

A Cross-dialectal Investigation of Prosody of Mandarin Ritual and Sincere Refusals: Cues and Detectability

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Refusals of invitations and offers in Mandarin Chinese can be ritual or sincere, the interpretation of which depends on a variety of verbal and nonverbal cues. Previous studies on English apologies found that listeners were able to perceive the level of sincerity on the basis of intonation. Research investigating how a speaker's intonation expresses rituality and sincerity in Mandarin refusals, and whether or not a listener can perceive the intended meaning based on prosodic cues, is scant. Adopting Signal Detection Theory, this study cross-dialectally examined 72 native Mandarin listeners' (36 from northern China and 36 from Taiwan) perception of rituality and sincerity in Mandarin refusals involving an illocutionary force indicating device, *Buyong* (meaning 'You don't need to') and its two variants with a sentence final particle *Buyong-le* and *Buyong-la*. The listeners only heard *Buyong*, *Buyong-le*, or *Buyong-la* (a total of 240 tokens sliced out from role-play data containing the target phrase, produced by 6 native Mandarin speakers from northern China and another 6 from Taiwan) and had to decide whether the speaker's refusal was sincere or ritual. Results showed that rituality and sincerity in refusals could be successfully distinguished, that the effect of dialectal differences was absent in the perception task, and that speakers of the two dialects employed similar prosodic cues. Acoustic analyses on a subset of utterances that yielded high *d'* values revealed that refusals perceived as being ritual were spoken more slowly at a lower pitch than those that were rated as being sincere. These data provide new evidence that in addition to semantic cues, prosody also plays an essential role in evaluating Mandarin refusals, while suggesting that the utilized prosodic cues are possibly similar across different Mandarin-speaking regions.

Selected references

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