

## Maintenance and Sustainability of Shanghai Heritage Language: An Intergenerational Transmission Study

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### ABSTRACT

Native speakers are using fewer local languages as a result of Mandarin's dominance as the official language and national language. Younger generations are progressively ignoring the widely spoken Shanghai dialect, particularly in urban areas. The use, attitudes, sustainability, and preservation of the Shanghai dialect are all examined in this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with three generations of Shanghai women regarding their language use. The majority of participants continue to use the Shanghai dialect in daily communication. All first-generation participants and the majority of second-generation participants hold a positive attitude towards the Shanghai dialect. The Shanghai dialect was viewed favorably by all but one third-generation participant. Although they claimed to speak some Shanghai dialect, they were hesitant to respond to interview questions in that language. Mandarin and English are becoming more and more popular among third-generation speakers as they abandon their native tongue. They wish to preserve the dialect for future generations, even among third-generation speakers who use it less, due to concerns about its potential loss.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a rare three-generation perspective on Shanghai dialect maintenance, revealing a significant intergenerational shift towards Mandarin despite predominantly positive attitudes across generations, and highlighting the critical role of environmental barriers (home language choices, educational policies) in hindering transmission despite a shared desire for preservation.

## 1. Introduction

The Shanghai dialect is an indigenous language spoken in the international metropolis of Shanghai, China. Approximately 10 million people speak this language. The Shanghai dialect is spoken throughout the entire city of Shanghai. Most speakers of the Shanghai dialect use it in daily conversations, but they switch to Mandarin in formal contexts, as Mandarin is the national language of China (Qing & Jiang, 2023; Liu, 2023). The popularity of local languages among native speakers has steadily declined across China, especially Shanghai, as a result of the extensive effort to promote the national language in all spheres of contact. Some academics are worried that vernacular languages have been severely harmed by Mandarin's dominance as the official language and national language, especially in formal settings, where they are under a lot of pressure (Zhao & Liu, 2020; Yang, 2024). Many young people in Shanghai now speak both Mandarin and English. Many educated members of Shanghai families now prefer to speak Mandarin and English rather than the Shanghai dialect in family settings. This change makes sense because Mandarin is the most common language and English is spoken all around the world, while the native tongue is not taught in schools. The rapid replacement of local languages by the national language has made Mandarin a "killer language" for some weaker dialects and minority languages. Zhao and Liu (2020) add that the preference of Shanghai parents for Mandarin over the Shanghai dialect may influence young people to avoid using the dialect, contributing to the erosion of Shanghai's cultural identity among the youth.

The Shanghai dialect is currently at risk, as young people in Shanghai, particularly those with higher levels of education, are increasingly shifting to Mandarin and English (Gui & Zhou, 2021; Wang & King, 2022; Chen, 2022). The maintenance of the Shanghai dialect among its speakers has shifted negatively, as evidenced by this pattern. According to Eastman (1992), one of the elements behind the drop in language use is negative attitudes toward language. In contrast, positive language attitudes encourage speakers to maintain their language (Wang, 2023). Speakers will unintentionally transmit the language to the following generation if they keep using it. Meanwhile, Ortega (2020) contends that each legacy language's distinctiveness benefits its speakers.

This study intends to close the gap by investigating the attitudes of three different generations, as previous research has mostly concentrated on young (Xu & Zhou, 2016; Rubino, 2021; Yang, 2022; Zeng, 2022). Three generations of Shanghaiese families in the Jingan district are the subjects of this study, which investigates their perspectives on their native tongue. In order to address this problem, the study intends to offer theoretical and practical insights into how the Shanghai dialect is used throughout the three generations, which could be useful as a reference for upcoming scholars in the subject.

