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ARTICLE

Migrating meanings: Language (re)valuation in a two-way parallel migration context

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Abstract

This article examines how the socio-indexical meanings of dialects/style are reconfigured through *two-way parallel migration* in Ningbo-Fenghua, China, focusing on the socio-indexical (re)valuation of Putonghua, Ningbonese, and Fenghuanese. Using two-phase matched-guise experiments and interviews, the study traces how mobility patterns and generational positioning mediate these meanings. Results show that, while Putonghua retains institutional prestige, it is often regarded affectively empty. In contrast, Fenghuanese and Ningbonese carry ambivalent, shifting values. Fenghua-born migrants reframe Fenghuanese as a resource for expressing intimacy, trust, and regionalism, while non-migrants view it as outdated. Ningbonese occupies a middle-ground, indexing familiarity, respectability, or obsolescence depending on context. Notably, younger speakers collapse dialectal distinctions, reframing both as 'old speech' tied to generation rather than place. These findings challenge Global North models that link indexical revaluation to elite cosmopolitanism, showing instead how meaning-making in the Global South can also emerge through administrative restructuring, regional absorption, and long-standing mobility patterns. (Indexicality, social meaning, Ningbo-Fenghua, migration and language, language attitudes).

Introduction

Sociolinguistic research has demonstrated that the social meanings of language are context dependent (Eckert 2008). However, the range of contexts examined remains narrow, particularly in the Global South, limiting our understanding of how language is interpreted, deployed to navigate social hierarchies, and shaped by structural constraints. This article examines what languaging 'means' in a particular Global South context: the Greater Ningbo region of China. Specifically, it investigates the social meanings associated with three prominent named languages across Downtown Ningbo (老三区 *lǎo sān qū* 'old three districts') and Fenghua district (henceforth, Ningbo-Fenghua): Fenghuanese (Fenghuahua), a subdialect of Ningbonese within the Wu family; Ningbonese (Ningbohua), the 'prestige' dialect of Ningbo; and Standard Chinese/Mandarin (Putonghua). The analysis adopts an indexicality framework, which interrogates how linguistic forms signal

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social meanings, identities, and relationships contingent on context (Silverstein 2003; Eckert 2008), and, following Maegaard & Pharao (2021), treats these meanings as extending beyond individual micro-linguistic variables to encompass broader language styles and varieties.

The Ningbo-Fenghua region provides a critical site for understanding social meaning in China. Two factors make it particularly compelling. First, observations from my Fenghuanese research assistant revealed pervasive linguistic discrimination reported by Fenghua speakers, offering a context to examine and potentially mitigate linguistic marginalization and 'lateral violence', where speakers devalue their own language due to stigmatized social meanings. Second, the area exemplifies what this article terms *two-way parallel migration*: the simultaneous, bi-directional movement of residents between Region A (Downtown Ningbo) and Region B (Fenghua) within a shared administrative macro-region AB (Greater Ningbo). Unlike conventional one-way migration patterns that dominate sociolinguistic accounts (e.g. rural-to-urban or return migration), this reciprocal movement reflects shifting economic and social logics and complicates assumptions of unidirectional linguistic assimilation, such as the growing acceptance of 'standard' Putonghua by Hong Kong locals who are dominantly Cantonese speakers. Instead, it reveals how linguistic value can be contested across regions rather than converging toward a single prestige norm.

While sharing surface similarities with returnee migration (Cho 2015) and lifestyle-based privileged mobility (Etrillard 2019), two-way parallel migration differs in its internal, intra-national scope and its emphasis on mutual linguistic evaluation within a unified administrative and linguistic framework. In Cho's study, returnees face pressure to embody native-like English as a neoliberal ideal, while Etrillard shows how white British migrants mobilize racial and linguistic privilege to bypass integration norms. The Ningbo-Fenghua case instead demonstrates how fine-grained regional distinctions—for example, urbanity, local authenticity, and lineage—shape linguistic legitimacy even WITHIN one national and administrative system. It thereby extends migration scholarship by showing that mobility within a shared macro-region does not necessarily equate to flattened linguistic hierarchies. As Gal (2016) observes, contact often generates new differentiation rather than uniformity. In this sense, intra-regional mobility in Ningbo-Fenghua reconfigures, rather than erases, linguistic stratification, exposing how language, place, and privilege are continually renegotiated under internal regimes of inequality.

From the examples of migration above, one can observe that migration can carry *unequal social meanings*, that is, meanings that reproduce asymmetries in prestige, place, and linguistic legitimacy (c.f. unequal Englishes) (Tupas 2015). Some forms of migration are associated with mobility, privilege, and modernity, while others connote stigma, marginality, or top-down state intervention. Particularly, in this study's context, the unequal meanings reflect both rural-urban trajectories and the sociocultural evaluation of local varieties. Fenghua migrants to Downtown Ningbo regard migration as a vehicle for *upward social mobility*, where concealing one's rural or migrant origins helps mitigate urban stigma and facilitates integration into the city's prestige economy. Downtown Ningbo migrants to Fenghua, by contrast, frame migration through historical and institutional narratives, linking their relocation to state-directed movements, for example, the 'down to the countryside movement'

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(1950s to 1978) and the centralized graduate job-assignment system (毕业分配制度) (Y. Zhao 2016) that assigned Ningbo graduates to work in Fenghua. For them, migration evokes memories of administrative redistribution and socialist nation-building rather than personal advancement, imbuing it with 'historical' and 'political' meanings tied to China's mid-twentieth-century bureaucratic past. Thus, for these groups, migration indexes divergent histories and moral economies, shaping how language itself becomes inscribed with migration-related meaning. And because language and social practice are intertwined (Eckert 1999), these orientations surface in linguistic evaluations: Ningbo-Fenghua languaging practices acquire differing connotations depending on speakers' migration trajectories and their alignment with standard-language ideologies.

The evaluations related to migration and language are further complicated by administrative redistribution. Formerly a county-level city, Fenghua was reclassified as a district of Ningbo in 2016 through the process of 撤市建区 'abolish cities, establishing districts'. Politically, Fenghua now falls within Ningbo's jurisdiction, but socioculturally it remains distinct. Many residents still identify as *Fenghuaren* 'Fenghua person' rather than *Ningboren* 'Ningbo person'. Attitudes toward this reclassification intersect with language ideologies: those resisting administrative incorporation often express stronger attachment to Fenghua identity and evaluate Fenghuanese more positively, irrespective of migration status.

This sociopolitical landscape thus provides a natural laboratory for investigating how migration, administrative change, and individual identity or stance-taking can shape the social meanings of Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua. The study advances previous research on Putonghua, Ningbonese, and Fenghuanese (Z. Zhao 2022) by shifting attention from broad national patterns to localized negotiations of linguistic value. Drawing inspiration from variationist sociolinguistics (Eckert 2008) and metapragmatic research (Silverstein 2003), the study moves beyond assumptions of community homogeneity to examine how the same languages acquire different social meanings across socially differentiated groups distinguished by place of residence (Fenghua vs. Downtown Ningbo), birthplace, and migration status (migrant vs. non-migrant). In short, I aim to answer the following questions:

(i) What are the socio-indexical meanings of Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua in the Greater Ningbo region?
(ii) To what extent does the residents' migration background (i.e. particularly place of birth, current residence, and migration status) shape or condition these meanings?

The Ningbo-Fenghua region and its languages

The Ningbo-Fenghua region, located near Shanghai, is part of the broader Greater Ningbo area in eastern China (Figure 1). As of 2024, Ningbo comprises six central districts: Haishu, Yinzhou (incorporating former Jiangdong), Jiangbei, Beilun, Zhenhai, and Fenghua, alongside two northern county-level cities (Yuyao and Cixi) and two southern counties (Xiangshan and Ninghai). This study focuses on four of the central districts: Haishu, Jiangbei, and Jiangdong (now within Yinzhou), collectively known as the老三区 or 'old three districts' (hereafter, Downtown Ningbo), and

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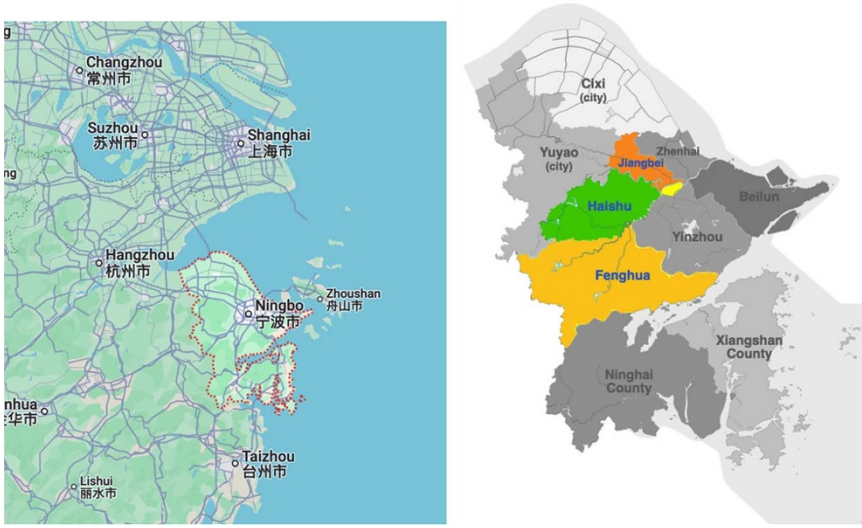


Figure 1. Location of Greater Ningbo in eastern China (left, in red dotted lines), Greater Ningbo (right), with the Ningbo-Fenghua region highlighted; Haishu (green), Jiangbei (orange) and the Upper part of Yinzhou (Jiangdong) (yellow) form 'Downtown Ningbo' (Sources: Google Maps, Wikimedia Commons).

Fenghua. Within Ningbo-Fenghua, multiple varieties or 'dialects' are used, including Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, Putonghua (Mandarin), Anhuinese, and Dongbeinese (assistant observations, 2024). The discussion below concentrates on the three dominant varieties, Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua, as the region's primary linguistic resources.

Putonghua (standardized Mandarin) serves as China's national lingua franca, spoken by over 1.1 billion people and actively promoted through state education policies. In contrast, Ningbonese, with roughly 830,000 speakers in Downtown Ningbo, and Fenghuanese, spoken by about 480,000 residents mainly in Fenghua, are local dialects central to the region's cultural life (Ningbo Municipal Statistics Bureau 2017). But both varieties are in decline especially among younger generations due to the dominance of Putonghua and socio-economic forces driving urban migration. Neither Ningbonese nor Fenghuanese holds official status, and their use is increasingly confined to domestic or informal settings. This erosion is accelerated by national policies that make Putonghua the medium of instruction and the lingua franca of administration, commerce, and education.

Table 1 outlines key linguistic differences between Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua, highlighting pronunciation, lexical, and syntactic variations, based on community observations (2023–2024) and existing studies on Ningbo dialects (Z. Zhao 2022).

Migration in the Ningbo-Fenghua region

Migration in the Ningbo-Fenghua region is shaped by interconnected socio-economic, historical, and administrative forces that circulate people,

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Table 1. Key differences between Putonghua, Ningbonese, and Fenghuanese.

Feature	Putonghua	Ningbonese	Fenghuanese
Pronunciation of 我 '1.SG'	wɔ	ŋo	ŋəu
Pronunciation of 你 '2.SG'	ni	nɐu	noŋ
Word for 'uncle'	叔叔 (ʂu ʂu)	阿松 (song)	阿叔 (so)
Word for 'no'	没有(meɪ joʊ)	灭 (mie)/谬 (miu)	莫 (mo)
Tone system	4 tones	7 tones	8 tones
Onset (声母)	21	29	29
Rime (韵母)	39	45	42
Reduplication	Limited	Common (e.g. 冰冰冷)	Common (e.g. 冰冰冷)
Sentence word order	SVO (e.g. 我早就吃过饭了)	SOV (e.g. 我饭老早吃过了)	SOV (e.g. 我饭老早吃过了)

languages, and social values. Educational mobility, marital migration, urban housing policies, and state programs have produced distinct sociolinguistic environments where languages are differently valued. Migration to Ningbo's urban core entails entry into a Putonghua-dominant space, where the language carries institutional prestige (p.c. Zhou F., 2024), influencing how Ningbonese and Fenghuanese are evaluated against the national standard. Marital migration further reshapes attitudes as spouses adapt to each other's linguistic practices, while urban housing reforms, such as Ningbo's 2009 *hukou* policy enabling property owners to settle more easily in the city (Ningbo Municipal Public Security Bureau 2009), have accelerated mobility and strengthened the association of Ningbonese with urban belonging and social mobility. Historical policies, notably the 'Down to the Countryside Movement' (1950s–1970s) and the centralized 'graduate job assignment system' (毕业分配制度), also structured earlier migration patterns. Recent developments, including the Ningbo Rail Transit Line 3, which links downtown Ningbo with Fenghua, and Fenghua's 2016 administrative reclassification under Ningbo (The People's Government of Zhejiang Province 2016) have intensified contact, promoting dialect leveling, bilingualism, and ongoing reconfigurations of local language hierarchies.

Theoretical framework

In analyzing the social meanings of Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua, I adopt the theoretical lens of indexicality: a semiotic framework developed in linguistic anthropology and variationist sociolinguistics. Following Eckert's (2008, 2012) third-wave variation model, this approach illuminates how linguistic features cluster into stylistic bundles and acquire social meaning. Indexicality posits that language not only conveys semantic content but also signals stances, social personae,

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and ideologies (Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson 2006). These meanings are fluid and context-dependent, emerging through situated use within particular sociocultural and historical conditions.

