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A survey and investigation of epistemological expressions in Taiwanese Southern Min and Taiwanese Mandarin

Robert Sanders and Satoshi Uehara

Introduction

In two earlier papers, Sanders, Uehara and Chiang (2000) and 上原・サンダース (2001), the present authors claimed that when the verb 想 ‘to be of the opinion’ is used in both Taiwanese Southern Min (*siuN7*) and Taiwanese Mandarin (*xiang3*), a formal distinction exists between first and second person subjects on the one hand, and third person subjects on the other. In particular, it was claimed that when the subject is a first or second person, then the verb ‘to be of the opinion’ can either be used alone, or it can be followed by an additional form, 講 *khong2* in Southern Min, 說 *shuo1* in Mandarin. In both languages this extra form is derived from the full verb ‘to say’ and is labeled by Cheng (1985) as a complementizer. It was further claimed that for first and second person subjects, the difference between ‘to be of the opinion’ all by itself and ‘to be of the opinion’ followed immediately by ‘to say’ is primarily a stylistic one and this lexical difference does not represent a significant functional or semantic split.

In the case of third person subjects, on the other hand, it was claimed that both for Taiwanese Southern Min and for Taiwanese Mandarin, only the combination ‘to be of the opinion’ followed immediately by ‘to say’ is possible, and that the reason for this fact, as pointed out by both Sanders and Uehara (2000) and Lin (2002), is that it is virtually impossible to report on the opinion of a third person unless it is based on what s/he has actually said.

Because these claims were largely based on the intuition of just a very small number of native speakers and lacked any discourse setting that might assist listeners to interpret more precise meanings for particular example sentences, the present authors carried out a linguistic survey to investigate whether the claims made in the previous two papers could be substantiated over a wider range of native speakers, and with example sentences embedded in specific discourse contexts. The results of this survey are reported here.

Methodology

A two-part questionnaire was constructed and distributed to 9 native speakers of both Taiwanese Southern Min and Taiwanese Mandarin living in Sendai, Japan and studying at Tohoku University. Part 1 of the survey solicited information about the sociolinguistic background of each participant which could then be referred to if a degree of inconsistency in linguistic judgment was observed among individual native speakers. Of particular note, the questionnaire asked for information about the family background of each informant, as well as the types and frequency of usage of the different languages used under a variety of different settings and with a variety of different interlocutors. Part 1 of the questionnaire also asked subjects to assess their own spoken and listening abilities in each of their “native” languages. Part 1 of the questionnaire is shown with part-by-part English translation in Appendix 1.

Part 2 of the questionnaire then presented four written, colloquial template passages, half in Southern Min and half in Mandarin. Each template passage contained one example each of an opinion sentence with just the single verb ‘to be of the opinion’ for each of the three subject types--first person, second person and third person. Then that template passage was presented again with the addition of ‘to say’ placed immediately after the opinion verb. This then insured that for any possible combination of a given subject type with a given verbal structure there would also be two separate examples, each embedded in a discourse template (e.g. two separate Mandarin examples of a sentence with a first person subject and the complex verb structure ‘to be of the opinion’ plus ‘to say’, two separate Southern Min examples of a sentence containing a third person subject and the simple verbal structure ‘to be of the opinion’ only, etc.). Then, to assist participants in easily locating within the larger template passage the critical sentence containing the target subject-verb combination, the subject and verb portion of the target sentence was underlined and labeled with a bracketed letter from (a) to (f). A sample of one such template passage, which contains both a simple ‘opinion’ and an ‘opinion-say’ form, is shown with part-by-part English translation in Appendix 2.

Next, subjects were asked to read each of the four different passages and to pass judgment on the acceptability of each underlined portion based on the choices of “natural”, “a little bit strange” or “unnatural”. Additionally, participants were given an opportunity to provide relevant comments they might wish to make concerning their impressions of the differences between the simple ‘to be of the opinion’ version of a sentence and its more complex ‘to be of the opinion’ plus ‘to say’ counterpart for the same subject embedded in the same discourse context. An example of this optional comment section is shown with part-by-part English translation in Appendix 3.

