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Simultaneous Interpreting with Accented Mandarin

A study on the perception of quality in Taiwan

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Abstract: This study investigates the perception of simultaneous interpreting (SI) quality among accented Mandarin interpreters in Taiwan. Four hundred Taiwanese individuals were recruited online for a controlled experiment, where participants were randomly assigned, in equal numbers, to listen to one of four SI versions. Each version was distinguished solely by accent: Taiwan Mandarin, Chinese Standard Mandarin, Malaysian Mandarin, and US-accented Mandarin. Subsequently, participants were asked to evaluate the SI quality using a nine-item questionnaire, and optional comment sections were available for them to provide written feedback. Ratings were analyzed quantitatively, while comments were subjected to qualitative analysis. Results indicate that SI quality was evaluated less favorably in terms of comprehensibility and performance satisfaction with increasing markedness of accent. The Chinese Standard Mandarin accent was regarded as the suitable stylistic choice because of its "standard" prestige. However, it also faced some criticism, particularly for what certain participants perceived as mispronunciations. Among the non-Taiwanese Mandarin accents, Malaysian Mandarin was perceived as the most favorable for comprehensibility and satisfaction, likely due to its perceived similarities with Taiwan Mandarin. In contrast, American-accented Mandarin received the lowest ratings for comprehensibility. Nevertheless, there was

a general sense of support for the US interpreter, possibly suggesting that perceived deficiencies in SI were attributed to factors beyond the interpreter's control, such as their non-native background, as inferred from their accent. This study reveals that accent significantly influences interpreting quality perceptions, challenging prior beliefs of its minimal impact and underscoring its importance in interpreter training and development. The interpreting market is affected by complex dynamics involving diverse stakeholder biases towards accents, so interpreters face the dual challenge of adapting to a neutral accent to satisfy client expectations while preserving their own accent identity. However, increasing global and local focus on linguistic diversity may enhance accent tolerance and reduce accent-based judgments.

Keywords: interpreting quality, Mandarin, accent, accent stereotype, simultaneous interpreting

摘要：此項研究旨在透過實驗探討臺灣聽眾如何評價不同華語口音的口譯品質。實驗在線上邀請共四百位臺灣受試者，並將參與者隨機且平均分配至四個組別，分別聆聽下列其中一個版本的口譯：臺灣華語、中國普通話、馬來西亞口音華語、美國口音華語。這四個口譯版本僅在口譯員的口音上有差異。結束後，參與者須填寫一份口譯品質評價問卷，為九項評價標準評分，也可填寫意見。量化及質化分析顯示，口音愈明顯，口譯品質評價愈低。中國標準華語口音獲得正面及負面評價，一方面被視為口譯員應當使用的標準口音，另一方面也有參與者認為其發音應當修正。馬來西亞華語口音在內容可理解性及整體表現方面所獲得的評分為非臺灣口譯員中最高，可能是因為該口音與臺灣口音相似。美國華語口音在內容可理解性及整體表現方面所獲得的評分為非臺灣口譯員中最低，但參與者所填寫的意見給予了該口譯員許多鼓勵，可能是因為參與者透過該口音認知到口譯員非華語母語人士，並將該口譯員較差的口譯表現歸因於此。這項研究顯示，口音顯著影響聽眾對口譯品質的認知。這挑戰了先前認為口音影響微乎其微的看法，並凸顯了口譯員培訓必須重視口音。口譯市場受到複雜多變的因素影響，其中涉及不同利害關係者對口音的偏見。因此，口譯員面臨雙重挑戰：一方面需調整自己的口音以符合客戶的期待，另一方面維持自己的口音以反映自我認同。然而，隨著各地對語言多樣性日益關注，各方或能接受更多元的口音，減少基於口音的價值判斷。

關鍵詞：口譯品質、華語、口音、口音成見、同步口譯

1. Introduction: Microhistory

According to the United Nations (2019), international migration has significantly grown from 153 million in 1990 to 272 million in 2019, enhancing cross-cultural interactions (Unbabel, 2019). This global trend is reflected within Taiwan, which has emerged as an attractive destination for international talent, marked by growth in both education and the workforce. Taiwan's higher education is appealing due to affordability, ranking as the 5th most cost-effective place to study (Minsky, 2017). International students numbered 103,658 in the 2022–2023 school year, among which, more than half came from Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia (National Development Council, 2022). This 30% increase since 2013 is vital in counterbalancing Taiwan's low birth rate, supporting the sustainability of over 160 higher education institutions.

For non-local students aspiring to become interpreters in Taiwan, accents often pose a significant challenge. Studies indicate that an interpreter's accent can lead to both positive and negative perceptions based on stereotypes concerning the speaker's race, social status, enthusiasm, confidence, intelligence, academic success, and even physical appearance (Rubin, 2012). This presumably stems from the close connection between social information and speech perception (Niedzielski, 1999). For example, Niedzielski observed that listeners "heard" the Canadian English variant known as Canadian Raising (CR) when told the speaker was Canadian but were less likely to recognize CR if told the speaker was from Michigan. Additionally, some studies have shown that speakers perceived as having higher social status, belonging to a favored ethnic group, or exhibiting similarities to listeners may receive more positive judgments (Cargile & Giles, 1998; Lippi-Green, 2012). In contrast, non-native accents, signifying deviation from the norm, may be subjected to unfounded stereotyping concerning character and physical traits (Goffman, 1963). Such accents often face lower credibility due to processing difficulty, making accented speech appear less trustworthy, even when conveying information from native speakers (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010).