Recent East Asian studies demonstrate the analytic reach of this framework. In Taiwan, Wan (2022b) shows how Deaf speakers mobilize sibilant variation to index orientations toward able-bodiedness shaped by speech training. In Hong Kong, Chau (2025) links evaluations of a celebrity's English to political ideology and local anxieties. Gao & Forrest (2023) trace the association of Mandarin full tone with a stylized, 'cute' femininity tied to Taiwanese influencer culture, and Wang (2025) shows how Beijing rappers use phonological variables to project authenticity and masculinity. Together, these studies highlight how indexical meanings evolve through personal histories, media circulation, and sociopolitical change: insights that inform my analysis.

Building on this work, I treat Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua as regionally situated indexical resources whose meanings arise from socially embedded patterns of use shaped by migration and mobility. As Eckert (2008) notes, such meanings form indexical fields: constellations of recognizable associations that speakers draw upon and renegotiate in interaction. These fields are contested, shifting with stance, role, and context. Maegaard & Pharao's (2021) study of Copenhagen Danish and Gonzales' (2025) study of higher-order Cantonese-English style-shifting in Hong Kong illustrates how styles can carry layered or even contradictory meanings depending on co-occurrence and interpretation. Extending this perspective, I show that in Ningbo-Fenghua, linguistic styles are continually revalued through intraregional migration and socio-spatial stratification. While earlier work has emphasized media and political discourse, this study foregrounds *peri-urban mobility* as a key site of indexical reconfiguration, demonstrating how experiences of locality, aspiration, and differentiation reshape language ideologies and contribute to broader debates on enregisterment, linguistic inequality, and the semiotics of place in contemporary China.

The study

To examine the social meanings of languages in the Ningbo-Fenghua region, I employed a two-phase design integrating matched-guise experiments and semi-structured interviews. Phase 1 (May–November 2024) served as an exploratory stage grounded in ethnographic observation with a local Fenghua-Ningbo resident and close engagement with community speakers, enabling methodological contextualization and sensitivity to locally salient dynamics. Insights from this phase directly informed Phase 2 (December 2024–July 2025), which retained the same methods while expanding participant numbers across existing social categories. Phase 2 also incorporated a refined set of ethnography-grounded matched-guise descriptors, drawn from salient terms identified through Phase 1 word-cloud analyses, and tested with both newly recruited and returning participants (see the section *Matched-guise experiment*). This phased design anchored the study in local social realities while enhancing the representativeness and comparative depth of findings across the region.

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Participants

Given the study's focus on how place of residence, birthplace, and migration status shape language attitudes, participants were purposively selected to represent diverse profiles across these dimensions. Recruitment, coordinated by a Fenghua-based assistant,[1] combined purposive and snowball sampling to identify eligible participants while avoiding random sampling, which risked including short-term residents. Accessing certain groups, especially Ningbo-born residents of Fenghua (NF), proved difficult, though the assistant's community ties enabled limited inclusion and validated this targeted approach. Phase 1 (May–November 2024) included eleven participants (five male, six female; eighteen to seventy-five years) across four birthplace–residence pairings: Fenghua-born Fenghua residents (FF = 3), Ningbo-born Fenghua residents (NF = 2), Fenghua-born Ningbo residents (FN = 3), and Ningbo-born Ningbo residents (NN = 3). Matching birthplace and residence denoted non-migrants, while mismatched cases indicated migrants.

To enhance representativeness, Phase 2 (December 2024–July 2025) added thirty-two participants (nine male, twenty-three female; sixteen to seventy-four years) under the same stratification (FF = 8, FN = 5, NN = 19). The NF group remained underrepresented due to the emic five-year residency criteria and social hesitation to disclose migration status. Online recruitment via Rednote proved unsuccessful, and one Ningbo-born woman withdrew, citing fear of being 'targeted', reflecting identity ambivalence (see the section *Migration and the reconfiguration of sociolinguistic hierarchies*). Phase 2 interviews involved eleven participants (one male, ten female; FF = 5, FN = 2, NN = 4), again with no new NF participants. Across both phases, fifty-four individuals participated (see Table 2): forty-three completed the matched-guise experiment (eleven in Phase 1 + thirty-two in Phase 2) and twenty-two joined semi-structured interviews (eleven per phase). Of the experimental group, twenty-two were Ningbo non-migrants, eleven Fenghua non-migrants, and ten migrants (eight FN, two NF).

Overall, the interview pool comprised 16 non-migrants (72.7%) and 6 migrants (27.3%), balancing social representativeness with the practical and sociocultural constraints of recruiting across sensitive migration categories.

Matched-guise experiment

To examine how Ningbo-Fenghua residents evaluate the region's three main language varieties, a matched-guise experiment was conducted to minimize the influence of speaker identity and topic content. This widely used sociolinguistic technique presents listeners with identical utterances in different varieties produced by the same speaker, without revealing that the voice is constant, thereby isolating attitudes toward the languages themselves. The experiment comprised fifteen audio clips, five sentiment-neutral sentences in each of the three languages (5 × 3 = 15 stimuli; Table 3), voiced by a middle-aged woman fluent in standard Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua, with lived experience in both Fenghua and Ningbo. Multiple takes were screened for authenticity, and the most representative token for each guise was selected. Although filler items are often used to mask a study's purpose, pilot testing showed they increased fatigue, so a no-filler design was

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Table 2. Participant information.

#	phase	participant	birthplace	residence	status.migration	dur	age	sex	job	education.level	civil.status
1	1	Meidi	NB	FH	migrant	54	75	F	retiree	secondary	married
2	1	Ziyan	NB	FH	migrant	10	40	M	government worker	postgraduate	married
3	1	Ming	FH	NB	migrant	30	55	M	government worker	undergraduate	married
4	1	Juanxi	FH	NB	migrant	5	62	F	retiree	secondary	married
5	1	Yuran	FH	NB	migrant	12	36	F	doctor	undergraduate	married
6	1	Xiong	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	48	M	teacher	undergraduate	divorced
7	1	Tongshu	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	24	M	teacher	undergraduate	single
8	1	Dingding	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	17	M	student	secondary	single
9	1	Jinghua	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	46	F	government worker	undergraduate	married
10	1	Jiajia	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	24	F	government worker	undergraduate	single
11	1	Xinyi	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	23	F	student	postgraduate	single
12	2	Linger	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	23	F	student	postgraduate	single
13	2	Zhenyu	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	27	F	tutor	undergraduate	married
14	2	Yeqiao	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	17	M	student	secondary	single
15	2	Junhao	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	16	M	student	secondary	single

(*Continued*)

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Table 2. (*Continued.*)

#	phase	participant	birthplace	residence	status.migration	dur	age	sex	job	education.level	civil.status
16	2	Yiyi	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	16	F	student	secondary	single
17	2	Canran	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	16	M	student	secondary	single
18	2	Yuanyuan	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single
19	2	Quansheng	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	74	M	retired	primary	married
20	2	Weili	FH	NB	migrant	5	22	F	kindergarten teacher	undergraduate	single
21	2	Xinman	FH	NB	migrant	5	23	F	barista	undergraduate	single
22	2	Yangfei	FH	NB	migrant	5	22	M	student	undergraduate	single
23	2	Shuhe	FH	NB	migrant	7	18	F	student	secondary	single
24	2	Dajian	FH	NB	migrant	7	65	M	retired	secondary	married
25	2	Yuhong	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	22	F	student	undergraduate	single
26	2	Kaicheng	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	32	M	agent	postgraduate	single
27	2	Mingyang	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	25	M	student	postgraduate	single
28	2	Hanni	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	25	F	art assistant	postgraduate	single
29	2	Xuanli	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	25	F	student	postgraduate	single
30	2	Qihan	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	24	F	student	postgraduate	single

(*Continued*)

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Table 2. (*Continued.*)

#	phase	participant	birthplace	residence	status.migration	dur	age	sex	job	education.level	civil.status
31	2	Siqi	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single
32	2	Yuhang	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	M	student	secondary	single
33	2	Wenwen	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	16	F	student	secondary	single
34	2	Manlu	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	16	F	student	secondary	single
35	2	Yalin	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single
36	2	Lin	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single
37	2	Mengqi	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single
38	2	Wanqing	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single
39	2	Xiaowen	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	16	F	student	secondary	single
40	2	Fei	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	24	F	student	postgraduate	single
41	2	Ningxin	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single
42	2	Ruolin	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single
43	2	Tianya	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	16	F	student	secondary	single
44	2	Tingting	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	18	F	student	secondary	single
45	2	Xueqi	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single

(*Continued*)

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Table 2. (*Continued.*)

#	phase	participant	birthplace	residence	status.migration	dur	age	sex	job	education.level	civil.status
46	2	Bowen	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	17	M	student	secondary	single
47	2	Sihan	NB	NB	non-migrant	0	16	F	art assistant	secondary	single
48	2	Lili	FH	NB	migrant	11	17	F	student	secondary	single
49	2	Hanxi	FH	NB	migrant	15	18	F	student	secondary	single
50	2	Kexin	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	16	F	student	secondary	single
51	2	Haoran	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	16	M	student	secondary	single
52	2	Yue	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	16	F	student	secondary	single
53	2	Leyao	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	16	F	student	secondary	single
54	2	Jinxuan	FH	FH	non-migrant	0	17	F	student	secondary	single

Table 3. Stimuli in the matched-guise experiment.

	Stimuli items	Gloss
1	我现在在看电视。	I am watching television.
2	我刚才看了天气预报。	I have just seen the weather forecast.
3	我中午坐了2路公交车。	I took the number 2 bus at noon.
4	我今天去了公园。	I went to the park today.
5	我和叔叔一起吃了晚饭。	I ate dinner with (my) uncle.

adopted. Even so, participants consistently perceived the clips as spoken by different individuals, confirming that the experimental illusion was successfully maintained.

In Phase 1, eleven participants completed the experiment. For each of the fifteen stimuli, they undertook two tasks. First, they responded to an open-ended evaluation task (Drager, Hardeman-Guthrie, Schutz, & Chik 2021), consisting of three questions delivered in Putonghua (though responses could be given in any language).

(i) Please use three adjectives to describe the person talking.
请使用3个形容词来描述说话人。

(ii) What do you think is the occupation of the speaker?
你认为说话人的职业是什么?

(iii) What do you think is the social background of the speaker?
你认为说话人有怎么样的社会背景)

The evaluation phase elicited spontaneous impressions followed by structured ratings to capture both intuitive and reflective judgments. Participants first described their impressions of each speaker, then completed a five-point Likert scale assessing seven traits: *established, educated, intelligent, good-looking, local, wealthy, and well-behaved* (i.e. 行为端正), selected from prior studies on linguistic perception (Campbell-Kibler 2010). This two-step procedure was repeated for each of the fifteen clips, with sessions lasting about thirty minutes. Review of Phase 1 data showed minor carry-over effects, as some participants reused scale descriptors in open-ended responses, suggesting influence from the rating task.

To mitigate this and improve validity, Phase 2 separated the two tasks. Thirty-two new participants and eight returning ones first completed open-ended evaluations for all clips without exposure to predefined scales, including an added age-estimation prompt ('How old do you think the speaker is?' 你认为说话人处在什么年纪?请给出具体数字). Only after this did they complete the trait-rating section, which expanded to thirteen descriptors: the original seven plus six ethnographically grounded additions (i.e. *retired, housewife, relaxed, white-collar, family-oriented*, and *pretty* (*accent*)) identified through Phase 1 word-cloud analyses. These additions ensured emic and contextually meaningful evaluation categories, echoing

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Gao & Forrest (2023) on locally salient stylistic descriptors. The stimuli were randomized, all ratings used a five-point scale, and sessions averaged fifty to seventy minutes. This revised design improved the interpretive clarity of the open-ended data, enhanced the ecological validity of the trait ratings, and ensured that both analytic categories and emergent descriptors reflected the participants' own social interpretations of the language varieties/styles in question.

Semi-structured interviews

While the matched-guise experiment provided insights into attitudes toward the three named languages, its capacity to uncover the ideological foundations of these evaluations was limited. As recent research emphasizes, language attitudes are not simply perceptual judgments but are embedded in broader regimes of value, identity, and social differentiation (Wan 2022a). To probe these deeper dimensions, the experiment was complemented by semi-structured interviews in both phases, designed to elicit participants' reflections on language, place, and personhood, and to trace how linguistic hierarchies are interpreted and reproduced in everyday discourse. In Phase 1, interviews were conducted immediately after the matched-guise task to minimize priming while maintaining contextual relevance. Led by the Fenghuanese local assistant, each session lasted, on average, about fifteen minutes and followed a twenty-two-question guide: seven on identity (e.g. place affiliation, generation, self-categorization) and fifteen on language practices, beliefs, and ideologies (see Appendix A). Participants were free to respond in any language or combination of languages they chose.

Analysis revealed widespread concern about the decline of intergenerational transmission of Fenghuanese and Ningbonese, with many describing youth as a 'no-dialect generation', indexing both affective loss and social change. These findings informed Phase 2, which focused on younger participants to examine how language shift and mobility are negotiated by those most affected. The revised nineteen-question guide (see Appendix B) emphasized family and school domains, key sites of dialect attrition and language socialization, and explored home language use, peer interaction, and language attitudes in educational contexts. Interviews again permitted flexible language choice and typically lasted about twenty minutes.