## 2. Literature Review

According to Bohner and Wanke (2011), attitudes encompass beliefs (cognition), emotional responses (effect), and behavioral tendencies (intentions, motivations). In classical definitions, an attitude is considered persistent, whereas more contemporary conceptualizations suggest that attitudes may vary based on situations, context, or mood. Attitude has been a key variable in numerous sociolinguistic studies (Cooper & Fishman, 1974). Attitudes on language use are often focused on the language, its users, or their ethnicity. *"The feelings individuals have about their own language or the languages of*

*others*" is the definition of language attitude (Crystal, 2003, p. 215). This idea refers to the attitudes individuals hold toward others who speak differently from them or share the same language (Kansikas, 2002). Language attitudes are structured along two evaluative dimensions: status (e.g., intelligence, education) and solidarity (e.g., friendliness, pleasantness). Language attitudes can be shaped by various social agents, including educators, peers, family, and the media. Since language attitudes are learned, they are inherently subject to change. Language attitudes can change in response to shifts in intergroup relations, government language policies, and, more dynamically, as a result of the social comparative context in which they are invoked. Once invoked, language attitudes can lead to various behavioral consequences, with negative attitudes often fostering prejudice, discrimination, and problematic social interactions (Dragojevic, 2017). People might have either favorable or negative views on language. Consistent use of language in daily interactions is a sign of a positive language attitude. According to Fakhrurrazi (2016), *"The language may be viewed as a key symbol of group identity when community members have positive attitudes toward it"* (p. 130). Negative language attitudes, as opposed to positive ones, are linked to speaker perceptions that lead to a decline in language use in everyday conversations. Such viewpoints could cause speakers to change how they use the language, which could result in language loss or even death (Agyekum, 2010).

According to Aziz and Amery (2016), *"the younger generation is likely to abandon the language if they perceive it as outdated or uncool"* (p. 103). At times, younger people appear to lack pride in their heritage or minority language, which may lead to increased use of the dominant language in their community. The Shanghai dialect, spoken within the Shanghai speech community, is an example. The Shanghai dialect is primarily used in suburban areas and within families, while Mandarin serves as the dominant lingua franca in public and formal domains, due to its prestige as Chinese official language. The dominance of Mandarin within the Shanghai speech community has led to negative attitudes among Shanghai youth toward the Shanghai dialect. The primary factors contributing to Shanghai youth's reluctance to use the Shanghai dialect in their social interactions and daily lives include perceptions that Mandarin is more modern and widespread, while the dialect is viewed as low-class and unsophisticated (Banda, 2020). Throughout the educational system, Mandarin is predominantly spoken on campuses and is regarded as more prestigious and practical than the Shanghai dialect.

So, there are some factors why local Shanghai speakers tend to shift to Mandarin. One reason is that Mandarin provides an easier means of learning in school. Shanghai residents also argue that speaking Mandarin facilitates socialization, such as interacting with new people or making friends. Another cause is that Mandarin is dominant in the Shanghai speech community, making children engaged in conversations and secure decent employment easier. As a result, many children recognize Mandarin as their mother language (Yu, 2012).

Luckily, bright findings exist regarding the language attitudes of the younger Shanghainese generation, with the Shanghai dialect serving as a key marker of their identity as Shanghainese. While many younger residents, especially in Shanghai's suburbs, continue using the local dialect daily and view it positively, their motivations stem from identity, effective communication, and prestige. Parental influence also plays a crucial role, as children often adopt the language habits they observe at home. However, Zhao and Liu (2020) argued that Shanghainese parents do not hold a positive attitude toward their children speaking the Shanghai dialect; instead, they encourage

their children to speak English or other languages. They believe that other languages are more useful than the Shanghai dialect in Shanghai.

### 3. Method

Qualitative research seeks to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups assign to social or human problems (Creswell, 2014). And qualitative methods focus on exploring, interpreting, and describing the characteristics or qualities of concepts (Hale & Napier, 2013). So, a descriptive qualitative approach was used in this study to examine the language attitudes and use of Shanghainese speakers across three different generations.