Accent, despite being a prominent feature of speech, has consistently been rated as the least important criterion in assessing the quality of interpreting (Amini et al., 2015; Kurz, 2001). However, the question of whether it is truly irrelevant has rarely been empirically challenged. A public survey initiated by Niewiarowski (2010) on ProZ.com showed mixed

opinions on the necessity for interpreters to have a native-like accent, with 54% considering it unnecessary. Some participants believed a native-like accent to be essential to avoid hindering comprehension or questioning professionalism. Others argued that clear understanding was key, and non-native accents might be more widely comprehensible than certain regional native accents. Cheung (2003) showed differences in tolerance to non-native accents, with native Cantonese speakers being less tolerant, and suggested that accent might invoke negative stereotypes. Cheung (2013) confirmed that non-native accented interpreters were rated lower in quality due to reasons such as extra listening effort, negative stereotypes as unreliable, and concerns over local workers' job prospects. Chang (2009) was one of the few studies that examined how an interpreter's enunciation affects Taiwan audience perception in two aspects: professionalism and favorability. The study recruited 21 students from a university in central Taiwan to rate four sets of matched guises of speeches recorded by two Chinese and two Taiwan professional interpreters. Each interpreter produced three versions of recordings in different pronunciations: Standard Mandarin, a Natural guise, and an Accented guise. The study was then replicated in northeastern China by recruiting 89 students as participants. Both studies showed that Standard Mandarin was viewed as more professional and favorable for interpreters when content rendition was kept constant. Thus, the influence of accent on perceived interpreting quality may be more complex and significant than traditionally assumed, raising questions about how it actually matters.

Despite some existing research, the impact of accent stereotypes on users' attitudes towards interpretation quality in Taiwan is largely unexplored. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a preliminary investigation into how Taiwanese audiences perceive the quality of interpretations by Mandarin speakers with various accents. Specifically, an experiment was designed to examine perceptions of quality in interpretations performed by speakers using different Mandarin accents. This focus stems from the fact that non-native interpreters in Taiwan must often work not only into their native language but also into Mandarin, Taiwan's principal communication language, which might be a secondary or tertiary language for some non-native interpreters. The experimental approach was modeled after the work of Cheung (2013), who explored the influence of non-native accents on perceptions of simultaneous interpreting (SI) quality in Hong Kong. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How will native Mandarin speakers in Taiwan perceive Mandarin interpretations by non-native accented interpreters?
2. Will interpretations by non-native speakers of different Mandarin varieties be perceived differently?

Based on the research questions, we formulated the following hypotheses: (1) the interpreting quality of the Taiwanese interpreter would be perceived more favorably than that of the Malaysian, Shanghainese, and US interpreters, based on accent; and (2) the three non-Taiwanese interpreters would be perceived differently from one another, with these perceptions guided by the stereotypes associated with their respective accents.

To avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding, the operational definitions of several key terminologies, which could bear different meanings in different literature, are provided below. These operational definitions are adopted or re-appropriated from Her (2009) and entries of Merriam-Webster's online dictionary.

1. Mandarin: the umbrella term for the Mandarin variety most widely spoken today by Chinese or ethnic Chinese people around the world as the common language. People in different parts of the world speak Mandarin with their own unique features.
2. Standard Mandarin in China / Chinese Standard Mandarin: the Beijing Mandarin dialect recognized as the official modern Chinese spoken language used in China.
3. Standard Mandarin in Taiwan / Taiwanese Standard Mandarin: the established standard for Mandarin education in Taiwan, commonly referred to as *Guoyu* ("national language 國語"). It is highly similar to Standard Mandarin in China, with an emphasis on "*exquisite* enunciation and intonation[1]".
4. *Exquisite* enunciation and intonation: the way of pronunciation where a person pronounces every word clearly and correctly according to the established standard for Mandarin education. The terminology is adopted from the work of Chang (2009) which investigated whether such a way of pronunciation is necessary for an interpreter.
5. Taiwan Mandarin: the form of Mandarin spoken by at least 90% of

1 Referred to as *zì zhèng qiāng yuan* [字正腔圓] in Chang (2009).

Taiwanese today in real-life settings (Her, 2009). Although Taiwanese usually refer to their spoken Mandarin as *Guoyu*, these two terms are defined as distinctive from each other in this study. Taiwan Mandarin is a variety that has deviated from Standard Mandarin in China and Taiwan throughout time with unique phonological and lexical features. The most obvious difference between Standard Mandarin in Taiwan and Taiwan Mandarin is that Taiwan Mandarin does not emphasize *exquisite* enunciation and intonation.

6. Malaysian Mandarin: the variation of Mandarin spoken by Malaysian Chinese as their common language. It contains fundamental features of Standard Mandarin in China, but exhibits unique features that resulted from interactions with the Chinese dialects and other working languages in Malaysia.
7. Native speaker: a first-language speaker.
8. Native accent: the accent of the first language speakers.

2. Methods

2.1 Experimental Materials

As English is the most commonly acquired foreign language for Taiwanese, conference participants may not be motivated to listen attentively to the interpreters if they feel that they have, to some extent, the ability to understand the source language by themselves. To tackle this issue, Cheung (2013) required his participants to take a comprehension test after the SI session, and the highest scorer on the test was rewarded. However, participants have limited time and attention span. To address this issue, this study created the need for listening to interpretation by using a presumably unintelligible language to most Taiwanese for the source speech. A female Indian native speaker of Tamil was recruited to record the source speech audio track.

The speech was adapted from a webinar titled "Prospect for the Post-Pandemic Bilateral Cooperation Between Taiwan and India" co-organized by two think tanks in July 2020. In particular, the content focusing on Taiwan-India bilateral trade and investment opportunities and job market prospects were extracted. The total length of the source speech audio was initially

5 minutes and 20 seconds. However, to account for the limited attention span of the participants, only a part of the speech was extracted to be used as the source speech in the experiment. After reducing it to an excerpt that still retained a complete meaning unit structure of introduction, gist, and conclusion, the final source speech audio track was 2 minutes.

Four Mandarin speakers were recruited to play the role of interpreters in this study. They shadowed the same Mandarin interpretation of the source speech, prepared in advance. By shadowing, the "interpreters" imitated the intonation and pauses of the shadowed speech, thereby producing four simulated simultaneous interpreting (SI) recordings which technically only differed in their accents. The four speakers included a Taiwanese speaking Taiwan Mandarin (the control group), a Shanghainese speaking Standard Mandarin in China, a Malaysian speaking Malaysian Mandarin, and an American speaking Taiwan Mandarin as she learned Mandarin in Taiwan as her second language. Their Mandarin accents are likely the most common Mandarin accents that could be encountered in Taiwan. All four speakers were female, as gender is considered a variable, because cultural norms associated with gender roles and expectations in different societies (Yenkimaleki et al., 2017) could influence the choice of words and structures in delivering the same concept (Hilmioğlu, 2015).