Data processing and analysis

Following data collection from the matched-guise experiment and semi-structured interviews, a systematic process of data preparation and analysis was undertaken, following identical protocols across phases. Audio recordings from the open-ended evaluations and interviews were transcribed, participant-verified, and translated by the Fenghua local assistant to ensure accuracy. Quantitative analysis focused on Likert-scale adjective ratings. For each descriptor, seven in Phase 1 and thirteen in Phase 2, mean scores were computed and compared across key social categories: birthplace, residence, and migration status. Data were modeled using Bayesian linear mixed-effects regression in R, with adjective rating as the dependent variable and fixed effects for language/style (Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, Putonghua), migration status, current residence, and their interactions. Covariates included age, gender, education, and study phase to control for demographic and awareness-related

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variation. Random intercepts for participants and stimuli accounted for repeated measures and individual variability, improving generalizability and guarding against overfitting. Bayesian modeling was chosen for its robustness with complex, partially pooled sociolinguistic data and its probabilistic interpretation of effects, enabling nuanced inferences, including the likelihood that one variety was rated higher than another or that no effect was present.

Qualitative analysis addressed the open-ended evaluations and interview data. Participant-generated descriptors were visualized through word clouds, with semantically similar terms standardized unless context-specific distinctions emerged. These patterns revealed listeners' implicit associations and informed the expanded descriptor set in Phase 2. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically: data were reviewed, coded inductively, and grouped into emergent themes using a bottom-up approach. This qualitative layer illuminated the social meanings, ideologies, and identity narratives underpinning quantitative trends, offering a fuller interpretation of both convergence and divergence across experimental and ethnographic findings.

Results

Matched-guise experiment: Adjective scale

Descriptive ratings (Figures 2 and 3) and Bayesian regression models (Table 4, Table 5, Supplementary resources) reveal a patterned stratification of social meanings across the three language varieties. On 'prestige' descriptors, that is, *educated, intelligent, urban, white-collar*, and *well-behaved*, Putonghua ranks highest, followed by Ningbonese and Fenghuanese. For example, *z*-scored means for *educated* are 0.58 (Putonghua), 0.01 (Ningbonese), and −0.29 (Fenghuanese). Bayesian estimates likewise show Fenghuanese less associated with *established* (−0.8, $pd = 0.98$), *urban* (−1.3, $pd = 0.99$), and *white-collar* (−0.9, $pd = 0.97$), while Putonghua is positively linked to *well-behaved* (0.7, $pd = 0.99$), reinforcing its association with education, professionalism, and mobility.

A reverse pattern appears for 'traditional' or domestic-role traits (i.e. family-oriented, housewife, retiree) where Fenghuanese scores highest, followed by Ningbonese and Putonghua. Fenghuanese thus indexes domesticity and aging, echoing ideologies that tie it to home life and the past. Ningbonese, by contrast, occupies a middle position on prestige traits but ranks highest for *relaxed* (0.67 vs. 0.38 Fenghuanese, 0.07 Putonghua). This stance contrast suggests that Ningbonese affords ease and familiarity: urban embeddedness without the institutional authority of Putonghua or the deference of Fenghuanese. Fenghuanese's lower 'relaxedness' likely reflects its link to hierarchical family roles requiring respect rather than informality, while Putonghua's disciplined and aspirational associations make it least compatible with relaxedness. Situated between these poles, Ningbonese enables an affiliative yet unmarked stance: familiar, dexterous, and interactionally smooth. When migration variables are introduced, further patterns emerge (Table 5). Non-migrants, especially those residing in their birthplace, elevate their local variety, reaffirming place-based loyalty. Ningbo non-migrants rate Ningbonese highly on *pretty* (*accent*) (+++) (Figure 4), *educated* (++), *intelligent* (++), and *urban* (++), particularly older and less educated listeners. Fenghua

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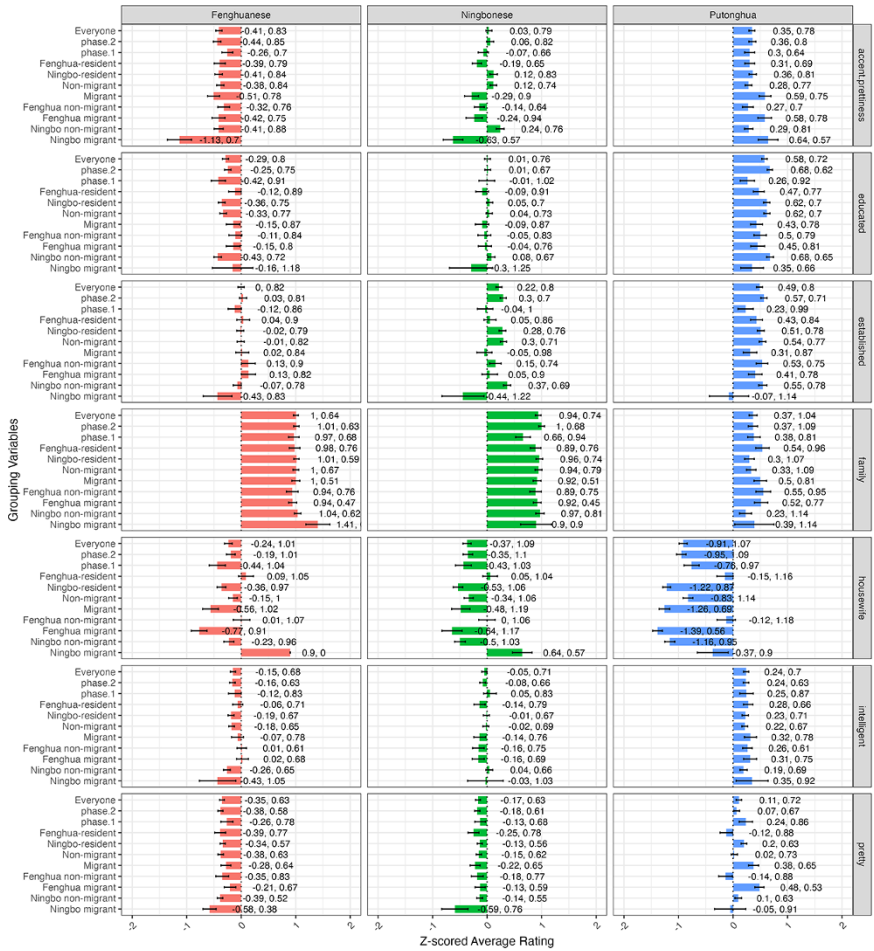


Figure 2. Mean and standard deviation (SD) comparisons across grouping variables: everyone, residence, migration status (part 1).

non-migrants similarly favor Fenghuanese on *established* (++), *relaxed* (++), and *pretty* (∼), showing affective attachment to familiar speech.

However, mobility complicates these associations. Migrants, particularly those relocating to contexts where their variety lacks local dominance, often re-evaluate both their heritage code and surrounding varieties (Table 5). Ningbo migrants rate Fenghuanese more negatively on *pretty* (*accent*) (– –) (Figure 4) and *intelligent* (– –) (Figure 5), reflecting reduced alignment with non-local speech. They also assign Putonghua even harsher judgments on *housewife* (– – –), signaling rejection of traits linked to traditional domesticity. At the same time, they continue to rate Ningbonese highly on *pretty* (*accent*) (++), while slightly downgrading it on *well-behaved* (+), suggesting selective retention of aesthetic value and growing ambivalence toward moralized traits. Fenghua migrants, meanwhile, modestly upgrade Fenghuanese on *intelligent* (+), despite otherwise neutral evaluations. These

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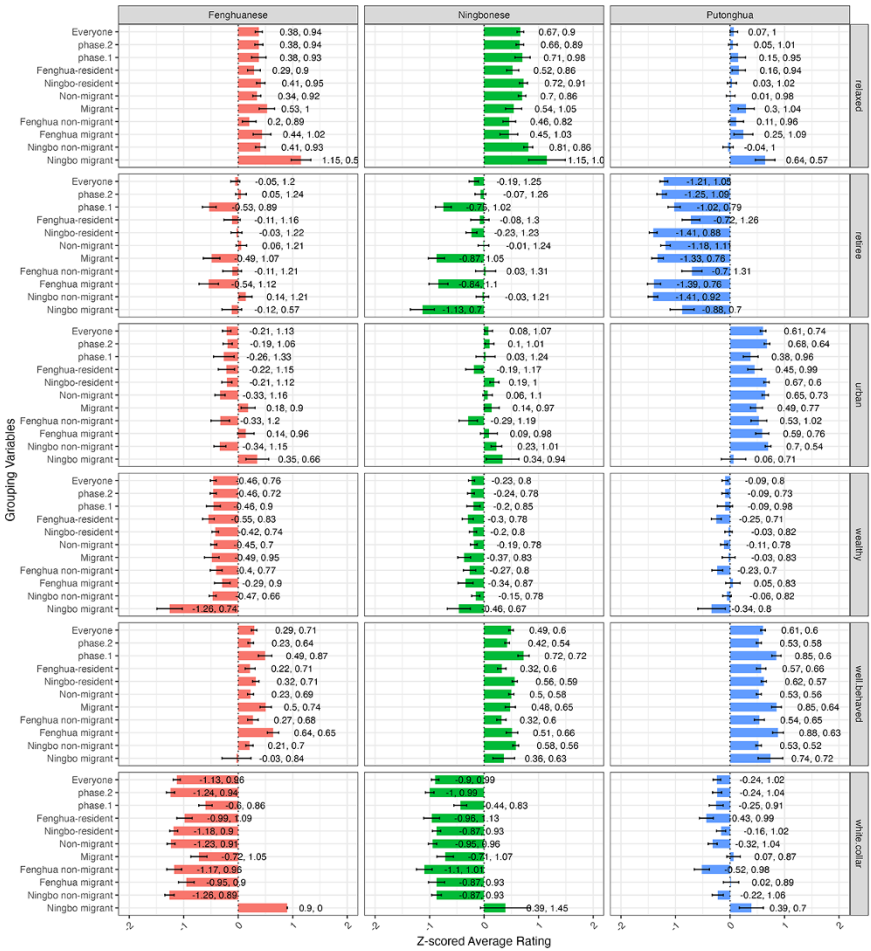


Figure 3. Mean and standard deviation (SD) comparisons across grouping variables: everyone, residence, migration status (part 2).

shifts reflect how migration prompts targeted reconfigurations of social meaning: while some associations are disavowed, others are strategically preserved or recast to fit new sociolinguistic contexts.

Residence also shapes evaluations beyond birthplace effects. Fenghua residents rate Fenghuanese higher on *educated* (++) and *intelligent* (++), bolstering its localized prestige, while assigning *family* (++) to Putonghua, partly re-domesticating the national standard. Ningbo residents elevate both Putonghua and Ningbonese: the former on *educated* (+++) (especially among the less educated) and the latter on *intelligent* (++), *pretty* (++), and *well-behaved* (+++). That both local and national codes receive positive but differentiated evaluations underscores that residence, not merely origin, mediates linguistic value. Patterns of evaluation are thus shaped less by inherited loyalties than by the social and ideological conditions of where speakers live, revealing the situated nature of linguistic appraisal.

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Table 4. Summary of all Bayesian linear mixed-effects regression models (cells with *pd* values over 95% are in gray, direction of effect encoded in the median/estimate/beta cell to the left, red = negative, green = positive).

	ACCENT		EDUCAT		ESTABL		FAMILY		HOUSEW		INTELL		URBAN		PRETTY		RELAXED		RETIREE		WEALTHY		WELLBHV		WHITCOL	
	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*
Main effects																										
(Intercept)	*3.54*	*1*	*3.3*	*1*	*3.7*	*1*	*4.25*	*1*	*3.26*	*1*	*3.29*	*1*	*2.72*	*1*	*3.33*	*1*	*3.58*	*1*	*3.08*	*1*	*2.97*	*1*	*3.52*	*1*	*2.38*	*1*
language A (**Fenghuanese** vs. Ningbonese)	−0.6	0.92	−0.6	0.94	−0.8	0.98	−0.4	0.82	0.25	0.7	−0.5	0.92	−1.3	0.99	0.36	0.86	−0.1	0.58	0.35	0.74	0.04	0.54	−0.24	0.79	−0.9	0.97
language B (**non-Putonghua** vs. Putonghua)	0.28	0.74	0.08	0.58	0.02	0.52	−0.1	0.55	0.28	0.72	0.17	0.68	0.84	0.95	0.28	0.8	−0	0.51	0.62	0.87	0.45	0.86	0.7	0.99	−0.5	0.87
migrant status A (**Fenghua** vs. Ningbo migrant)	−0.7	0.92	−0.1	0.63	−0.5	0.87	0.36	0.73	0.78	0.84	−0.6	0.94	0.35	0.77	−0.39	0.89	0.6	0.81	0.24	0.63	−0.7	0.97	−0.61	0.93	1.17	0.93
migrant status B (**migrant** vs. non-migrant)	−0	0.53	−0.1	0.74	−0.1	0.61	0.05	0.58	0.23	0.75	−0.1	0.62	−0.3	0.86	−0.07	0.66	−0.1	0.63	0.25	0.79	−0	0.53	−0.05	0.6	−0.2	0.71
residence (**Fenghua** vs. Ningbo)	−0.2	0.8	−0.3	0.96	−0.2	0.84	0.08	0.65	−0.22	0.77	−0.3	0.94	0.03	0.55	−0.13	0.81	0.23	0.82	0.28	0.85	−0.1	0.63	−0.01	0.52	−0.1	0.66
phase (**Phase 1** vs. Phase 2)	−0.4	0.95	0.25	0.89	0.05	0.61	0.1	0.66	0.13	0.65	0.03	0.56	0.35	0.92	−0.17	0.85	0.09	0.62	0.2	0.74	−0.2	0.8	−0.05	0.59	−0.3	0.78
gender (**female** vs. male)	0.03	0.58	0.03	0.57	−0.1	0.75	0.2	0.84	0.67	0.99	0	0.51	0.23	0.87	−0.05	0.64	0.47	0.97	0.87	1	0.07	0.66	0.13	0.78	−0.1	0.63