As national Mandarin promotion initiatives lead residents to increasingly adopt the national language over their native dialect, concerns arise regarding potential negative attitudes towards the local vernacular in future generations. Consequently, this study focused on investigating this shift to support the preservation of the Shanghai dialect alongside Mandarin.

#### 3.1. Research Location

This study was conducted in the Jingan District of Shanghai. This district was selected because it is one of the oldest and most prosperous areas, with a significant population of local residents.

#### 3.2. Participants

The study included nine Shanghainese women representing three generations: cohort 1 (the three aged 81-86), cohort 2 (three aged 46-51), and cohort 3 (three women aged 16 - 21). Participants were chosen via purposive sampling using two criteria from Bühmann and Trudell (2008): (1) parental language input to children, and (2) languages acquired from older relatives at home. These criteria targeted the study's youngest participants. Participants received generation-based codes ("C" + generation number: 1, 2, or 3) plus a unique identifier (1, 2, or 3). For instance, C1.1 denotes first-generation participant 1.

#### 3.3. Instruments

Interviews served as the main data collection method. Five semi-structured questions were administered to address the research objectives. The interview questions were adapted from the framework of Yusuf et al. (2013), which addresses language practice, attitudes, and maintenance. The interviews were conducted over a period of two weeks to gather information on the participants' attitudes toward the Shanghai dialect and their efforts to preserve it. A friend assisted me in conducting the interviews. He is a native of the Jingan district and speaks Shanghai dialect fluently, as it is his first language (L1). Interviews were conducted in participants' homes. Individual appointments were arranged beforehand, and written consent was secured prior to commencement. Using a tape recorder, sessions were captured, each lasting 20 - 30 minutes.

### 3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

In data collection, researchers first verified participant availability, then scheduled appointments after securing consent. Interviews occurred across varied locations due to third-generation participants residing separately from their parents. A smartphone audio recorder captured all responses, proving essential for documenting dispersed sessions. In data analysis, the interview dialogues were transcribed and this transcription underwent thematic analysis to extract meaningful patterns, ensuring a robust evaluation of language use and attitude.

### 3.5. Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researcher used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

## 4. Results

According to the interview responses, the participants reported rarely using the Shanghai dialect in conversations. Most participants primarily used Mandarin for communication at home, in markets, at employment, and other formal domains.

### 4.1. Intergenerational language transmission and use

#### 4.1.1. Cohort 1

Cohort 1 predominantly used the Shanghai dialect for communication. They reported continuing to use the Shanghai dialect as it has been their primary language since childhood. During the interviews, they responded in the Shanghai dialect without hesitation. They expressed great comfort using the language.

As illustrated in E1, G1.1 explained that she spoke the Shanghai dialect because it had been her primary language since childhood. In the data show, "E" represented an excerpt. E1: *"I have spoken Shanghai dialect since I was young. It is the language I use most"* (C1.1, age 82). Another participant, C1.2, as shown in E2, stated that she hardly spoke other languages and primarily communicated in the Shanghai dialect. E2: *"Wherever I go, I speak Shanghai dialect. I use it for everything because I am not fluent in Mandarin"* (C1.2, age 85). The sample responses show that the first generation of Shanghai speakers predominantly used their heritage language. They avoided mixing their heritage language with Mandarin, despite being able to speak Mandarin. One participant emphasized that she exclusively used Shanghai dialect, regardless of the setting.