To control the markedness of their accents from confounding the experiment, a pilot test was conducted. The four speakers recorded a 1-minute Mandarin speech of the same text in their most comfortable ways of speaking Mandarin. Next, 30 Taiwanese were recruited to rate all four recordings using a six-point Likert scale, with 0 indicating "no accent", 1 indicating "very weak accent", to 5 indicating "very strong accent". They also had to determine where each interpreter came from by choosing among four options: Taiwan, China, Southeast Asia, or Europe/US. The results of the pilot test showed that more than 70% of the participants accurately identified the origins of the three non-Taiwanese speakers, and the ratings for their accent markedness were not significantly different ($p = .764$).

Each version of the interpretation audio track was then combined with the same source speech audio track to produce 4 dual-track audio files, with the source speech as a faint background soundtrack to simulate real conference settings where the audience could still hear the speaker while wearing the interpretation headset.

2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited from the general public to reflect the composition of conference attendees in real-life. They may come from all walks of life, be of different age groups and different genders. No deliberate effort was made to exclude individuals who had previously studied in language-related departments from participating, as seen in Cheung (2013), because this study aims to investigate the perceptions of the general public, which also include those who have received interpreter training before. The only eligibility requirement was that they had to be Taiwanese. A total of 400 participants were recruited online, a sample size slightly higher than the number of participants needed to obtain experimental results with a confidence level of 95%, a 5% margin of error, and a 50% variability (n = 385). A total of 100 convenience store vouchers, each with a TWD 100 value, were offered as lucky draw prizes to attract participants to the experiment.

2.3 Procedure

The experiment was conducted as an online questionnaire and was posted on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Line, and online forums. Participants were randomly assigned and evenly distributed to one of the four groups. First, they were first asked to fill out part one of a questionnaire surveying their language exposure backgrounds. The information could later be used to compare their familiarity with the variations of Mandarin accents against their interpreting quality perceptions. This was integrated in the experiment because studies have shown that less listening effort may be needed if participants have previously been exposed to, and are familiar with, non-native phonological features (Cheung, 2013), because the knowledge of these regularities should lead to more efficient decoding of the speech signal, and therefore to improved processing efficiency (Clarke & Garrett, 2004).

Next, participants were required to listen to one of the four versions of SI with different Mandarin accents: the Taiwan Mandarin accent (TW), the Malaysian accent (MY), the Chinese Standard Mandarin accent (CN), and the US accent (US). Participants then filled out part two of the questionnaire surveying their perceptions on nine interpreting quality items. Participants were asked to rate each item based on the performances of the interpreters using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree). An

optional comment section was provided for the participants to elaborate on their rating for each item. The selected survey items were adapted from Cheung (2013) but with the elimination of item 2 ("There were no mistakes in the SI delivery") and item 6 ("The SI was fluent"). Item 2 was eliminated as this study chose Tamil as the source language, which was unintelligible to most Taiwanese. Item 6 was eliminated as the concept of fluency seemed to overlap with other items in the survey, namely "The SI delivery was well-paced", "The SI delivery did not have long pauses", "The SI was in sync with the speaker".

2.4 Data Analysis

A total of 400 valid questionnaire responses were collected for the experiment. The control group and three experimental groups each yielded 100 responses with no missing data. The interpreting quality items surveyed were coded in the manner as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Interpreting quality items surveyed in the experiment

Dimension	Code	Interpreting quality item
Accent markedness (AM)	I5	The interpreter has an accent.
Comprehensibility (Q_{com})	I1	I can understand what the interpreter said.
	I2	The interpreter spoke clearly.
Delivery (Q_{del})	I3	The interpreter's delivery was well-paced.
	I4	The interpreter's delivery did not have long pauses (did not speak) other than the times when the speaker stopped speaking.
	I6	The interpreter's delivery was in sync with the speaker.
Satisfaction (Q_{sat})	I7	The interpreter delivered the SI very professionally.
	I8	I am satisfied with the overall SI performance.
	I9	I will recommend that the same interpreter be hired again for a similar event.

The interpreters' Accent Markedness (AM) was the independent variable of the experiment. The other eight interpreting quality items (the dependent variables) were categorized into three dimensions to better understand whether an interpreter's accent affected their Comprehensibility (Q_{com}), Delivery (Q_{del}), and/or perceived performance Satisfaction (Q_{sat}). For each

group, a mean rating was obtained for each category by summing up the ratings of all items in a category then divided by the total number of ratings. For example, the mean rating of Group TW's Q_{com} was obtained by adding up the ratings of I1 and I2 of the group, then divided by 200.

3. Results

Table 2 summarizes the demographic distribution of the participants' age, gender, and highest level of educational attainment. The majority of the participants were aged between 25 and 34, a pattern that might reflect the age distribution of internet users, as the survey was administered online. Furthermore, the predominant educational qualification among the participants was a bachelor's degree.

Table 2: Background of participants

Category		TW	MY	SH	US	Total
Gender distribution	Male	40	43	41	42	166
	Female	60	57	59	58	234
Age distribution	12-17	2	3	0	3	8
	18-24	21	10	19	20	70
	25-34	60	57	51	47	215
	35-44	12	21	21	21	75
	45-54	4	6	4	7	21
	55-64	1	1	5	2	9
	65-74	0	2	0	0	2
Highest level of educational attainment	High school and below	12	8	5	7	32
	5-year junior college	2	2	2	8	14
	Undergraduate	54	59	57	56	226
	Post-graduate	32	31	36	29	128

To understand their language background, the participants were also asked to identify their most proficient speaking and listening languages. All four groups chose Mandarin as their most proficient speaking (chosen by over 94%) and listening (chosen by over 96%) language.