(*Continued*)

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Table 4. (*Continued.*)

	ACCENT		EDUCAT		ESTABL		FAMILY		HOUSEW		INTELL		URBAN		PRETTY		RELAXED		RETIREE		WEALTHY		WELLBHV		WHITCOL	
	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*
Main effects																										
age	0	0.74	0.01	0.91	0	0.8	−0	0.87	−0.02	0.97	0.01	0.94	0.01	0.82	0	0.71	−0	0.78	−0.03	1	0	0.64	0.01	0.95	0.01	0.89
education	−0.1	0.78	−0.2	0.99	−0.2	0.99	−0	0.65	−0.04	0.6	−0.1	0.81	0.02	0.58	−0.07	0.84	−0.1	0.72	−0.01	0.53	0.02	0.59	−0.11	0.88	−0	0.57
language A x migrant status A	1.2	0.99	0.07	0.57	0.39	0.84	0.04	0.53	−0.52	0.81	0.81	0.99	0.21	0.67	0.13	0.65	0.35	0.72	−0.5	0.77	0.85	0.98	0.61	0.98	−0.4	0.73
language B x migrant status A	0.71	0.91	0.38	0.84	0.33	0.8	−0.5	0.84	−1.05	0.96	0.59	0.95	−0.4	0.79	0.12	0.64	−0.2	0.64	−0.66	0.83	0.61	0.93	0.41	0.92	−0.8	0.9
language A x migrant status B	0.63	1	0.5	1	0.45	0.99	0.06	0.61	−0.33	0.91	0.49	1	0.53	0.99	0.11	0.74	0.53	0.98	0.15	0.71	0.36	0.96	0.44	1	0.37	0.93
language B x migrant status B	−0.3	0.92	0.29	0.93	0.17	0.81	−0.2	0.82	−0.07	0.62	0.11	0.73	0.34	0.92	−0.17	0.84	0	0.5	−0.44	0.94	−0.1	0.62	−0.09	0.74	0.08	0.63
language A x residence	0.42	0.98	0.41	0.99	0.24	0.91	−0.1	0.61	−0.31	0.92	0.43	1	0.24	0.85	0.01	0.53	0.22	0.85	−0.29	0.87	0.11	0.72	0.25	0.97	0.28	0.89
language B x residence	0.17	0.8	0.36	0.98	0.12	0.75	−0.4	0.99	−0.61	1	0.15	0.83	−0	0.55	0.21	0.91	−0.2	0.86	−0.94	1	0.07	0.65	−0.1	0.77	0.46	0.98
language A x phase	0.33	0.93	−0.1	0.75	0.26	0.9	0.31	0.92	−0.01	0.52	−0.1	0.72	0.3	0.89	−0.04	0.6	−0.1	0.72	−0.1	0.64	0	0.5	−0.07	0.69	0.08	0.63
language B x phase	0.54	0.99	0.19	0.84	0.16	0.8	−0	0.56	−0.47	0.97	0.1	0.72	−0	0.52	0.13	0.78	−0.1	0.61	−0.69	0.99	0.16	0.78	−0.06	0.65	0.64	0.99

(*Continued*)

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Table 4. (*Continued.*)

	ACCENT		EDUCAT		ESTABL		FAMILY		HOUSEW		INTELL		URBAN		PRETTY		RELAXED		RETIREE		WEALTHY		WELLBHV		WHITCOL	
	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*	med	*pd*
Main effects																										
language A x gender	−0.3	0.92	−0.1	0.7	−0.1	0.76	−0.2	0.9	−0.19	0.82	−0	0.62	−0.4	0.98	−0.05	0.64	−0.1	0.63	−0.16	0.74	0.05	0.61	−0.08	0.74	−0.1	0.63
language B x gender	0.3	0.94	−0.2	0.83	0.13	0.78	−0.3	0.91	−0.08	0.64	−0	0.53	−0.3	0.95	−0.1	0.77	−0.1	0.74	−0.46	0.97	−0.2	0.87	−0.19	0.94	0.32	0.93
language A x age	0.01	0.98	0	0.78	0	0.67	0.01	0.95	0	0.67	0	0.62	0.01	0.95	−0.01	0.97	0	0.73	0	0.58	0	0.64	0	0.51	0.01	0.82
language B x age	0	0.53	−0	0.86	−0	0.92	0.01	0.91	0.01	0.9	0	0.63	−0	0.89	0	0.54	0.01	0.93	0.01	0.82	0	0.6	−0.01	0.98	0	0.58
language A x education	−0.2	0.96	0.13	0.93	0.16	0.96	−0.1	0.78	0.07	0.74	−0	0.69	0.32	1	0.01	0.55	−0.1	0.86	−0.12	0.83	−0.1	0.88	−0.02	0.6	0.25	0.99
language B x education	0.01	0.53	0.17	0.97	0.16	0.96	−0.1	0.83	−0.14	0.89	−0	0.68	0.01	0.54	0.03	0.68	−0.2	0.91	−0.11	0.81	−0.1	0.86	0.04	0.72	0.21	0.97
Random effects																										
item (SD)	0.05	1	0.04	1	0.14	1	0.17	1	0.04	1	0.03	1	0.06	1	0.11	1	0.05	1	0.07	1	0.08	1	0.04	1	0.05	1
Participant (SD)	0.3	1	0.32	1	0.31	1	0.39	1	0.59	1	0.33	1	0.36	1	0.24	1	0.47	1	0.49	1	0.3	1	0.39	1	0.58	1
Model information																										
residual SD (sigma)	0.74		0.67		0.68		0.71		0.82		0.62		0.86		0.58		0.81		0.95		0.73		0.51		0.83	
R-squared	0.3		0.36		0.28		0.32		0.47		0.29		0.29		0.25		0.32		0.44		0.2		0.4		0.44	
observations	585		630		630		585		585		630		630		630		585		585		630		630		585	

Table 5. Summary of effects by language (+/–) signs indicate polarity of judgments and number of signs indicate degree).

	FENGHUANESE	NINGBONESE	PUTONGHUA
pretty (accent)	–	+	+
	– – (Ningbo migrant)	++ (Ningbo migrant)	
	~ (non-migrant)	+++ (non-migrant)	
	– – (Ningbo resident)	++ (Ningbo resident)	
	– – (older)	+++ (older)	
	– – (more educated)	+++ (less educated)	
educated	~	+	++
	++ (Fenghua resident)	++ (non-migrant)	+++ (Ningbo resident)
			+++ (less educated)
established	+	++	++
	++ (non-migrant)	+ (migrant)	+++ (less educated)
	– (more educated)	+ (more educated)	
family	++	++	+
			++ (Fenghua resident)
housewife	~	–	– –
			– – – (Ningbo migrant)
			– (Fenghua migrant)
			– – – (Ningbo resident)
			~ (Fenghua resident)
intelligent	~	+	++
	– – (Ningbo migrant)	~ (Fenghua migrant)	
	+ (Fenghua migrant)	++ (non-migrant)	
	++ (Fenghua resident)	++ (Ningbo resident)	
urban	~	+	++
	+ (male)	++ (non-migrant)	
		++ (female)	
		+++ (more educated)	
pretty (good looking)	–	+	++
	~ (older)	++ (younger)	
relaxed	+	++	+
	++ (non-migrant)	+ (non-migrant)	

(*Continued*)

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Table 5. (*Continued.*)

	FENGHUANESE	NINGBONESE	PUTONGHUA
retiree	+	+	– –
			– (Fenghua resident)
			– (male)
wealthy	–	+	++
	– – (Ningbo migrant)	– (Fenghua migrant)	
	– – (migrant)	– (migrant)	
well behaved	+	++	++
	~ (Ningbo migrant)	+ (migrant)	
	++ (older)	+++ (Ningbo resident)	
		+++ (older)	
white collar	– –	– –	~
		– (older)	– (Fenghua resident)
			+ (older)

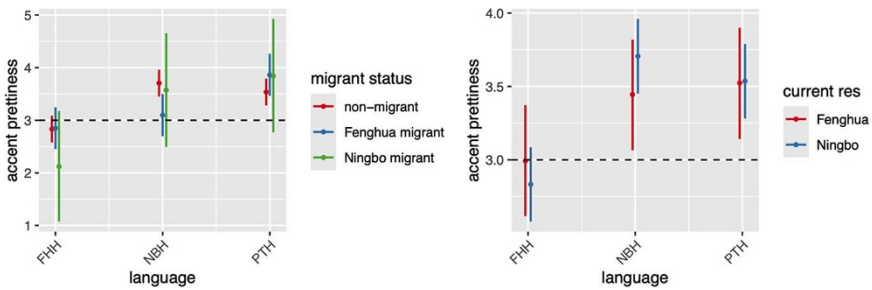


Figure 4. Evaluations of languages by migrant status (left) and current residence (right): *pretty (accent)* (NBH = Ningbonese, FHH = Fenghuanese, PTH = Putonghua).

Three key patterns emerge. First, migration does not entail uniform convergence toward dominant prestige norms but instead fosters selective, context-specific revaluations of linguistic meaning. Ningbo-born migrants intensify aesthetic attachment to Ningbonese (*pretty* ++ vs. + baseline) yet leave negative ratings on *housewife* (–) and *white-collar* (– –) unchanged. Migration, therefore, produces *indexical differentiation*, not uniform alignment. Second, Fenghua-born migrants unexpectedly upgrade Fenghuanese on *intelligent* (+), reversing the usual neutral or negative pattern (~/– –). Instead of internalizing dominant hierarchies, they reframe Fenghuanese as signaling competence and local fluency, which is evidence that mobility can sustain, not erode, place-based pride. Third, revaluation structures diverge by origin: Ningbo migrants restrict upgrades to aesthetic domains, whereas Fenghua migrants extend them to cognitive and educational traits. That peripheral

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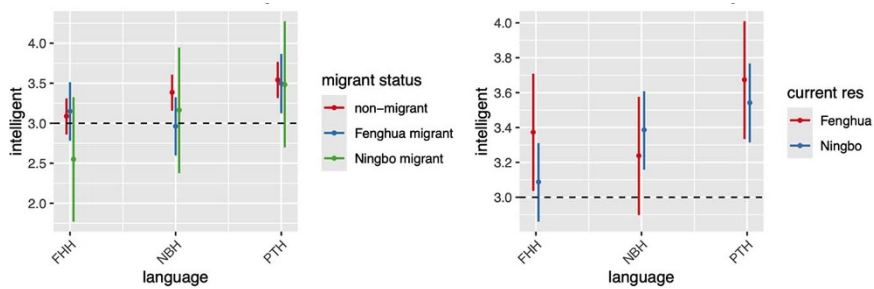


Figure 5. Evaluations of languages by migrant status (left) and current residence (right): *intelligent* (NBH = Ningbonese, FHH = Fenghuanese, PTH = Putonghua).

speakers enact broader, prestige-relevant revaluations suggests symbolic resistance may be strongest at the margins.

What emerges most clearly from the analysis is the fragmented and locally contingent nature of prestige. Traits conventionally associated with status—for example, *educated, intelligent, urban, white-collar*—do not align within a single variety or style. Putonghua indexes institutional authority, Ningbonese signals relaxed urban familiarity, and Fenghuanese evokes tradition and domesticity. Prestige thus operates as a dispersed set of trait-specific associations rather than a unified attribute of dominant codes. Migration and residence prompt selective recalibrations: Ningbo migrants maintain aesthetic attachment to their heritage code while rejecting domestic and occupational connotations, whereas Fenghua migrants elevate cognitive traits within a less institutionalized variety. Even under shared ideological conditions, speakers enact divergent indexical realignments. Collectively, these patterns suggest that 'prestige', at least for Global South Ningbo-Fenghua, is best understood as a modular, context-sensitive construct that is emergent through affect, social relations, and institutional positioning instead of fixed hierarchies of linguistic value.

Matched-guise experiment: Word cloud

Analysis of the qualitative short-answer data, visualized through word clouds, reveals a wider and more nuanced range of meanings than previously documented in the literature.