#### 4.1.2. Cohort 2

Unlike the first generation, the Cohort 2 participant C2.3 (E3) occasionally used the Shanghai dialect, but only in specific contexts. C2.3 occasionally mixed languages when speaking with other Shanghainese individuals. C2.3 seemed comfortable mixing Mandarin, the Shanghai dialect, and English. Mandarin was predominantly used in

education, the workplace, transactions, and family settings. Mandarin, being the national language and the most widely spoken in China, is spoken by nearly everyone. E3: *"I am Shanghainese. I speak the Shanghai dialect with my parents' generation. In the office, market, and at home, I use Mandarin."* (C2.3, age 48). During the interviews, it was surprising that C2.1 answered questions in Mandarin (E4), despite being fluent in the Shanghai dialect. When asked in the Shanghai dialect, she continued responding in Mandarin. She reported speaking both Mandarin and Shanghai dialect. However, she clarified (E5) that she primarily used Mandarin at home with her Shanghainese husband and children, explaining: *"I only speak the Shanghai dialect with my mom at home"* (E4, C2.1, age 46). This suggests a decline in the use of the Shanghai dialect in her daily interactions. As observed among the second-generation participants, the Shanghai dialect was seldom used. These findings suggest that the second generation has begun shifting their language practices, indicating a decline in the use of their heritage language.

#### 4.1.3. Cohort 3

While heritage language use diminished in the second generation, third-generation participant C3.1 spoke almost exclusively Mandarin. Though unable to speak the Shanghai dialect at home or elsewhere, C3.1 maintained comprehension when listening to the dialect. E6: *"I do not speak the Shanghai dialect because it is uncommon in my neighborhood. However, I can understand it when others speak. I speak Mandarin and English."* (C3.1, age 16). C3.1 acknowledged that she rarely spoke the Shanghai dialect. When asked about the language, she seemed unsure and spoke only limited Shanghai dialect. At times, she only nodded in response to questions. In E7, another third-generation participant, C3.2, stated that she primarily used Mandarin and answered interview questions in Mandarin. She occasionally used English, depending on the context and interlocutor. She avoided using the Shanghai dialect with older adults. Her understanding of the Shanghai dialect was limited. E7: *"I often speak Mandarin. I rarely use the Shanghai dialect with older people because I know only a few basic expressions. I lack confidence in using the Shanghai dialect, so I speak Mandarin instead."* (C3.2, age 19). Two of the third-generation participants primarily spoke Mandarin. They could not speak the Shanghai dialect and had only a limited understanding of it. C3.1 primarily spoke Mandarin because her neighborhood offered limited opportunities to use the Shanghai dialect. C3.2 used English occasionally in certain contexts.

## 4.2. Language Attitude

Shanghai participants consider their identity as Shanghainese to be reflected in their choice of language.

#### 4.2.1. Cohort 1

First-generation participants indicated that the Shanghai dialect was their preferred language for communicating with family members. One participant, C1.1 highlighted (E8) that while the Shanghai dialect was historically the dominant vernacular, many elders developed Mandarin proficiency as a supplementary skill. E8: *"I have spoken the Shanghai dialect since childhood. As grandparents, we still primarily use the Shanghai dialect."* (C1.1, age 83). The first-generation participants' childhood use of the Shanghai dialect strongly influenced their attitudes toward the language. C1.3 used the Shanghai

dialect because, in her youth, Mandarin was seldom used, making the Shanghai dialect the primary language.

E9: *"At that time, the Shanghai dialect was used because opportunities to communicate in Mandarin were limited."* (C1.3, age 85). Other participants indicated that the Shanghai dialect usage depended heavily on communicative context and interlocutor identity. In E10, C1.1 noted that she primarily spoke Mandarin when visiting towns outside Shanghai. She adjusted her language to match the interlocutor, using Mandarin or English as appropriate. E10: *"I speak Mandarin when visiting other towns, English with foreigners, and the Shanghai dialect with my family."* (C1.1, age 83).

Like the first participant, C1.3 exhibited a similar pattern in language choice during communication. In E11, C1.3 explained that she spoke Mandarin at the market because most sellers were from other cities, rendering the use of the Shanghai dialect inappropriate. At home, she consistently used the Shanghai dialect. E11: *"I use Mandarin in the market because most sellers are from other cities, making the Shanghai dialect unsuitable. At home, I speak the Shanghai dialect with my family."* (C1.3, age 85). First-generation participants predominantly used the Shanghai dialect for family interactions but often switched to Mandarin in public settings.