3.1 Quantitative Analysis of Accent Markedness and Perceived Interpreting Quality

The mean ratings of Accent Markedness (AM), Comprehensibility (Q_{com}), Delivery (Q_{del}), and Satisfaction (Q_{sat}) are shown in Table 3. A higher rating of AM indicates greater agreement among participants that an interpreter "has an accent", while a higher rating for any of the eight interpreting quality items in Q_{com}, Q_{del}, and Q_{sat} signifies that a participant perceived that aspect of interpreting quality as more favorable.

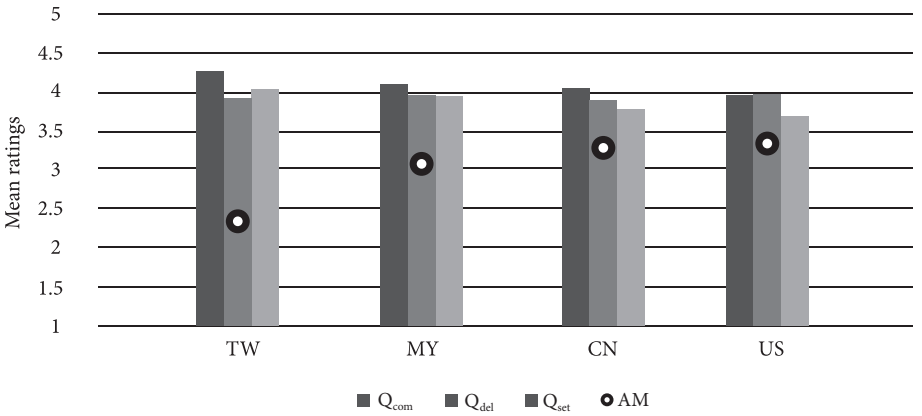
Table 3: Quality ratings of accent markedness, comprehensibility, delivery, and satisfaction

Interpreting quality items	Group	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Accent markedness	TW	2.34	2.00	2.00	1.03
	MY	3.06	3.00	4.00	1.07
	CN	3.28	4.00	4.00	1.11
	US	3.34	4.00	4.00	1.02
Comprehensibility	TW	4.25	4.50	4.00	0.71
	MY	4.09	4.00	4.00	0.71
	CN	4.04	4.00	4.00	0.66
	US	3.94	4.00	4.00	0.57
Delivery	TW	3.91	4.00	4.00	0.68
	MY	3.95	4.00	4.00	0.69
	CN	3.89	4.00	4.00	0.79
	US	3.97	4.00	4.00	0.69
Satisfaction	TW	4.04	4.00	4.00	0.75
	MY	3.94	4.00	4.00	0.79
	CN	3.78	4.00	4.00	0.87
	US	3.69	4.00	4.00	0.80

The results indicate that as the mean of AM (represented by the round dot in Figure 1) increased sequentially from Group TW to Group MY, followed by Group CN, and finally to Group US, the mean ratings for Q_{com} (represented by the dotted bar) and Q_{sat} (represented by the bar filled with horizontal lines) correspondingly decreased. This trend suggests that perceived SI performance became less favorable with increased accent markedness. However, no similar

trend was observed for Q_{del} (represented by the diamond-filled bar), a measure related to the interpreters' delivery parameters, such as pacing, pauses, and synchronicity with the speaker.

Figure 1: AM and other quality ratings of each group



Four ANOVAs on the main effects of Accent Markedness (AM), Comprehensibility (Q_{com}), Delivery (Q_{del}), and Satisfaction (Q_{sat}) were performed to determine whether the four groups of participants differed in their perception of interpreting quality (see Table 4). Results showed that the main effect of AM was significant, $F(3, 396) = 18.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$; the main effect of Q_{com} was significant, $F(3, 396) = 3.9$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$; and the main effect of Q_{sat} was significant, $F(3, 396) = 3.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. However, the main effect of Q_{del} was insignificant, $F(3, 396) = 0.26$, $p = .85$, $\eta^2 = .002$. The results demonstrated that the experiment successfully controlled confounding factors, such as fluency, pacing, and intonation by requiring all four interpreters to shadow the same speech to produce the different accent versions of the target speech.

Table 4: ANOVAs of AM, Q_{com}, Q_{del}, and Q_{sat} ratings

Dimensions	Cases	df	MS	*F*	*p*	η^2
AM	Group	3	21.1	18.88	1.83e-11***	0.13
	Residuals	396	1.12			

Dimensions	Cases	df	MS	*F*	*p*	η^2
Q_{com}	Group	3	1.73	3.9	9.17e-3***	0.03
	Residuals	396	0.44			
Q_{del}	Group	3	0.13	0.26	0.85	1.98e-3
	Residuals	396	0.51			
Q_{sat}	Group	3	2.47	3.82	0.01*	0.03
	Residuals	396	0.65			

***$p < .001$, *$p < .05$

Looking at Accent Markedness, Tukey post-hoc comparisons of the four groups indicated that the mean value of AM for Group TW was significantly different from the three experimental groups (see Table 5). There were no significant differences in the AM ratings between any pair of the three experimental groups.

Table 5: Post-hoc comparisons of I5 ratings between groups

Pair of groups		Mean difference	95% CI		*t*	*p*
			Lower	Upper		
TW	MY	-0.72	-1.11	-0.33	-4.82	1.24e-5***
	CN	-0.94	-1.33	-0.55	-6.29	5.12e-9***
	US	-1.00	-1.39	-0.61	-6.69	4.45e-10***
MY	CN	-0.22	-0.61	0.17	-1.47	0.46
	US	-0.28	-0.67	0.11	-1.87	0.24
CN	US	-0.06	-0.45	0.33	-0.40	0.98

*** $p < .001$

Looking at Comprehensibility, Tukey post-hoc comparisons indicated that the mean value of Dcom was significantly different only between Group TW and Group US (see Table 6). There were no significant differences in Dcom between other pairs of groups. This suggests that the perceived Comprehensibility of interpreters only differed significantly between the Taiwanese and the US interpreters.