Fenghuanese

The word cloud analysis of non-migrant Ningbo-born residents frames Fenghuanese as indexing a structured, middle-class lifestyle grounded in conventional socioeconomic order (Figure 6). Lexical items such as *urban, upper-middle, retired, worker*, and *bachelor's* evoke a population perceived as stable, employed, and settled, that is, neither elite nor marginal, but anchored in routinized respectability. Terms like *employee, calm, family*, and *leisured* further project an image of balanced labor and comfort. Together, educational and occupational markers (*graduate, vocational, college*) co-occur with affective descriptors (*ordinary, suburban, middle-aged*), positioning Fenghuanese as emblematic of modest aspiration and social integration. Even

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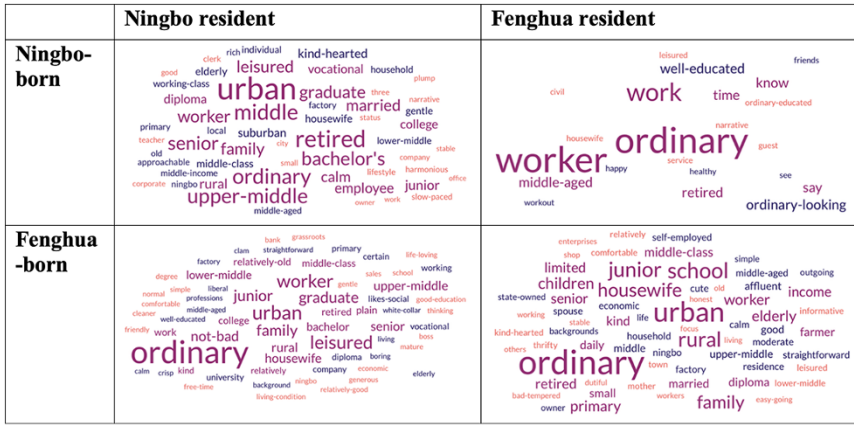


Figure 6. Word clouds for Fenghuanese by residence and birthplace (and implicitly, migration status).

references to *housewife* and *leisure*, when paired with institutional terms, reinforce domestic order and 'being proper' rather than constraint.

By contrast, non-migrant Fenghua-born residents associate Fenghuanese more directly with traditional roles and modest rural domesticity. Dominant lexemes such as *ordinary, housewife, junior school, worker*, and *rural* foreground embeddedness in everyday life over institutional mobility. The co-occurrence of *dutiful, kind, daily, small, children*, and *elderly* highlights interpersonal intimacy and generational continuity, while *limited, thrifty*, and *income* signal constrained economic horizons. Here, *housewife* connotes pragmatic domesticity shaped by necessity rather than choice, particularly alongside *limited, self-employed,* and *rural.* Despite the overarching portrait of cohesion, items like *bad-tempered* and *self-employed* introduce ambivalence, hinting at affective strain and the precarities of small-scale or informal livelihoods.

Among Fenghua-born migrants to Ningbo, the social meaning of Fenghuanese becomes layered and reflexive, merging practicality with markers of urban aspiration. Lexical items such as *graduate, urban, worker,* and *leisured* indicate both continuity with working-class respectability and an emergent orientation toward self-development. The co-occurrence of *liberal, well-educated, comfortable*, and *relatively-good* points to an ideological recalibration in which Fenghuanese is recontextualized through urban exposure and lifestyle differentiation. Even traditionally domestic terms such as *housewife* and *leisure*, when juxtaposed with *graduate* and *liberal,* signal a reimagining of domesticity as compatible with aspiration and cultural capital. This reconfiguration softens earlier rural associations and positions Fenghuanese as a flexible semiotic resource that is capable of indexing upward mobility while maintaining affective ties to local authenticity. In contrast, Ningbo-born migrants to Fenghua frame Fenghuanese in markedly utilitarian and depersonalized terms. Core descriptors such as *worker, retired, middle-aged, ordinary,* and *housewife* situate the variety within the domains of labor, aging, and routine rather than aspiration. The recurrence of *work* and *time*, alongside the absence of educational or prestige-related terms, suggests a more flattened, task-oriented understanding

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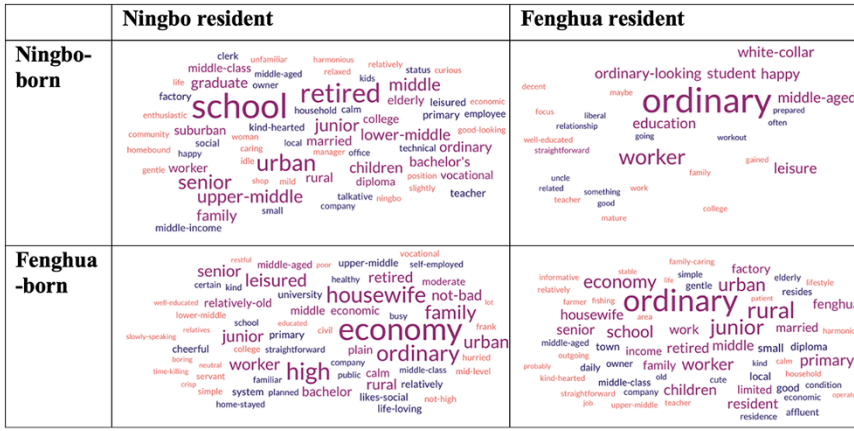


Figure 7. Word clouds for Ningbonese by residence and birthplace (and implicitly, migration status).

of language and identity. Unlike the urban migrants, this group's co-occurrence of *housewife* and *worker* lacks prestige markers, thereby reinforcing a reading of Fenghuanese as practical rather than aspirational. Here, Fenghuanese emerges as a practical medium for 'getting by', rather than a resource for social distinction or lifestyle signaling.

In sum, labor remains central to the indexical field of Fenghuanese, but its evaluative resonances shift across social positions. Migration refracts perception: at times reinforcing inherited meanings, at others transforming them. These differences hinge on perceived ownership of the code. For Fenghua-born migrants, Fenghuanese, as a mother tongue embedded in lived experience and affective familiarity, allows for layered, ambivalent readings that blend tradition and mobility. For Ningbo-born speakers, it is a later-learned variety interpreted through institutional associations and social distance. Even shared descriptors such as *housewife* and *leisure* acquire contrasting meanings depending on whether the variety is framed as 'mine' or 'theirs'. Fenghuanese thus operates within a dynamic indexical field whose value emerges from how speakers position themselves within hierarchies of place, belonging, and mobility.

Ningbonese

From a non-migrant perspective, Ningbonese evokes structure, status, and institutional order, though its meanings diverge by birthplace. Ningbo-born non-migrants depict Ningbonese speakers as *orderly, educated*, and securely *middle-class*. Frequent descriptors—for example, *school, retired, urban, senior, upper-middle, graduate*—portray speakers embedded in a predictable, institutionally sanctioned trajectory from education to work to retirement (Figure 7). Terms like *junior, college, bachelor's, suburban*, and *family* reinforce residential stability and intergenerational continuity, constructing Ningbonese speakers as 'socially anchored': civically integrated members of Ningbo's urban middle class.

By contrast, Fenghua-born non-migrants offer more grounded, utilitarian portrayals. Words such as *worker, housewife, rural, retired,* and *economy* evoke routine labor

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and domestic responsibility. Although *school, urban*, and *college* appear, they co-occur with *fishing, factory,* and *farmer,* which temper prestige associations. Here, *housewife* aligns not with urban respectability but with modest domestic labor, its pairing with rural and manual work narrowing interpretive flexibility. For this group, Ningbonese signifies functionality and external order but lacks the intimacy and affective resonance associated with Fenghuanese. It indexes competence and structure rather than aspiration or affective belonging.

Migration complicates and reconfigures these patterns, alternately reinforcing and softening earlier impressions of Ningbonese. Among Fenghua-born migrants to Ningbo, perceptions appear calibrated rather than idealized. Whereas Fenghua-born non-migrants depict Ningbonese speakers in functional terms, migrants construct a more balanced image. Words such as *economy, urban, high, university, housewife*, and *not-bad* evoke a modest, upward-leaning lifestyle. The pairing of worker with status-oriented terms like *university* and *high* indexes a speaker who is stable and respectable within the urban middle class. In this indexical field, descriptors like *housewife* and *not-bad* take on a pragmatic tone: they suggest a modest but respectable lifestyle: stable, decent, and grounded in everyday competence rather than prestige or upward ambition. Instead of exaggerating the prestige of Ningbonese, migration appears to moderate it. Listeners no longer idealize Ningbonese 'from afar' but interpret it as attainable, something practical, respectable, and within reach. Their stance shifts from aspirational to experiential, reflecting a revaluation shaped by proximity and everyday familiarity.

In contrast, Ningbo-born migrants to Fenghua intensify their evaluations of Ningbonese, casting it in sharper relief against a rural backdrop. Whereas non-migrants emphasize *school, urban, senior*, and *graduate*, signaling stability and continuity, migrants foreground *white-collar, well-educated, liberal, teacher,* and *decent,* indexing refinement, respectability, and professional capital. In the rural context, qualities once marking routine middle-class life now connote exceptionality and upward distinction. Migration thus heightens the perceived prestige of Ningbonese, amplifying its symbolic alignment with success and social elevation.

Putonghua

Among non-migrant groups, Putonghua carries distinct associations shaped by location and institutional proximity. For Ningbo-born residents in the metropolitan center, it indexes urban modernity, middle-class aspiration, and institutional prestige. Dominant descriptors—for example, *income, resident, urban, upper-middle, bachelor's, family*—position it as a vehicle for education, employment, and mobility (Figure 8). Co-occurring terms such as *school, teacher, student*, and *education* reinforce its link to formal learning, while *position, white-collar,* and *doctor* situate it within professional hierarchies (Figure 8). For this group, Putonghua embodies success and class progression, coherently aligned with institutional norms. By contrast, Fenghua-born non-migrants, situated in a more peripheral setting, offer a tempered reading. Frequent descriptors—*ordinary, urban, education, economy, senior*, and *student*—highlight familiarity and functionality rather than prestige. Medium-frequency items such as *family, middle*, and *worker* depict it as socially expected but unexceptional. Absent are elite markers like *doctor* or *university;* instead, *limited*

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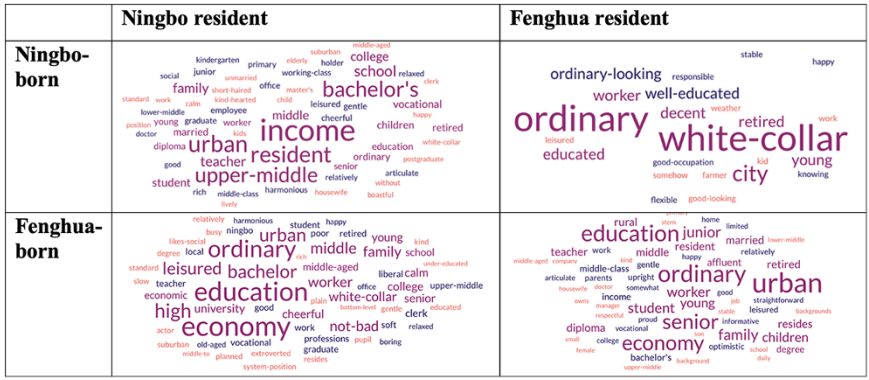


Figure 8. Word clouds for Putonghua by residence and birthplace (and implicitly, migration status).

and *stern* denote restrained value. For this group, Putonghua is necessary for participation in public life but not necessarily a vehicle of class transformation.

Among migrant groups, the meanings of Putonghua become fragmented and recalibrated. Fenghua-born migrants to Ningbo express a more aspirational yet ambivalent stance, associating the language with *urban, education, bachelor, white-collar,* and *economy.* These reflect exposure to prestige-bearing institutions, however, terms such as *ordinary, worker, clerk*, and *middle* remain dominant. The coexistence of high and low-status descriptors—*rich* alongside *bottom-level, university* alongside *under-educated*—reveals a tension between aspiration and constraint. Migration heightens awareness of Putonghua's symbolic capital but also its inaccessibility: these speakers recognize its prestige but encounter its limits, as institutional inclusion remains uneven. In contrast, Ningbo-born migrants to Fenghua present a softened reading of Putonghua's prestige. Although still linked to *white-collar, educated*, and *decent,* dominant terms such as *ordinary, worker*, and *city* mark a shift toward pragmatism. Absent are class-ascent indicators like *position, doctor*, or *upper-middle*; instead, *responsible* and *stable* suggest utility without aspiration. This shift reflects a spatial and institutional downgrade: movement from urban core to periphery distances speakers from the infrastructures, for example, elite schools, markets, networks, through which Putonghua once indexed upward mobility. In this setting, it enables everyday integration but no longer signifies elite access.

Migration thus reshapes the social meanings of Putonghua through selective reinterpretation. Non-migrants maintain stable, place-bound meanings: urban residents uphold prestige-oriented readings, while peripheral residents emphasize practicality. Migrants, navigating multiple sociolinguistic systems, selectively adopt, soften, or rework associations to fit new circumstances. This process fractures Putonghua's symbolic unity, redistributing rather than erasing value, amplifying some meanings, tempering others, and introducing ambivalence where coherence once prevailed. The weakening of Putonghua's link to mobility reflects broader structural change: for those moving from center to periphery, former pathways to elite mobility may no longer be visible or viable; for those entering urban centers, prestige is more salient but its benefits less assured.

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Semi-structured interview

The follow-up interviews revealed three key themes on how migration shapes perceptions of Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua: negotiating indexical identities, reconfiguring sociolinguistic hierarchies, and generational mediation of meaning.

Negotiating indexical identities and linguistic boundaries in the face of migration

Migration reconfigures the indexical meanings of Fenghuanese and Ningbonese, transforming them from fixed, place-bound styles into socially flexible resources through which speakers perform identity, articulate stance, and negotiate social boundaries. In contrast, Putonghua remains relatively stable across migrant and non-migrant contexts. It functions as a supra-local, institutionally anchored code associated with education and formal domains, but carries little affective resonance and is seldom used for indexical alignment or boundary work. The analysis therefore centers on the more dynamic recontextualization of Fenghuanese and Ningbonese in migration.