Results and Functional Analysis

Altogether 9 participants were asked to judge the acceptability of twenty four different sentences, indicating whether each sounded “natural”, “a little bit natural”, or “unnatural”. These judgments were then converted into a point scale of 2, 1, and 0 respectively. Then the total number of points for each possible sentential subject type (i.e. first person, second person or third person) in combination with each of the two verbal structures was calculated both for Mandarin and for Southern Min. The results are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: Naturalness rating

	Mandarin	Average score	Southern Min	Average score
1 st person	想	1.83	想	1.72
	想說	1.89	想講	1.89
2 nd person	想	1.33	想	1.67
	想說	0.50	想講	0.67
3 rd person	想	0.72	想	0.89
	想說	1.61	想講	1.78

2=Natural, 1=A little bit strange, 0=Unnatural

The above results reveal certain important facts. First, regardless of language and regardless of whether the verb structure is the simple ‘to be of the opinion’ or the more complex ‘to be of the opinion’ plus ‘to say’, epistemological expressions using *xiang3* or *siuN7* are most natural when they involve first person subjects, and fairly unnatural when they involve second person subjects, especially when ‘to say’ is used. Second, there is strong confirmation both in Taiwanese Mandarin and in Taiwanese Southern Min that it is indeed very unnatural for third person subjects to express opinions without the addition of ‘to say’.

We believe that there exist very compelling functional explanations to account for the above observations. First, it is *usually* necessary to first have objective, direct insight into a person’s inner thoughts before one is able to report on his/her opinions. Naturally, the mind that any speaker is most familiar with is his/her own, so it is not at all surprising that the expression of an opinion is judged most natural by participants when it involves a first person subject.

Additionally, we believe that the reason epistemological expressions using *siuN7* or *xiang3* and involving a second person subject were deemed rather unnatural by participants is due to the somewhat

restricted conditions under which a sentence of this type can be used. That is, *usually* the only way that a second person subject can be used in an epistemological sentence is when it comes in the form of a question. Thus the survey uses the interrogative sentences for the second person subject pattern. And generally speaking, interrogative sentences are employed significantly less frequently than statements. The reason that these particular sentences may not have been universally judged as natural may be because the contexts we used may not have been typical enough to make the questions sound natural. Some participants judged both forms of the question as unnatural, which if true, makes it impossible to even ask such a question. This issue will be addressed in a follow-up survey.

Finally, as was noted above, it is *usually* necessary to first have objective insight into the mind of a person before one is able to report what his/her opinion is. So whereas the mind that a speaker has the clearest insight into is his/her own, it is virtually impossible to report on the opinion of a third person unless that report is based on what s/he has actually said. Probably for this reason, then, speakers of both languages emphatically reject sentences that don't make it explicitly clear through the use of 'to say' that the reason we know the opinion of another person is simply because s/he told us. As Huang (2003) argues, then, the function of 'to say' here is not actually *de re*, but rather *de dicto*. This being the case, it calls into serious question the labeling of 'to say' here as a complementizer. What the precise semantic or functional dynamics of 'to say' might actually be when it follows the verb 'to be of the opinion', regardless of subject type, is an area that the present authors intend to pursue in their next round of investigation.

Implication of Present Investigation for Future Research

Despite the many clear answers provided by the above survey with regard to the use of 'to be of the opinion' in both Taiwanese Mandarin and in Taiwanese Southern Min, a number of questions remain. First, given the fact that a clear *de dicto* function seems to exist for 'to say', it seems prudent to reinvestigate what semantic distinction might exist between the presence or absence of 'to say' in these epistemological sentences. It is our tentative theory that the use of 'to say', especially in the case of first person subjects, functions to provide a degree of objectivity to the speaker's statement, that s/he is merely reporting what s/he hears, and not inflicting some sort of subjective personal opinion or guess into the report. This feeling of relative objectivity versus subjectivity was reported by three or four different participants in their written comments. The relative objectivity expressed by the addition of 'to say', then, serves to distance the speaker from taking personal responsibility for the accuracy of the opinion. Therefore, another possible function of 'to say', which we intend to examine in our next survey, is to allow speakers to hedge their bets as to whether the expressed opinion is

actually correct or not without being held personally accountable for this. To test this hypothesis we will be constructing sentences that express two kinds of opinions — one type of opinion where the speakers can be almost 100% certain of the veracity of the statement, e.g. “I think coffee tastes better than tea.”, and another type where the speaker’s opinion can only be conjecture, e.g. “I think that tomorrow’s winning lottery numbers will be...”. According to our hypothesis, when talking about one’s own personal thoughts about the merits of coffee versus tea, the use of ‘to be of the opinion’ all by itself should be judged more natural than a version of the same sentence that also includes ‘to say’. On the other hand, when talking about that likelihood of a particular set of numbers being tomorrow’s winning lottery numbers, then just the opposite should be the case, that the version of the statement containing ‘to say’ should be judged more natural than a version of the sentence that leaves it out.