Table 6: Post-hoc comparisons of Q_{com} ratings between groups

Pair of groups		Mean difference	95% CI		*t*	*p*
			Lower	Upper		
TW	MY	0.17	-0.08	0.41	1.75	0.30
	SH	0.22	-0.03	0.46	2.28	0.10
	US	0.32	0.07	0.56	3.34	5.03e-3**
MY	SH	0.05	-0.19	0.29	0.53	0.95
	US	0.15	-0.09	0.39	1.59	0.38
SH	US	0.10	-0.14	0.34	1.06	0.71

** $p < .01$

Regarding Satisfaction, Tukey post-hoc comparisons indicated the mean value of Q_{sat} was significantly different only between Group TW and Group US (see Table 7). There were no significant differences in Q_{sat} between other pairs of groups. This implies that only the Taiwanese and the US interpreters significantly differed in the Satisfaction ratings they received.

Table 7: Post-hoc comparisons of Q_{sat} ratings between groups

Pair of groups		Mean difference	95% CI		*t*	*p*
			Lower	Upper		
TW	MY	0.10	-0.19	0.39	0.88	0.82
	SH	0.26	-0.03	0.55	0.29	0.10
	US	0.35	0.06	0.64	3.08	0.01*
MY	SH	0.16	-013	0.45	1.41	0.50
	US	0.25	-0.04	0.54	2.20	0.13
SH	US	0.09	-0.20	0.38	0.79	0.86

* $p < .05$

These one-way ANOVA analyses seemed to support the hypothesis that based on her accent, the interpreting quality of the Taiwanese interpreter was regarded as superior to that of the Malaysian, Shanghainese, and the US interpreters. Interestingly, though not significant under the ANOVA analyses, there was an observable trend that the higher the Accent Markedness, the lower the ratings received for an interpreter's Comprehensibility and Satisfaction. Was the difference in the three dimensions of SI quality ratings associated with the interpreters' accent markedness? Was the SI quality

of the non-Taiwanese interpreters evaluated differently from one another as suggested by the second general hypothesis of the experiment? In the next two sections, these questions will be explored through within-group correlation analysis in conjunction with qualitative comments submitted by the participants.

3.2 Qualitative Comments on Accent Markedness and Perceived Interpreting Quality

A total of 197 written comments were received. All comments cited were translated from Chinese into English, then back-translated into Chinese to ensure translation accuracy. Participants are represented by an alphanumeric number, where the first two letters (TW/MY/CN/US) indicate the groups and the subsequent numbers denote the order of the participant's completion of the questionnaire.

Overall, Group CN received the highest number of comments (84), followed by Group US (57), Group TW (31), and Group MY (25). The content suggests that Group CN and Group US received more comments due to the participants' ability to better identify the accents of their interpreters—the interpreter of Group CN having a Mandarin accent in China, and the interpreter of Group US having a non-native Mandarin accent. Such awareness allowed participants to articulate more concrete perceptions, including discomfort with the speech comprehensibility, delivery, and performances of both non-native interpreters.

Interestingly, while both interpreters were criticized similarly (e.g., lack of intonation), critical comments for the US interpreter more frequently transitioned from criticism to encouragement. For instance, negative comments might be followed by appreciation for hard work or improvement suggestions. Conversely, the Shanghainese interpreter received fewer positive or encouraging comments following criticism, or more comments transitioning from positive to critical statements. A few examples from Group US and Group CN illustrate these trends:

> US063: The sentences were complete. Though the intonation was occasionally off, it did not affect the overall message.
>
> US004: The interpreter's Mandarin delivery was not smooth, but the content was largely comprehensible.

US002: There were occasional pauses, maybe because the interpreter was overloaded. But the overall performance is already very good.

CN056: It was generally understandable, but some sentences did not sound coherent.
CN018: There were no long pauses in general, but some sentences sounded less coherent as the interpreter was thinking and interpreting simultaneously.
CN075: There were not many pauses, but there were popping noises from the microphone.

The interpreter of Group TW, who was perceived as having "no accent" by most participants, received fewer comments, probably because there were fewer stimuli (e.g., discomfort due to non-native accents) to comment on. Interestingly, the interpreter of Group MY received the fewest comments overall. It is possible that the participants assigned to Group MY were less expressive due to difficulty in identifying the interpreter as a non-Taiwanese Mandarin speaker.

Another notable finding is that participants indicated that they felt unqualified to judge the interpreters' performances because they did not understand the source language, Tamil.

TW062: Unable to judge as I don't understand the source language.
MY016: [I] don't understand the source language, so it's hard to know whether the interpretation was accurate, or if there was too much omission.
CN066: This is already good enough for minor language translation.
US004: No comment, because I'm not able to know if the interpretation was accurate. The interpreter sounded a bit stage-frightened; she seemed not confident enough, so I probably wouldn't proactively recommend her.

These comments suggest that participants might have been less critical in their judgment, as they could not understand the source language, and because they understood the scarcity of interpreters for the Tamil language in Taiwan.

3.2.1 Comments on accent markedness (AM)

Though participants had the option to elaborate on their ratings for any of the nine evaluated items, they were specifically encouraged to identify the origins of the interpreters' accents, if detectable, in the comment section. The purpose was to investigate whether any accent stereotypes were invoked when the participants were able to identify the interpreters' accents. The absence of comments under AM for Group TW suggests that participants generally perceived the interpreter as having no accent.

In contrast, Group CN received the highest number of comments for AM (21), with more than half (15) identifying the speaker's origin by either specifying the location or by providing examples of pronunciation that delineated the differences between Chinese and Taiwan Mandarin accents. For example:

> CN036: Sounds like (the interpreter is from) China.
> CN049: It's *yīn wèi* (pronounced as 位), not *yīn wéi* (pronounced as 維).
> CN100: It's *Putonghua*, not *Guoyu*.

These comments, including those from participants S049 and S100, indicate that the pronunciation of the interpreter of Group CN was judged as inappropriate or divergent from Standard Mandarin in Taiwan, which served as their evaluation benchmark.

In contrast to the more critical nature of these comments, some participants interpreted the accent of Standard Mandarin in China as perhaps intentional for a formal setting. For example:

> CN027: There were many retroflex [sounds]. [I'm] not sure, maybe that was how it should be.
> CN031: Perhaps because it was a formal setting, some [of her] enunciation were so exquisite that it sounded like a Chinese accent or [as if] the Google lady [was speaking]. It was not that similar to Taiwanese's common ways of speaking.