For Fenghua-born non-migrants, Fenghuanese is rigidly tied to authenticity and rightful belonging. It is described as the language of everyday life and ancestral continuity. As Xiong put it, "To be a Fenghua local, at least you need to speak Fenghuanese". Referred to as "our local dialect", it is framed as intimate yet exclusionary, explicitly inaccessible to outsiders such as Ningbo migrants or tourists (excerpt (1)). Through this boundary-marking discourse, Fenghuanese operates as a semiotic gatekeeping device: to speak it is to perform local legitimacy; to lack it is to remain socially peripheral.

(1) 首先我会在，自己在奉化地区里面，我会肯定会使用它的。除非有别人，有新奉化人，或者是有外地的朋友跟我说普通话，我会说普通话。如果一般情况下，我还是会使用奉化话。

'First of all, when I'm in Fenghua, I'll definitely use it [Fenghuanese]. Unless someone else, such as new Fenghua people, or friends from other places speak to me in Putonghua, I will speak Putonghua. But in general, I would maintain using Fenghuanese.'

(Xiong, Fenghua-born non-migrant residing in Fenghua)

This indexical stance extends to language use across institutional and social settings. Tongshu notes that Fenghuanese facilitates smoother workplace interaction, while Putonghua and Ningbonese are reserved for communicating with non-locals. These patterns reflect a broader stance of alignment: Fenghuanese indexes affiliation with the local core, whereas the other 'non-local' varieties signal distance and externality. Like Xiong, Tongshu deliberately avoids Putonghua in local exchanges, underscoring its status as an out-group code. His efforts to minimize Ningbonese influence on local speech (excerpt (2)) further demonstrate that this linguistic boundary is ideologically maintained. Despite Fenghua's administrative incorporation into Ningbo, he continues to treat Ningbonese as foreign, constructing a sharp contrast between the two dialects. This opposition reflects not only his non-migrant status but a broader

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socio-cultural stance of resistance to regional absorption. The boundary between Fenghuanese and Ningbonese thus operates as a site of symbolic and ideological work through which language is mobilized to sustain local distinctiveness within an expanding regional order.

(2) 再就是不会让他刻意去学宁波那些人的发音是怎么样的

'And also, I wouldn't intentionally make him [my son] learn how people from Ningbo pronounce things.'

(Tongshu, Fenghua-born non-migrant residing in Fenghua)

Fenghua-born migrants to Ningbo exhibit more flexible, context-responsive linguistic practices, drawing on both Fenghuanese and Ningbonese to navigate shifting sociolinguistic environments. For these speakers, the two varieties are not rigidly demarcated but described as 'similar' and used interchangeably depending on context (Juanxi and Ming). This fluidity does not signal a loss of distinction but a reframing of indexical meaning: the varieties form a macro-repertoire from which speakers strategically draw to enact familiarity, intimacy, and locality across settings. Ming's reflection (excerpt (3)) illustrates this stance. Rather than differentiating the dialects, he frames them collectively as a "foreign" or "secret" family code that is unintelligible to outsiders yet pragmatically useful in daily life, such as in taxis, where switching between the two fosters ease and "a sense of security". What distinguishes this from the non-migrant stance is not the maintenance of boundaries but their flexible negotiation: for migrants like Ming, Fenghuanese and Ningbonese operate as stylistic resources mobilized to index alignment and manage shifting roles and audiences rather than something that is policed.

(3) (因为)人家都能听懂(普通话)的, 是吧?我们自己家里面的人交流, 奉化话, 宁波话简直就是一门外语, 谁都不懂的外语多好, 是不是?……比如说我打的去了, 我跟司机交流的, 我奉化话也好, 宁波话也好, 反正我都用方言跟他交流, 那不挺顺畅的?当然, 必须是这个司机本身就是本地人, 相反的更加有一种安全感, 彼此之间。

'(Because) everyone can understand it (Putonghua), right? When we family members communicate in Fenghuanese or Ningbonese, they are **like a foreign [secret] language**. How great is it to speak a foreign language that no one understands, right?... For example, if I take a taxi, I can communicate with the driver, whether it is Fenghuanese or Ningbonese, I can communicate with them in **(the two) dialects (Fenghuanese and Ningbonese)**. Isn't it smooth? Of course, the driver must be a local. There is a sense of **security** between us.'

(Ming, Fenghua-born migrant to Ningbo)

For migrants, then, use of 'non-standard' dialects (i.e. Fenghuanese and Ningbonese) is more about performing adaptable stances that foster social cohesion and pragmatic integration. Both Fenghuanese and Ningbonese are deployed to facilitate

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interaction, project ease, and create "a sense of security" in navigating life across the Ningbo-Fenghua region. This represents a shift from dialect as index of authenticity and 'in-group-ness' (among non-migrants) to dialect as resource for negotiated belonging. In this context, the two dialects shed some of their exclusivist connotations and begin to overlap as a flexible repertoire, with indexical meanings shaped less by inherited identity and more by utility, affiliation, and interactional positioning. Migration thus reconfigures the sociolinguistic field, prompting speakers to recalibrate the boundaries and meanings traditionally attached to local codes.

Migration and the reconfiguration of sociolinguistic hierarchies

Migration (re)configures the indexical relationships among Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua, reshaping how these languages are positioned vis-à-vis power, prestige, and identity. Interview data reveal that each acquires distinct indexical trajectories as they interact differently with the dynamics of mobility. As speakers move across socio-geographic spaces, they confront competing value systems and linguistic norms that selectively elevate or marginalize local codes. These shifts are mediated by migration status, place of origin, and current residence. Examining how mobility reshapes these socio-indexical meanings illuminates the reorganization of linguistic hierarchies within the Ningbo-Fenghua region.

Fenghuanese: Migration reinforces stigma but also provides opportunities for empowerment

For Fenghua-born non-migrants, the indexical meanings of Fenghuanese remain anchored in historical stigma and regional economic marginality. Tongshu, who has never migrated, recalls it as a language long associated with inferiority and shame prior to Fenghua's administrative reclassification in 2016. His sensitivity to pronunciation reflects efforts to disalign from these negative associations by approximating Ningbonese norms (excerpt (4)). Without access to the contact zones and alternative value systems that migration affords, he continues to interpret Fenghuanese through a narrow, predominantly negative indexical frame. Similarly, Dingding's characterization of Fenghuanese as "not pure" or "inauthentic" reproduces these entrenched ideologies, illustrating how, in non-migrant contexts, linguistic stigma persists unchallenged and un-recalibrated.

(4) 有一段时间。就是，我会觉得就在宁波，整个宁波里面，就是，我是一个奉化人，好像带了一种自卑的情绪。就是奉化的发展，相对于整个宁波的其他比如镇海，海曙，相对来说比较差。特别是我在初中的时候，我们班那个时候地域歧视比较严重，然后这个时候，奉化正好是这个"排头兵"，然后有一种自卑的情绪 …当我跟，我就是出去跟同学玩，就是接触的时候。特别是初中同学，然后就曾经会因为就是语言发音闹过分歧的时候，　就是发音会特别注意一下(会尝试使用宁波话),就这么讲

'For a period of time, I felt like, in the whole of Greater Ningbo, "I was a Fenghua person" seemed to bring a sense of inferiority. Compared to other districts of Ningbo, like Zhenhai and Haishu, Fenghua's

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> development was relatively worse. Especially when I was in middle school, regional discrimination was quite severe in our class, and at that time, Fenghua was at the forefront of **being discriminated against,** which led to a feeling of inferiority.... When I went out and played with my classmates, especially my middle school classmates, there were times when disagreements arose because of pronunciation. At those times, I would be particularly mindful of my pronunciation and (would **try to speak Ningbonese**), that's how it goes.'
>
> (Tongshu, Fenghua-born non-migrant residing in Fenghua)

For Fenghua-born migrants to Ningbo, mobility catalyzes a reconfiguration of the indexical meanings attached to Fenghuanese. Ming, who relocated for work, links both Fenghuanese and Ningbonese to feelings of security and locality, suggesting that migration heightens awareness of linguistic identity (excerpt (3)). Through this movement, stigmatized associations of Fenghuanese, linked in participants' accounts to backwardness (*limited, lower-middle, bad-tempered, ugly*, and *poor*; see matched-guise results), are reinterpreted as markers of solidarity and resistance to dominant norms such as Putonghua. Fenghuanese thus becomes a resource for asserting insider belonging and challenging what Ming describes as the "bad" northern language. A similar process appears in Juanxi's description of Fenghuanese as *nga* (lit. 'hard'), an evaluative term indexing strength, directness, and even defiance (or even intelligence, c.f. **Discussion and conclusion**). Migration amplifies these meanings by situating Fenghuanese in contrastive relation to Ningbonese within Ningbo's more stratified linguistic landscape, where features like fast tempo and falling tones gain salience as cues of distinction.

Migration opens alternative indexical pathways for Fenghua-born individuals. While non-migrants remain embedded in localized frameworks of stigma, migrants encounter new contact zones that enable the revaluation of Fenghuanese as a marker of solidarity and belonging. However, this process is neither unidirectional nor uniformly empowering. For 'new Fenghua locals' such as Meidi, a Ningbo-born migrant to Fenghua, migration produces indexical ambivalence. Despite long-term residence, she orients away from Fenghuanese, perceiving its phonological features (e.g. falling tones) as indexical of rurality and diminished social value. Though she occasionally uses Fenghuanese, or what she calls "Fenghua-accented Ningbonese", in intimate contexts, she treats such usage as stylistically marked and suppresses it in urban spaces like downtown Ningbo, where these features risk negative uptake. Her linguistic self-monitoring reveals acute awareness of how specific variants operate within a stratified indexical field. Importantly, her disalignment is not with Fenghuanese as a whole, but socially recognizable or 'enregistered' features of Fenghuanese, indexical residues that compromise claims to urban legitimacy. In this context, migration does not produce reaffiliation or empowerment but sharpens sensitivity to indexical hierarchies, prompting active disidentification from stigmatized forms.

Ningbonese: Migration reinforces positive social meanings but also complicates them

For Ningbo-born non-migrants, Ningbonese functions as a key semiotic resource for constructing local authenticity and urban distinction. Speakers such as Jiajia

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describe a stratified linguistic order in which Ningbonese occupies a middle ground between Fenghuanese and Putonghua (cf. matched-guise results), valued not for institutional legitimacy but for its perceived *nga* 硬 'hard' qualities, that is, directness, clarity, and communicative assertiveness, attributes indexing moral stance and downtown Ningbo identity. Similarly, Jinghua's insistence that her niece learn Ningbonese reflects an ideological investment in the variety as a marker of rightful belonging and cultural continuity. Across these narratives, Ningbonese is emblematic of place and mobilized as a boundary resource distinguishing authentic locals from 'rural' outsiders, especially Fenghua speakers.

Among migrants to Fenghua, these meanings persist but are recontextualized. Meidi, a Ningbo-born speaker who has lived in Fenghua for over five decades, continues to orient toward Ningbonese as the normative standard. Although she acknowledges producing 'Fenghua-style Ningbonese' in casual contexts, she regards such speech as marked and undesirable in public settings, especially in central Ningbo. Her linguistic self-monitoring evidences a heightened indexical awareness: features associated with Fenghuanese are perceived as deviations that signal rurality and diminished prestige. Through this stance, Meidi balances local embeddedness with aspiration toward urban linguistic norms, using stylistic modulation to align with prestige while distancing herself from peripheral associations.

In contrast, Ziyan adopts a divergent stance, rejecting Ningbonese as outdated and expendable (excerpt (5)). His detachment signals disaffiliation from the variety's locally valued indexicalities. What once indexed urban rootedness and distinction is reframed as irrelevant within his post-migration linguistic ideology. Unlike Meidi's strategic accommodation, Ziyan's refusal constitutes an oppositional stance privileging utility over affiliation, redefining Ningbonese as a marker of obsolescence and symbolic excess. Migration, in this case, catalyzes a reconfiguration of linguistic value: by relocating speakers into new sociolinguistic ecologies where existing indexical orders lose traction, it compels a reassessment of the symbolic capital of local varieties and their alignment with emergent norms of mobility, modernity, and instrumental value.

(5) 那么如果是宁波话的话, 被普通话所代替掉了。那么作为普通话来说, 它如果能够准确的表达意思, 那么自己的子女对于学习宁波话没有任何兴趣的话, 我觉得可以不学习。

'If we are talking about Ningbonese [because it's non-functional], so it can be replaced by Putonghua. And if Putonghua can accurately convey the meaning, then if my children have no interest in learning Ningbonese, I think it's okay not to learn it.'

(Ziyan, Ningbo-born migrant to Fenghua)

Generational mediation of socio-indexical meaning under migration

Previous sections have shown how migration reshapes social hierarchies and language boundaries, however, an equally critical mediating force is generation. The perceptual effects of migration are generationally inflected, producing layered and sometimes conflicting orientations toward communicative function, social

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legitimacy, and linguistic value. This section examines how Putonghua, Ningbonese, and Fenghuanese acquire evolving meanings across generations within Fenghua-born migrant families in Ningbo, showing how generational position modulates language evaluations through situated acts of stance-taking and identity work.

Grandparents: Dialect as affective default facing rising Putonghua hegemony

For the eldest generation, Fenghuanese and Ningbonese seem to function as ontological defaults and not necessarily styles to be strategically chosen or leveraged. The use of these 'dialects' is unmarked in everyday life, learned through habitual practice rather than metalinguistic reflection. Their socialization occurred at a time when Fenghuanese and Ningbonese were considered hegemonic and powerful, as these languages were used in education, commerce, and domestic interaction, before Putonghua became fully institutionalized (see excerpt (6)).