Second, although we noted that such sentences are considerably less natural to native speakers when they involve a second person subject as opposed to when they involve a first person subject, nevertheless, we can see from the results of our survey that certain second person sentences are clearly more natural-sounding to speakers than others. We need to further pursue what sort of contextual factors work to govern the greater or lesser naturalness of second person subject sentences.

Third, even though it is very rare for a third person subject to express an opinion without the addition of ‘to say’, the results above show that in a very limited number of cases, participants are occasionally willing to accept such a sentence. We suspect that the reason this sometimes occurs may be because from the greater context it is abundantly clear that the subject has already clearly told the speaker his/her opinion. Therefore, the presence of ‘to say’ may be understood from this context, and hence can be explicitly left out of the sentence.

Finally, several participants noted in their written comments that the presence of ‘to say’ with first person subjects makes the sentence more colloquial, more intimate and less formal, which in a way is culturally related to the sense of objectivity already noted above. That is, among friends and family members, as well as in informal situations, one should try to be friendly and unthreatening. Therefore, the use of ‘to say’ with first person subjects serves to make the speaker sound less assertive.

Our next survey will test these hypotheses.

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Appendix 1 : Questionnaire (Participant's background information)

	您本人 (Self)	您的父親 (Father)	您的母親 (Mother)	
(1) 出生地： (Place of birth)	_____ 省 _____ 縣 (市) (_____ Province _____ County/City)	_____ 省 _____ 縣 (市)	_____ 省 _____ 縣 (市)	
(2) 教育程度： (Level of Education)	_____	_____	_____	
(3) 職業： (Occupation)	_____	_____	_____	
(4) 對不同對象 / 在不同場合會話溝通時所使用的語言： (Frequency of languages spoken with different people/in different settings) 【程度：1. 經常 2. 有時候 3. 偶爾 4. 從不 (填寫數字即可)】 (Level: 1. Frequently 2. Sometimes 3. Occasionally 4. Never (Simply fill in the number))				
交流的對象 / 場所 (interlocutor / setting)	國語 (Mandarin)	台語 (Southern Min)	客家話 (Hakka)	其他語言 (請填寫語言) (Other) (Please fill in language)
a. 祖父母/外公外婆 (Grandparents)				
b. 父親 (Father)				
c. 母親 (Mother)				
d. 兄弟姊妹 (Siblings)				
f. 好友 (Close Friends)				
g. 鄰居 (Neighbors)				
h. 一般朋友 (Ordinary Friends)				
i. 一般同學 (同事) (Ordinary Classmates/ Colleagues)				
j. 政府機關 (Government Offices)				
k. 一般商店 (Ordinary Stores)				
l. 大眾運輸工具 (Public Transportation)				
m. 夜市 (Night Market)				

(5)關於您自己的語言使用能力情形：(Your own language ability)				
【1. 運用自如 2. 日常會話程度 3. 很有限 4. 完全不會 (填寫數字即可)】				
(1. Fluent 2. Daily Conversation 3. Limited 4. Zero)				
	國語 (Mandarin)	台語 (Southern Min)	客家話 (Hakka)	其他語言 (請填寫語言) (Other) (Please fill in language)
a. 會話能力 (Conversational Ability)				
b. 聽力 (Listening Ability)				

Appendix 2: Sample passage template

問卷調查一 (國語の場合, 關於「想」、「想說」)

Survey 1 (Xiang3 and Xiang3shuo1 in Mandarin)

以下的對話是小張和小王二人關於料理口味的選擇所進行彼此間的意見訊問。

The conversation below is an exchange of opinion about the choice of food between Xiao Zhang and Xiao Wang.

小張：「很難得這次我們三個人能一起出國玩，所以我想吃點兒比較特別的，像是韓國料理等等。

小王你覺得韓國料理如何？會不會想吃呢？你哥哥先不是也曾說過，想到國外吃點兒跟台灣料理不太一樣的大餐嗎？」

Xiao Zhang: What a rare treat it is for the three of us to be able to go abroad together. Therefore I'd like to eat something a bit special, like Korean food, etc. Xiao Wang, how do you feel about Korean food? Are you able to eat it? Didn't your older brother once say that he wanted to go overseas to eat food that was the same as Taiwanese cuisine?