The high volume of comments about accent markedness for Group CN suggests that the Shanghainese interpreter's Mandarin accent was the most identifiable among all non-Taiwan Mandarin accents in this study.

As for Groups US and MY, participants found it more challenging to pinpoint the interpreters' accent origins. Two out of seven participants in Group US commented that the interpreter had an "English accent" or "sounded like someone from the US or the UK". Two out of six participants in Group MY identified the interpreter as "a Southeast Asian overseas Chinese" or possessing "a Southeast Asian accent." Intriguingly, both groups included participants who identified the interpreters as native Taiwanese speakers, saying that the interpreter for Group US "had no accent" or "had a friendly Taiwanese accent", and that the interpreter for Group MY had "a variation of the Taiwanese accent."

3.2.2 Comments on comprehensibility (Q_{com})

Comments regarding the interpreters' comprehensibility across all four groups were predominantly positive. Participants generally expressed that they could largely grasp the content of the speech, and found the interpretation logical and coherent. However, more explicit negative feedback was confined to Group US, where participants cited difficulty in understanding the interpretation:

> US011: It was understandable, though quite taxing.
> US024: A small part of it was not clear.

In the ten comments that Group TW received for Q_{com}, there were no negative remarks. The only two comments that might be construed as criticism pertained to the distractions arising from simultaneous exposure to dual-track SI (both source and target languages) and the interpreter's pace of delivery:

> TW004: [I] had a little difficulty understanding [the interpretation] as the speaker and the interpreter were speaking simultaneously, and it disturbed me; it has nothing to do with the interpreter.
> TW100: The speed of delivery was a bit slow, making it hard for people to focus.

Group MY and CN participants generally found the interpretation clear and understandable, but they offered slightly more critical feedback about

pauses and enunciation:

> CN083: Occasional unnecessary pausing and incorrect pronunciation aside, [the interpreter's speech clarity] was generally okay.
> MY037: Some sentences did not sound coherent, but [I] could generally understand what [the interpreter] was trying to convey.

Group US stood out for giving the highest number of comments about the interpreter's pronunciation or accent (5 out of 17, compared to 0 out of 10 for Group TW, 1 out of 23 for Group CN, and 2 out of 10 for Group CN). For example:

> US004: There was a slight accent, but it was not hard to understand.
> US011: [The speech was] clear; a few words' fourth tone were not pronounced accurately, but it did not affect comprehension.
> US041: The retroflex sounds were all clear, but some ending sounds should be pronounced more clearly, such as 'an', 'ang', and 'eng'.

These observations suggest that participants were able to easily detect the interpreter's unique pronunciation or accent. Although these differences did not necessarily impede comprehension, they were perceived as non-conformities to a specific standard upheld by the participants.

3.2.3 Comments on delivery (Q_{del}) and satisfaction (Q_{sat})

All four groups received analogous comments regarding the Q_{del} items, which pertain to the interpreters' pacing, pausing, and synchronization with the speaker. Participants from all four groups felt that the interpreters should have articulated more rapidly to facilitate comprehension of the speech and to align with the tempo of the original Indian speaker, although the pacing was generally considered to be acceptable:

> TW059: [The interpreter's] pacing was slow relative to the speaker.
> MY093: [The pacing was] slow with reference to [my] native language. Therefore, it was slightly difficult to understand.
> CN024: [The pacing was] a little slow, but [the interpretation was] clear.
> US004: [The pacing was] somewhat slow but acceptable, given the complexity of the issues being discussed.

These comments indicate that participants assessed the appropriateness of the interpreters' pacing with regard to both the original speaker's delivery and the customary pacing of native Mandarin speakers in Taiwan.

Overall, the feedback on D_{del} was consistent across all four groups, a finding that aligns with expectations given that all four interpreters produced their target speech by shadowing the same original interpretation output.

D_{sat} refers to the participants' more holistic perception of interpreting quality for each interpreter, encompassing aspects such as professionalism, overall satisfaction with the performance, and willingness to recommend the same interpreter for a similar task. The comments from all four groups concerning D_{sat} were primarily centered on the interpreters' intonation, suggesting that a more animated intonation could enhance audience engagement. Some participants attributed this preference to the interpreters' delivery sounding less resolute than the original Tamil speaker, who spoke with a robust and convincing tone. This conveys that interpreting users are likely to prefer an interpreter capable of aligning with a speaker's intonation in addition to conveying the intended messages.

Group US was unique in noting specific comments about the interpreter's accent, which might necessitate additional effort to comprehend:

> US011: The interpreter was professional, but if the entire speech were delivered with such an accent, [I] would need to expend extra effort to understand it.
>
> US041: Mandarin emphasizes vowel pronunciation. The speech would sound more pleasant if [the interpreter] opened her mouth wider and pronounced with a clearer and louder voice.

This observation may partially elucidate why Group US received the lowest mean rating for Dsat and why such a rating exhibited a significant ANOVA difference compared to Group TW.

4. Discussion

4.1.General Discussion

The results of this experiment indicated general support for the study's hypotheses. Initially, the study sought to examine the perception of Taiwanese native Mandarin speakers regarding the interpreting quality of accented Mandarin interpreters from China, Southeast Asia, and Western countries, as compared to a native Taiwanese interpreter. Specifically, individuals from Shanghai, Malaysia, and the United States were recruited to role-play as the accented interpreters for the experimental groups. The study posited two hypotheses: (1) the Taiwanese interpreter's interpreting quality would be assessed more favorably than the Malaysian, Shanghainese, and American interpreters due to discernible accent differences; and (2) the three non-Taiwanese interpreters would receive varied evaluations based on stereotypes associated with their accents.

The descriptive results revealed that the Taiwanese interpreter was rated with the least noticeable accent, followed by the non-Taiwanese interpreters in the order of the Malaysian, Shanghainese, and American interpreters. Increasingly marked accents correlated with lower ratings for comprehensibility and satisfaction. The quantitative results validated the first hypothesis with a significant difference under ANOVA analysis between Group TW and the other groups. Qualitative results supported the second hypothesis, highlighting the influence of accent on participants' perceptions of each non-Taiwanese interpreter. The findings identified an interconnection between interpreting quality evaluation and the presence of a non-native accent, aligning with the observations of Cheung (2013).