(6) 走到宁波城区啦, 听到宁波话, 有一种亲切感。现在走进小区, 都是讲普通话啦, 总感觉语言上, 我们这样普通话不大会讲的, 总是非常难沟通。讲宁波话么, 就好沟通了, 主要我们普通话不会讲哦。……到宁波去了, 说奉化话人家一般都听得懂的。

'When I walked into the urban Ningbo and heard Ningbonese, I felt a sense of familiarity. Now when I walked into the residence community, everyone spoke Putonghua. I always felt that it was always very difficult for us who don't speak Putonghua well to communicate. If they speak Ningbonese, it will be easier to communicate, mainly because we don't speak Putonghua...In Ningbo, people here usually understand Fenghuanese.'

(Juanxi, Fenghua-born migrant to Ningbo)

In Juanxi's account, the once 'legitimate' communicative norms of Fenghuanese and Ningbonese among grandparents have become precarious under shifting language policies and urban sociolinguistic change. Grandparents now inhabit a contrastive frame: *dialect* versus *standard, familiarity* versus *estrangement, belonging* versus *exclusion*. Within this frame, Fenghuanese and Ningbonese converge into a perceived dialectal alliance: distinct yet co-intelligible and emotionally proximate. This can be interpreted as an *indexical field collapse* in which local varieties are unified against the generational and ideological dominance of Putonghua. However, intergenerational communication, particularly with younger family members, increasingly falters (p.c. Hanxi) as interpretive framings diverge, as if linguistic input were filtered through affective misalignment.

What grandparents treat as unmarked codes of intimacy and everyday life are increasingly reinterpreted by younger speakers as opaque, outdated, or socially irrelevant. This shift marks a broader reconfiguration of the indexical field: dialects no longer reliably cue belonging or moral legitimacy. While older speakers continue to link Fenghuanese and Ningbonese to care, belonging, familiarity, and authenticity, these associations are no longer intelligible to younger generations. The affective weight of grandparental speech persists, but its semiotic legibility erodes, producing cross-generational misalignment. The same forms index intimacy

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for one generation and incomprehension for another, rendering Fenghuanese and Ningbonese sites of stance misalignment and indexical 'slippage' where shared linguistic material no longer guarantees shared social meaning.

Parents: Dialect as gatekept legacy

The parent generation represents a transitional cohort whose language ideologies reflect migration-induced renegotiation of meaning. Unlike their parents, they possess operational fluency in Putonghua and partial competence in Ningbonese acquired post-migration, yet their first language remains Fenghuanese, rooted in rural childhood experience. This generational position enables both retention and distancing. Parents maintain the epistemic centrality of dialects in private domains, naming fish, recalling childhood, addressing elders, but deliberately restrict their use in childrearing (see excerpt (7)). Dialects, particularly Ningbonese, are framed as 'inappropriate' for urban life and excluded from aspirational linguistic trajectories. Although Ningbonese serves as a repository of local knowledge, this attachment is compartmentalized, preserved for memory and intimacy rather than projected into future generations.

(7) 她(指妈妈)带我回奉化, 然后讲东西, 就是在奉化的海边, 想告诉我一个什么不太认识的东西, 她告诉我这是什么的时候, 她会很自然地用宁波话讲出来, 她可能不太知道用普通话怎么讲。那时我来说, 我第一次听到这一个新鲜的宁波话的词汇, 我会好奇地问我妈妈就是如果它用普通话翻译过来, 这是叫什么?她就是说不出来。她的认知里面可能, 之前小的时候接受的概念就是它是用宁波话知道这个鱼的种类是怎么叫的。然后他没有那个概念, 要把它翻译成普通话, 也不会去查、去想

'She (referring to Hanxi's mother) took me back to Fenghua and told me something I didn't know. She wanted to tell me something at the seaside in Fenghua. When she told me what it was, she would naturally say it in Ningbonese. She might not know how to say it in Putonghua. For me, it was the first time I heard this new Ningbonese word. I would curiously ask my mother what it was called if it was translated into Putonghua. She just couldn't say it. In her cognition, she might have accepted the concept that she knew the name of this type of fish in Ningbonese when she was young. Then she didn't have the idea to translate it into Putonghua, and she wouldn't look it up or think about it.'

(Hanxi, Fenghua-born migrant to Ningbo)

Among the parent generation, dialect choice is filtered through the lens of urbanity. Fenghuanese is reinterpreted as a trace of rural origins, while Putonghua is embraced as a symbol of modernity and upward mobility (cf. matched-guise experiment). Juxtaposed with 'normative' Putonghua, Fenghuanese indexes backwardness or misalignment with urban life. By contrast, Putonghua is positioned as the appropriate linguistic style for navigating the city and projecting aspiration and sophistication. This logic is clearly illustrated in (see excerpt (8)).

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(8) **研究助理:**那你觉得就是你们家为什么会，就是像你妈，她为什么会选择用普通话跟你交流，而不是用宁波话?

'Why do you think your family, like your mom, would choose to communicate with you in Putonghua instead of Ningbonese?'

Lili:因为现在我妈是来了宁波，算大城市吧，那个小时候都是在乡村里面用那个奉化话比较好交流。到了大，大城，那应该随大城市然后就说了普通话。

'Because now my mother has moved to Ningbo, which is a big city. When she was a kid, she used Fenghuanese to communicate in the countryside. When she moved to a big city, probably we should speak Putonghua like the people in the city.'

(Lili, Fenghua-born migrant to Ningbo)

The parent generation thus occupies a pivotal role in the reorganization of the local indexical field, managing not just language use but the social meanings attached to it. Unlike their own parents, who treat dialects as unmarked and normative, they reframe Fenghuanese and Ningbonese as contextually bounded resources, indexing intimacy, memory, and local knowledge, but less aligned with urban aspiration. This selective retention reflects a situation where linguistic practice is recontextualized at the intersection of local authenticity and social mobility.

Children: Dialects as generational residues following the indexical collapse

For the youngest generation, language evaluations are framed by the post-migration linguistic order dominated by Putonghua. Dialects such as Fenghuanese and Ningbonese enter this landscape as peripheral, socially marked codes encountered primarily through grandparental speech and reframed within a Putonghua-centered semiotic hierarchy. Unlike their parents, who function as indexical gatekeepers, younger speakers act as indexical receptors: the end-users of a reorganized linguistic order. They inherit dialects as stylized residues, valued for their affective, nostalgic, or ironic meanings but increasingly inaccessible under Putonghua dominance. As Hanxi's account (excerpt (9)) shows, speaking Ningbonese remains meaningful: "a secret language" for communicating with grandparents, yet is experienced as self-conscious and even shameful ("embarrassed"), reflecting its declining practicality in everyday life.

(9) 我发现...不会讲[宁波话],然后我会卡壳…讲不出来之后我会把它带成普通话去讲…我会不太好意思，因为我感觉我不太会讲…感觉像在讲一种加密语言。...老师上课的时候偶然飙两句宁波话...我还会给他们旁边做翻译...

'I realized ... I **couldn't speak [Ningbonese],** and I'd get stuck... when I couldn't say it, I'd switch to Putonghua... I'd feel embarrassed, because I **didn't speak it [Ningbonese] well**... it **felt like speaking a secret language**... Sometimes the teacher would randomly throw in a few words of Ningbonese... and I'd translate for classmates next to me...'

(Hanxi, Fenghua-born migrant to Ningbo)

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Furthermore, the (non)use of the dialect is activated in specific contexts to navigate generational relationships. For Hanxi, the use of dialect in general is driven by the social meanings it can momentarily evoke, such as intimacy, generational contrast, or insider alignment. Clear boundaries that once distinguished Fenghuanese from Ningbonese, especially salient for the grandparents' generation, have blurred, resulting in an indexical collapse that gives rise to an emergent enregisterment of both as a unified, inherited style of 'old speech'. Hanxi's reflection captures this shift in (10) below.

(10) 我妈妈, 她是奉化人, 然后我外公外婆都是讲, 那也不能算宁波话, 那算奉化话吗?但其实都算宁波话范畴。

'My mother is from Fenghua, and my grandparents all speak it, but it can't be considered Ningbonese. Is it Fenghuanese? But in fact, they are all included in Ningbonese.'

(Hanxi, Fenghua-born migrant to Ningbo)

Younger speakers no longer recognize dialects as distinct local codes but collapse them into a broader generational category. What once indexed place-specific identity now signals age, ancestry, or family tradition. In this sense, dialect functions as *indexical residue*: a linguistic trace that retains symbolic weight but lies outside the core of active repertoires. This three-generation account reveals a patterned reconfiguration of linguistic value shaped by shifting generational stances in a migration context. For grandparents, Ningbonese and Fenghuanese remain unmarked and epistemically central; for parents, they are affectively retained yet withheld from aspirational domains; for youth, they persist as symbolic residues: stylistically marked, emotionally charged, but peripheral to everyday life. These differences reflect distinct chronotopic positions (Blommaert & De Fina 2017), that is, socially situated experiences of time and place that mediate how speakers interpret, value, and transmit linguistic forms across generations.

Discussion and conclusion

The adjective ratings, word cloud analysis, and interview narratives together reveal a stratified yet fluid hierarchy of language valuation in Ningbo-Fenghua, shaped by migration, mobility, and generation. Putonghua commands institutional prestige: rated as *educated, well-behaved*, and *urban*, and associated with income, higher education, and white-collar status, especially among urban non-migrants. However, interviews show that this prestige is affectively hollow: Putonghua functions as a default code of legitimacy rather than belonging or intimacy. Ningbonese occupies a strategic middle ground, linked to relaxedness and urban stability, bridging familiarity and respectability but occasionally dismissed as outdated or inauthentic. Fenghuanese emerges as the most dynamic: although routinely downgraded on prestige traits, it is elevated for its traditional, domestic, and intergenerational values. Interviews reveal sharply divergent orientations: among non-migrants, Fenghuanese acts as a gatekeeping code of local identity, while among migrants it becomes a resource for affective solidarity.

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Apparent contradictions across datasets cohere when interpreted through local ideologies of speech and identity. Likert-scale data show that Fenghua-born migrants rated Fenghuanese as more intelligent than any other group, which is paradoxical given its low prestige. Interviews clarify that this stems from an indexical field organized around the phonetic and affective quality of 硬 (/ŋã/, *nga*, 'hard'), which links sound, stance, and cognition. Juanxi, one of the highest raters (mean = 4, SD = 0), described Fenghuanese as 石骨铁硬的 "stone-hard and iron-solid' and 标准的奉化话 'standard Fenghua speech', contrasting it with the 软 'soft' tones of Ningbonese. Here, 硬 connotes standardness, correctness, and verbal authority. Other participants elaborated: Jiajia associated it with directness and clarity; Yuran described its 'crisp' pace (干脆), and Xinyi linked its falling tones to decisiveness. Across these accounts, 硬 clusters qualities of speed, clarity, and control: traits indexing intelligence not as testable aptitude but as disciplined, articulate thought. Within this ideological frame, 'hard' speech becomes an audible index of cognitive sharpness and evaluative discernment, allowing Fenghua-born migrants to revalue a stigmatized dialect as a sign of practical intelligence and self-assuredness, paralleling Ziyan's account of Putonghua's symbolic but hollow prestige.

Ningbonese, meanwhile, embodies ambivalence. In ratings, it occupies a neutral middle, neither prestigious nor stigmatized, however, word cloud descriptors such as *worker* and *retired* evoke classed familiarity. This tension is resolved through Meidi's narrative: she uses Ningbonese privately but avoids it publicly, fearing it may index ruralness or being "old-fashioned". This private-public divide explains its neutral ratings yet marked associations when made explicit. The ambivalence also extends to Ningbonese's relation with Fenghuanese: though institutionally distinct, both share overlapping descriptors (*housewife, leisure, retired*), blurring dialectal boundaries. Interviews with younger migrants such as Hanxi and Lili show that these varieties are increasingly collapsed into a generational category of 'old speech', where spatial distinctions fade and what endures are associations of age, intimacy, and familial memory. The convergence of descriptors thus reflects a generational rescaling of linguistic value, where dialectal difference is reinterpreted through affect, age, and kinship rather than geography or status.

Unexpected findings and explanations

A striking finding is that Fenghua-born migrants engage in far more dynamic revaluations of Fenghuanese than their Ningbo-born counterparts. This challenges Global North assumptions that urban speakers, closer to institutional norms and dominant ideologies, are more likely to rework the social meanings of peripheral codes (Ilbury 2024). In such accounts, urban proximity supposedly provides the discursive resources and metapragmatic awareness needed to reframe stigmatized varieties, as in the re-valuing of AAVE in US hip hop or Cockney features in London's multicultural styles. However, across all datasets, it is peripheral, non-urban speakers who display greater semiotic agility and indexical reflexivity. On the adjective scale, Fenghua-born migrants rate Fenghuanese higher on traits such as *intelligent* and *friendly*, disrupting its conventional devaluation. Word-cloud data echo this shift, associating the dialect with *graduate, liberal*, and *comfortable*, recoding it as aspirational and agentive. Interviews further show that speakers like Juanxi treat

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Fenghuanese as a strategic resource for intimacy, authenticity, and urban navigation, describing it as a "secret language" used to signal trust and solidarity in ambiguous contexts, and not a rural marker.

