu tiaozhi; Se tuozi; Da huanghuang; Za bangbang; Cuo dansui; Dai yijio; Xia  
 zenma; Sua taolou; Da cuopai;  
 Zan xiangyin; Da suipiao; Dou sanfang; Lao xinhuang; Lao suixiang; You banyan; Gua  
 yanke; Ma zahu; Gao deiwu; You qinkuang;  
 Huang qinkuang; Jiang gusi; Die yanjin; Ti qinpi; Mao kaihu; Cou tiaoban; Qi yanfan;  
 Zan yantong; Bu zongsen; Bu pa gua;  
 Diaodeda; Wadelao; Wandezuan; Zadaoguo; Madaogao; Tingliaotou; Xilesui; Xiliaohuo;  
 Keliaohui; Xialeko;  
 Qiadaowan; Andaodie; Maodaogao; Maoqiwan; Xindaomei; Meidaowan; Huangzi da;  
 Danzi cou; Didida; Po laoko;  
 Zaomazi; Wanguanzi; Liangsuazi; Cabazi; Waibianzi; Yidaotang; Yibalian; Yiwanzi; Cao  
 suiping; Geng laoko;  
 Yijioqian; Yikuaiqian; Yikeqian; Yipieqian; Yifangqian; Malaoko; Lan jinlin; Tou kexi;  
 Yang tiansen; Leganmian.

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