Cheung (2013) posited that the low ratings received by non-native Cantonese interpreters might stem from a lower tolerance toward accented Cantonese, as the language does not have as many variations as Mandarin. Building on this inference, Taiwanese participants in this study may have been more tolerant and less focused on accent as a determinant of interpreting quality, recognizing that Mandarin possesses a rich diversity of accents. This awareness was manifested when participants were able to suggest various answers to identify the accents of the interpreters, such as Chinese accent (or specifically East Coast or Southern Chinese accent), Southeast Asian accent, English accent, and Cantonese accent, though these answers

were not necessarily accurate. Moreover, it is possible that the participants considered the scarcity of interpreters for Tamil, a language largely unfamiliar to Taiwanese society, and thus demonstrated more tolerance toward their performances. This could also clarify why the non-native interpreters in this study were not criticized as "unreliable" based on their accents. The greater tolerance might stem from the perception that the non-native interpreters were suitable candidates for the Tamil interpretation assignment, given the limited number of Taiwanese individuals proficient in Tamil.

The study also found divergent views on the impact of accent on the perception of interpreting quality. In particular, the Shanghainese interpreter was criticized for mispronunciation or non-adherence to the Standard Mandarin in Taiwan, while others felt the accent was intentional for formal occasions. This divergence reflects differing standards used by the Taiwanese audience, with some comparing the accent to locally spoken Mandarin and others recognizing the prestige of Standard Mandarin for prestigious communication tasks, as noted in Khoo (2019). However, other participants praised the Shanghainese interpreter's clear pronunciation and maintained that slight deviations did not hinder intelligibility. This suggests that intelligibility outweighs accent in evaluating interpreting quality. It also suggests a complex Taiwanese attitude towards Standard Mandarin in China, not entirely positive or negative. Despite the local adoption of Taiwan Mandarin, many Taiwanese still regard the Chinese Standard Mandarin as the "standard" accent.

Participants from Group MY evaluated the Malaysian interpreter more favorably, possibly due to a similarity-attraction process, a phenomenon explored by Dahlbäck et al. (2007). This happens when same-accent speakers are perceived as providing more valuable information (as in being more helpful, reliable, smart, trustworthy, and useful) than those speaking with different accents. Therefore, the Malaysian interpreter may have been evaluated more positively as she sounded more like the participants themselves. This can be seen with the Malaysian-accented Mandarin interpreter being ranked the highest in intelligibility and satisfaction categories among the non-native interpreters. Malaysian Mandarin shares more commonalities with the Mandarin spoken in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and was generally less identifiable as non-native. In contrast, the American interpreter was rated with the strongest marked accent and ranked lowest in categories of intelligibility and satisfaction among the groups. This result partially

corroborates Cheung (2013), suggesting that both Cantonese and Mandarin audiences might struggle with English-accented versions of their native language. However, this non-native accent also led to more tolerant and encouraging evaluations, indicating that quality perception can be affected by external factors and stereotypes.

The study also highlights the potential impact of gradual familiarization with non-native accents on interpreting quality perception. Participants did not recognize that they might adapt to the accents over time, assuming increased effort would be required for longer listening. The possibility of reverse impact, where the accent becomes more noticeable and irritating over time, is also noted. This finding emphasizes that interpreting quality may be perceived as poorer based on presumptions of performance rather than actual deficiencies, underscoring the complexity of evaluating accented interpretation in various sociocultural contexts. Further studies could provide more insight into these nuanced interactions between accent and perception in interpreting quality.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both interpreter education and professional development. Firstly, they support the findings in Cheung (2013, 2003) that accent does affect perceptions of interpreting quality, contrary to prior beliefs that such impact was inconsequential, as indicated by interpreters and users surveyed in previous research conducted by Bühler (1986) and Kurz (2001, 1989). In this study, a Taiwanese interpreter with an accent native to the audience received the highest ratings for comprehensibility and overall performance satisfaction. For non-native interpreters, their non-native accents seemed to evoke both positive and negative assessments of their interpreting quality.

It is crucial to cultivate awareness among practicing interpreters and interpreting students that accents can indeed influence perceptions of interpreting quality. Specifically, since interpreters may be rejected for an assignment due to their accent, it may be more pragmatic for them to adopt as neutral an accent as possible to avoid triggering negative responses associated with the particular sociopolitical backgrounds of the target audience. This can present a challenge, as interpreters with non-native accents might grapple with a dual-role conflict. They may wish to preserve the accent representing their self-identity while simultaneously needing to cater to the accent favored by the audience and clients. This conflict underscores the prevailing issue in linguistics that, although all languages (or "accents" in this context) are

theoretically equal, preferences or biases do exist (Baugh, 2003; Lippi-Green, 1994).

In the contemporary interpreting market, the ability of interpreters to influence perceptions of accents is constrained by multi-layered power dynamics involving various stakeholders, including interpreters themselves, service users, clients, and speakers (Angelelli, 2004; Davidson, 2000). This complexity is an essential consideration for those pursuing a career in interpreting. While the appeal of native-accented interpreters remains significant, especially in educational contexts where accent accommodation is often emphasized (Derwing & Munro, 2009), this focus comes with challenges. For individual interpreters, success remains contingent on various factors such as skill level and motivation. Moreover, at a societal level, an overemphasis on native accents could perpetuate existing accent hierarchies, thereby contributing to a form of linguistic segregation (Lippi-Green, 2012). Research also suggests that tolerance for different accents can vary depending on whether they are perceived as native or non-native (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). For instance, this study found ambivalence among participants concerning the 'correct' accent standard for interpretation. While some participants leaned towards Standard Chinese Mandarin due to its prestige, others gave higher ratings to an interpreter with a Taiwan Mandarin accent. This reflects the evolving linguistic landscape of Taiwan, which has shifted gradually from Beijing Mandarin to Taiwan Mandarin (Khoo, 2019). Given ongoing global trends promoting linguistic diversity, such as where multilingualism is recognized as a core value by the United Nations General Assembly (United Nations, n.d.), along with increasing efforts in Taiwan to preserve native languages (Taiwan Today, 2018) and attract international expertise, particularly through promoting the Act for the Recruitment and Employment of Foreign Professionals (National Development Council, n.d.), the significance accorded to accents may diminish, or the tolerance towards accents may increase. Such shifts could liberate interpreters from accent-based judgments and better align market demands with the reality of a linguistically diverse society.