A second notable finding is the collapse of dialectal distinctions among younger speakers. Whereas older generations like Tongshu maintain sharp ideological divides between Fenghuanese and Ningbonese, younger respondents show far less investment in such boundaries. Adjective-scale and word-cloud data reveal overlapping descriptors—that is, *housewife, retired,* and *leisure*—appearing across both dialects. Interviews clarify this flattening: participants such as Hanxi and Lili describe both as a blurred, generational category of 'old speech'. For them, dialect use evokes intimacy with grandparents but lacks the locally differentiated meanings salient to elders. This points to a process of *indexical override*, where generational affiliation increasingly overrides spatial distinction.

The sociohistorical and political structuring of dialect ideologies

The findings are closely tied to the broader sociopolitical dynamics of state-guided mobility and regional absorption. Fenghua's (2016) reclassification as a Ningbo district, though framed as bureaucratic, unsettled longstanding notions of identity and legitimacy. Many residents continue to identify as *Fenghuaren* (Fenghua people) rather than *Ningboren* (Ningbo people), resisting the symbolic implications of absorption. These tensions surface sociolinguistically: dialects act as affective anchors and semiotic tools for recalibrating belonging, especially among Fenghua-born migrants, for whom Fenghuanese indexes both identity and resistance to erasure. Historical mobility policies such as the 'Down to the Countryside' movement and the graduate job assignment system institutionalized circulation between Ningbo and Fenghua, producing durable sociolinguistic entanglements that continue to shape contemporary practices.

Meidi and Ziyan exemplify how these policy legacies sediment into distinct linguistic orientations. Meidi, a Ningbo-born worker reassigned to Fenghua under the job assignment system, internalizes the ideological asymmetries of that era: she avoids Fenghuanese in professional contexts, viewing it as tied to rural marginality. This stance echoes matched-guise data showing Ningbo-born migrants downrating Fenghuanese on traits like *intelligent* and *pretty*, and word associations such as *worker* and *ordinary*. Ziyan, by contrast, represents a later wave of migrants shaped by marriage and employment mobility in the 2010s. His disengagement from dialect is pragmatic rather than stigmatic: he regards Ningbonese as 'outdated' and irrelevant to professional goals. For Ziyan and peers, Ningbonese collapses into an 'old speech' category with limited or transformed symbolic value, while Putonghua functions as a utilitarian, accessible institutional code. Likert data corroborate this reframing: Putonghua is no longer tied to elite traits like *white-collar* or *doctor*, but to *ordinary, stable*, and *responsible*, marking a shift from prestige to pragmatic legibility.

These divergent orientations illustrate how dialectal meaning is continually reworked through mobility and institutional change. Like Karatsareas' (2021) London Cypriot youth, who re-register Cypriot Greek as 'slang' within new prestige systems, and Wan's (2022a) Kinmenese speakers, who invert stigma by linking Hokkien to 'imagined Chineseness', Ningbo-Fenghua speakers reposition dialects to

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align with emergent value regimes. In all cases, local varieties become ideological resources for negotiating belonging, moral legitimacy, and identity under changing structural conditions. The Fenghua-Ningbo case thus exposes the ideological scaffolding through which 'ordinary variation' becomes a site of social and political negotiation where administrative reclassification and policy-mediated mobility reconfigure not only regional identity but the very meanings attached to language itself.

Concluding remarks: Migration, socio-indexical value, and the Global South

This study advances a critical intervention in Global South sociolinguistics by foregrounding two-way parallel migration, both 'rural'-to-urban and urban-to-'rural' movement, as a structuring force in the production and reconfiguration of indexical meaning. Unlike Global North paradigms that emphasize elite, cosmopolitan mobility and the accumulation of linguistic capital through English, the Fenghua-Ningbo case illustrates mobility shaped by institutional redistribution: administrative absorption, intra-regional re-organization, and state-directed job placement. Such movement not only relocates speakers but also reshapes the semiotic conditions under which linguistic forms gain value. Instead of producing uniform language shift or dialect loss, migration, from the data, generates asymmetrical revaluations: for example, traits like *pretty* or *natural* remain stable, while prestige-linked attributes (e.g. *educated*) are reassigned across trajectories. The resulting indexical fields are relational and multi-tiered: Fenghua-born migrants to Ningbo retain the affective affordances of Fenghuanese, while Ningbo-born residents in Fenghua renegotiate Ningbonese use to maintain proximity to urban symbolic capital.

As speakers traverse administrative, spatial, and generational boundaries, they reconfigure linguistic meanings, sometimes reinforcing inherited ideologies, other times dislodging them. 'Peripheral' languages such as Fenghuanese and Ningbonese are thus valuated anew: reframed as intimate resources, rejected as outdated, or rendered ideologically inert depending on the direction of movement and position within state-orchestrated mobility frameworks. Meanwhile, Putonghua shifts from a marker of elite aspiration to a pragmatic default, signaling a broader transition from prestige to functional legibility. These patterns unsettle Global North assumptions that exclusively link indexical transformation to cosmopolitan prestige economies, showing instead that meaning-making in the Global South can be mediated by administrative reclassification, spatial governance, and historically sedimented hierarchies. Tracing how dialects and their social values co-migrate reveals how language is not merely moved but continually made meaningful through mobility, within systems shaped more by state developmental priorities than by neoliberal markets.

Note

1. The local research assistant, a *Fenghuaren* (Fenghua native) with long-term experience in both downtown Ningbo (eleven years) and Fenghua (twelve years), was fluent in Fenghuanese, Ningbonese, and Putonghua. Their emic perspective deepened interpretive insight, trust, and cultural sensitivity throughout fieldwork. They contributed to participant recruitment, interview facilitation, and the interpretation

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of subtle linguistic and social cues, while their reflexive awareness of intra-community hierarchies ensured ethical engagement. Initially listed as a co-author, they later voluntarily withdrew from authorship due to concerns over state censorship and personal safety. This decision, made independently, allowed the research to circulate safely while honoring the project's collaborative intent. In correspondence, they described publication as both an act of resistance and a continuation of their shared ethnographic commitment. Should conditions permit, authorship will be reconsidered to acknowledge their foundational contributions.

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Appendix A. Semi-structured interview questions 访谈问题

Identity

1. In your opinion, what does it mean to be a Fenghua local?
   在你看来, 什么叫一个奉化人?
2. In your opinion, what does it mean to be a Ningbo local?
   在你看来, 什么叫一个宁波人?
3. How do you feel when people identify you as a Fenghua local?
   当别人叫你"奉化人", 你感觉如何?
4. How do you feel when people identify you as a Ningbo local?
   当别人叫你"宁波人", 你感觉如何?
5. Is there a difference between being a Fenghua local and a Ningbo local? What is the difference for you?
   做一个奉化人或者一个宁波人在你看来有区别吗?区别在哪?
6. In your opinion, is it possible to have these identities simultaneously, such that there is a hybrid Ningbo-Fenghua identity? Why or why not? What does it mean to be a Ningbo-Fenghua person?
   在你看来, 是否存在着一种这两者的混合身份, 即这两个身份可以同时出现?为什么(不)呢?什么叫做这种双重身份?
7. Would you consider yourself an individual with hybrid Ningbo-Fenghua identity? Why or why not?
   你会认为你拥有这样的双重身份吗?为什么(不)?

Language

1. In your opinion, do you speak authentic Fenghuahua? How so or how not so? Can you give examples of features that mark the use of the Fenghua dialect?
   在你看来, 你说的是标准奉化话吗?为什么(不)?你可以给出一些作为奉化话特征的例子吗?
2. In your opinion, do you speak the authentic Ningbohua? How so or how not so? Can you give examples of features that mark the use of the Ningbohua?

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在你看来, 你说的是标准宁波话吗?为什么(不)?你可以给出一些作为宁波话特征的例子吗?

3. Do you think the Fenghuahua you speak or other people speak is influenced by other languages? What languages? And how does it influence the Fenghuahua?
   你认为你说的方言是否受到了其他语言的影响?是什么语言?它是怎么影响的?
4. If you had a child, would you wish him or her to learn Fenghuahua? Why or why not?
   如果你有孩子的话, 你会让他/她学奉化话吗?为什么(不)?
5. If you had a child, would you wish him or her to learn Ningbohua? Why or why not?
   如果你有孩子的话, 你会让他/她学宁波话吗?为什么(不)?
6. In your opinion, what is the status of Fenghuahua used in the central Ningbo? Why do you think such is the case?
   在你看来, 在宁波城区说奉化话是怎么样的一种情况?你为什么会这么认为?
7. In your opinion, what is the status of the Ningbohua used in the central Ningbo? Why do you think such is the case?
   在你看来, 在宁波城区说宁波话是怎么样的一种情况?你为什么会这么认为?
8. Do you think Fenghuahua is important for you? Why or why not?
   对你来说, 奉化话重要吗?为什么(不)?
9. Do you think Ningbohua is important for you? Why or why not?
   对你来说, 宁波话重要吗?为什么(不)?
10. When do you use the Fenghuahua if you can speak it?
    如果你会说奉化话的话, 你什么情况下会使用它?
11. When do you use Ningbohua (at least try to)?
    如果你会说宁波话的话, 在什么情况下你会使用它?
12. For younger generations: Why do you not use Fenghuahua with peers outside school if you can speak it?
    对年轻人的提问: 如果你会说奉化话的话, 你为什么不在校外和同龄人使用奉化话交流?
13. For older generations: How do you feel about the younger generation not using Fenghuahua if they can speak it?
    对长者的提问:你对年轻人不再说奉化话的现象是怎么看待的?
14. Do you think we should protect Fenghuahua? Why or why not?
    你认为我们要不要保护奉化话? 为什么(不)?
15. How can we protect Fenghuahua?
    我们该如何保护奉化话?

Appendix B. Revised question list of semi-structured interview/survey

Section 1: Language practices

1. Can you understand or speak FHH/NBH?
   你能听懂奉化话/宁波话吗?
2. What language do you usually speak at home?
   你在家里通常说什么语言?
3. Do you speak the same language with your parents, grandparents, and siblings?
   你和爸爸妈妈、爷爷奶奶、兄弟姐妹说话时, 用的语言一样吗?
4. Do you remember what language your family used when you were little? Has that changed?
   你记得小时候家里人是用什么语言和你说话的吗?现在还是一样吗?

Section 2: Family language choices and attitudes

5. Why do you think your family chose to speak PTH/NBH/FHH with you?
   你觉得为什么你家选择用普通话/宁波话/ 奉化话 跟你说话?
6. Have your parents ever said they prefer you to speak—or not speak—a certain language?
   父母有没有告诉过你希望你说哪种语言?
7. Do you remember being corrected, encouraged, or discouraged when you tried to speak FHH/NBH as a child?
   小时候你有没有试着说方言, 但被纠正、鼓励或阻止的经历?

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8. Would you want to pass FHH/NBH on to your future children? Why or why not?
将来你会想把奉化话/宁波话 教给你的孩子吗?为什么或为什么不?
9. Compared to your parents or grandparents, do you think your generation feels differently about FHH/NBH?
跟你父母或祖父母比起来, 你觉得你们这一代对奉化话/宁波话的感觉有什么不一样?
10. Is NBH or FHH important to your belonging, or your sense of identity? Why or why not? Why or why not?
你觉得奉化话/宁波话对你的身份认同来说重要吗?为什么或为什么不?
11. Do you feel that speaking FHH/NBH connects you more deeply to your hometown or community? Why or why not?
你觉得说奉化话/宁波话有没有让你更有"本地人"的感觉?为什么或为什么不?

Section 3: Attitudes toward FHH/NBH

12. How do you feel when speaking FHH or NBH? For example, you feel familiar, awkward, old-fashioned, comfortable, or something else? Why or why not?
你说 奉化话/宁波话 的时候是什么感觉?比如感到亲切、尴尬、土、自在, 还是别的?为什么或为什么不?
13. Do your friends or classmates speak FHH/NBH at school? How do they feel about using local languages?
在学校里, 你身边的朋友、同学有很多会说 奉化话/宁波话吗?他们怎么看待说方言这件事?
14. If you can speak FHH/NBH, would you feel comfortable using it at school, or with friends? Why or why not?
如果你会说 奉化话/宁波话, 你会在学校或朋友面前说吗?为什么或为什么不?

Section 4: Gendered differences

15. Based on your observation, do you think there's a difference between how boys and girls use FHH/NBH at school?
根据你的观察, 在学校里你觉得男生和女生在说 奉化话/宁波话上有不一样的地方吗?
16. How do you feel when your classmates speak FHH/NBH to you at school? Is there a gender difference? If a girl or boy speak to you in FHH/NBH, what do you feel?
当你的同学在学校里跟你说奉化话/宁波话, 你的感觉如何?会因为说话者的性别产生差异吗?
17. What are the most frequently used FHH/NBH at school?
在学校里大家最常说的奉化话/宁波话有哪些?男生/女生说的奉化话/宁波话有什么特点吗?Are there any features that FHH/NBH that boys/girls specifically use?
18. Have you ever felt that your gender affected whether or how you use FHH/NBH?
你有没有因为是女生(或男生)而对说不说方言有过什么影响?

Section 5: Narrative elicitation

19. Is there a specific memory that made you feel special about speaking FHH or NBH? Can you share the story with me?
有没有哪个具体的瞬间或记忆, 让你对说 奉化话/宁波话 有特别的感受?你可以与我分享这个故事吗?

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