小王(1)：「是沒錯，可是聽說韓國料理蠻辣的，因為我不太喜歡吃韓式辣味，所以(a)我想韓國料理可能不太適合我的口味。但是同樣是屬於辣味的泰國料理呢，我倒是可以接受。泰國料理如何？同樣也是蠻特別的，不是嗎？(b)你只要是能在這裡吃到泰式料理的話，是不是也是蠻不錯的？至於我哥哥呢，因為他很喜歡吃辣，所以(c)他想只要能吃辣的話，無論是吃韓國料理或是吃泰國料理都行。」

Xiao Wang (1): You're absolutely right about that, but I've heard that Korean food is quite spicy, and because I don't like Korean-style spiciness too much, so (a) I think that Korean food is possibly not very suited to my taste. However, I can accept Thai cuisine, which is also spicy.

What about Thai cuisine? It is also quite special, right? (b) Don't you think that if we can eat Thai food here, then it would be great? As for my older brother, because he really likes to eat spicy food, (c) he thinks that as long as he can something spicy, it doesn't matter whether it is Korean cuisine or Thai cuisine.

小王(2):「是沒錯,可是聽說韓國料理蠻辣的,因為我不太喜歡吃韓式辣味,所以(d)我想說韓國料理可能不太適合我的口味。但是同樣是屬於辣味的泰國料理呢,我倒是可以接受。泰國料理如何?同樣也是蠻特別的,不是嗎?(e)你想說要是能在這裡吃到泰式料理的話,是不是也是蠻不錯的?至於我哥哥呢,因為他很喜歡吃辣,所以(f)他想說只要能吃辣的話,無論是吃韓國料理或是吃泰國料理都行。」

Xiao Wang (2): You're absolutely right about that, but I've heard that Korean food is quite spicy, and because I don't like Korean-style spiciness too much, so (d) I think that Korean food is possibly not very suited to my taste. However, I can accept Thai cuisine, which is also spicy. What about Thai cuisine? It is also quite special, right? (e) Don't you think that if we can eat Thai food here, then it would be great? As for my older brother, because he really likes to eat spicy food, (f) he thinks that as long as he can something spicy, it doesn't matter whether it is Korean cuisine or Thai cuisine.

Appendix 3: Sample evaluation and feedback section

問題 1 : 您對於小王(1)的談話方格中所出現的“(a)我想”、“(b)你想”、“(c)他想”的用法如何? 請勾選出您的看法。

Question 1 : What is your reaction to the use of (a)“I think”, (b)“You think” and (c)“He thinks” by Xiao Wang in discourse passage number 1? Please use a check mark to indicate your opinion.

(只要劃✓即可)

(You need only use a check mark)

	自 然	有一點奇怪	不自然
	Natural	A little bit strange	Unnatural
(a)我想 (I think)	_____	_____	_____
(b)你想 (You think)	_____	_____	_____
(c)他想 (He thinks)	_____	_____	_____

問題 2 : 您對於小王(2)的談話方格中所出現的“(d)我想說”、“(e)你想說”、“(f)他想說”的用法如何
? 請勾選出您的看法。

Question 2: What is your reaction to the use of (d) “I think say”, (e) “You think say” and (f) “He thinks say” by Xiao Wang in discourse passage number 2? Please use a check mark to indicate your opinion.

	自 然	有一點奇怪	不自然
	Natural	A little bit strange	Unnatural
(d)我想說 (I think say)	_____	_____	_____
(e)你想說 (You think say)	_____	_____	_____
(f)他想說 (He thinks say)	_____	_____	_____

意見欄：在“(a)我想”和“(d)我想說”，“(b)你想”和“(e)你想說”，“(c)他想”和“(f)他想說”的各配對組中，若每個用法均被勾選在「自然」的情況下，您對於在各配對組合中的二個用法，在語感上或語境方面是否覺得有差異？若有的話，請陳述您的意見。謝謝！！

Comments: If you found yourself marking as “natural” both members of any of the following pairs: [(a) “I think” and (d) “I think say”], [(b) “You think” and (e) “You think say”], or [(c) “He thinks” and (f) “He thinks say”], do you feel that there is any kind of difference between the two contrasting sentences, either in terms of feeling or in terms of contextual considerations? If there are, please explain. Thank you!

⊙關於“(a)我想”和“(d)我想說”：

(With regard to (a) “I think” and (d) “I think say”) :

⊙關於“(b)你想”和“(e)你想說”：

(With regard to (b) “You think” and (e) “You think say”) :

⊙關於“(c)他想”和“(f)他想說”：

(With regard to (c) “He thinks” and (f) “He thinks say”) :