4.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies

The methodology of this study presents several limitations. First, although online survey distribution effectively reaches the general public quickly,

it has recruited a focused demographic of young adults, comprising two-thirds of the participants aged between 18 and 34, who are primarily internet users. Consequently, the study may not adequately represent the opinions and experiences of interpreting users across broader age groups. For example, those aged between 55 and 74 constituted only 2.75% of the study's participants. These individuals, likely the first and second generations of *Waishengren* and *Benshengren*,[2] were among the first to encounter the assertive National Language Movement led by the Kuomintang (KMT, the Chinese Nationalist Party). Their language acquisition backgrounds, particularly in Mandarin, differ from today's young adults, who experience more relaxed requirements for standard Beijing Mandarin pronunciation. Thus, these two age groups might have distinct preferences concerning an interpreter's accent or may prioritize accent differently when evaluating performance. Additionally, the inclusion of very young (aged 12 to 17) participants with limited comprehension and perception abilities of the subject of the speech offered little relevance to the study.

Second, the pilot study had participants identify the origins of interpreters by listening to accents through multiple-choice questions, with the number of choices equaling the number of speakers. Participants might have guessed some speakers' origins by process of elimination rather than genuine identification, creating a potential flaw in the methodology.

Third, participants could not see the interpreters, unlike the audience in a real simultaneous interpretation (SI) setting. Visual cues from interpreters that hint at their origins might influence how accent affects perceived interpreting quality. For instance, more apparent non-native attributions leading to negativity mitigation might be detected. Cheung (2020) observed that non-Chinese-looking interpreters were rated more favorably than their Chinese-looking counterparts even when delivering identical interpretations. Participants attributed the flaws of non-Chinese-looking interpreters to external factors, such as the challenges of mastering Mandarin for a non-

2 *Waishngren* [外省人] refers to individuals who moved to Taiwan from mainland China around the time of the Chinese Civil War (1945-1950) and their descendants. These individuals often spoke Mandarin as their first language. *Benshengren* [本省人], on the other hand, refers to individuals whose families have been in Taiwan for generations, often long before the Chinese Civil War. Their native languages are typically Southern Min (commonly known as Taiwanese), Hakka, or indigenous languages. The linguistic preferences and practices of these two groups have been shaped by social and political factors, including language policies and identity politics.

native speaker.

In addition, listeners may have different expectations for the interpreters in an authentic communication setting, where they would have a more genuine interest in understanding the speech and hence may place more emphasis on comprehension instead of evaluating the interpreters.

Next, although efforts were made to minimize delivery differences, it was virtually impossible to create four SI audios that only differed in accent, an essential control variable. Furthermore, participants across all four groups expressed distraction due to the simultaneous presence of both source and target languages, requiring extra effort to understand the simultaneous interpretation.

Lastly, accent stereotypes being community-specific means that different results might arise with other non-native interpreters, such as those from Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Britain, or other European countries. Choosing a Beijing interpreter, known for a more pronounced accent, might lead to significantly different results from the Shanghainese speaker in this study, causing larger disparities in perceived interpreting quality.

Given these limitations, future research could consider replicating the study with added visual stimuli, such as employing consecutive interpretation mode to mitigate the distraction of SI's dual track. Utilizing professional sound engineering software to control delivery could enhance the experimental design. Extending the study to explore how accents of various Mandarin varieties influence interpreting quality perception in Taiwan would also add valuable insights.

5. Conclusion

Data from 400 Taiwanese participants revealed that accent significantly influences interpreting quality perception, activating stereotypes that can lead to positive or negative evaluations. Beyond previous findings, this study illuminated the culturally, socially, and politically specific impacts of Mandarin accents on interpreting quality perception within Taiwanese society.

The Taiwanese interpreter received higher ratings for comprehensibility and performance satisfaction than all three non-native interpreters, particularly the US interpreter, who was rated significantly lower.

Among the non-native interpreters, the Malaysian interpreter ranked highest in comprehensibility and satisfaction, likely due to the attractive similarities between her accent and Taiwan Mandarin. This resemblance can be attributed to the shared Southern Chinese dialectal roots of both Mandarin-speaking communities. The Shanghainese interpreter, who utilized a Standard Mandarin accent, ranked second in comprehension and satisfaction. These ratings appeared to stem from accent stereotypes, activating negative impressions of China, such as its perceived repression of democracy and pressure on Taiwan's diplomacy. The study's demographic, mostly aged between 18 and 34, may have influenced these attitudes. Yet, some Taiwanese also view Standard Mandarin as prestigious and appropriate for formal tasks, such as interpretation. The accent of the U.S. interpreter received the lowest ratings because it was generally unfamiliar, necessitating greater listening effort. Preconceived notions of non-native accents impairing comprehensibility also likely contributed to the poor evaluations. Nonetheless, positive comments reflected a mitigating effect, as the non-native accent led to more lenient evaluation standards.

In summary, the study reveals a discrepancy between listeners' articulated perceptions of quality and their criteria for assessing it, compared to their actual evaluations. While they ostensibly prioritize content-related criteria as indicators of quality, presumably because they believe this to be the socially acceptable answer, the significance of accent in their assessments suggests otherwise. Interpreters and interpreting students must recognize the influence of accent on quality perception. It may be prudent for an interpreter to adopt as neutral an accent as possible to cater to users and clients, considering the perceivable lower status in power relations of interpreters among all stakeholders in an interpreted event. However, growing appreciation for language and accent diversity fuels optimism that interpreters' accents may face less critical judgment in the future.

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