#### 4.2.2. Cohort 2

Second-generation participants had varied perspectives on using the Shanghai dialect as their primary language in conversations. They reported frequently speaking Mandarin and often mixing it with the Shanghai dialect during conversations, as revealed in interviews. This indicates a less favorable attitude toward the Shanghai dialect. C2.1 reported domain-dependent the Shanghai dialect usage (E14), noting Mandarin predominated at home with her husband and children. This selective pattern was clarified in E12: *"I speak the Shanghai dialect at home, except when communicating with my children." Mandarin is the dominant language when I talk to my children. With my husband, who is also Shanghainese, I speak a mix of Shanghai dialect and Mandarin."* (C2.1, age 46).

C2.1 (E13) stated her language selection between the Shanghai dialect and Mandarin was interlocutor-driven and responsive to conversational initiations, stressing communicative efficacy. Similarly, Cohort 2 participant C2.3 used Mandarin with children to ensure comprehension and facilitate education. She added that she used Mandarin at work when interacting with colleagues. Only one participant, C2.2, reported speaking exclusively in the Shanghai dialect without mixing it with Mandarin. In E14, C2.2 acknowledged using Mandarin because of the prevailing linguistic environment. She explained that her neighborhood mainly consisted of non-Shanghainese speakers, which encouraged her to use Mandarin in interactions. Furthermore, many citizens favor using Mandarin to support their children's education and align with national linguistic trends. E13: *"If someone speaks to me in the Shanghai dialect first, I respond fluently in the same dialect. However, if the initial interaction is in Mandarin, I feel uncomfortable switching to the Shanghai dialect."* (C2.1, age 46).

E14: *"I can speak the Shanghai dialect. Since birth, my parents have taught me the Shanghai dialect as my mother tongue. At home, I use the Shanghai dialect with my elder siblings and parents. Outside the home, I primarily speak Mandarin due to the language domain."* (C2.2, age 45). Another significant phenomenon of the Shanghai dialect use is

its application in specific contexts. Several participants employed the Shanghai dialect for affective purposes like expressing anger, gravity, or humor. C2.1 (age 46) specifically used it for emphatic communication with her children, noting in E15: *"I speak the Shanghai dialect when upset with my children... Mandarin doesn't fully express my feelings."* She further clarified in E16 that Mandarin often carries diminished gravity. Consequently, when having a serious conversation with another Shanghainese, she preferred using the Shanghai dialect. She also believed that the Shanghai dialect was more effective for making jokes. When joking, she preferred the Shanghai dialect because she found it funnier when specific words were combined or used with idiomatic expressions. Idioms in the Shanghai dialect often carry unique meanings, enhancing humor in conversations among Shanghainese speakers.

E16: *"I believe Mandarin lacks seriousness when discussing important matters. For serious conversations, I use the Shanghai dialect. I also prefer the Shanghai dialect for jokes, as it delivers stronger punchlines depending on the context."* (C2.1, age 46). Notably, C2.1 spoke exclusively in the Shanghai dialect with her family. However, she alternated between the Shanghai dialect and Mandarin based on the conversational context. The findings suggest that the use of the Shanghai dialect primarily depends on the context and the interlocutors involved in the conversation. In E17, C2.3 mentioned using Mandarin predominantly with her colleagues in the office. E17: *"In the office, I occasionally speak the Shanghai dialect, but I predominantly use Mandarin."* (C2.3, age 48).

#### 4.2.3. Cohort 3

However, not all individuals used the Shanghai dialect in conversation. Among the third generation, one participant primarily spoke Mandarin and had difficulty with the Shanghai dialect. Third-generation speakers reported minimal dialect engagement.

C3.1 (16) noted in E18: *"I usually speak Mandarin or English rarely the Shanghai dialect."* Similarly, C3.2 (E19) attributed her Mandarin preference to environmental dominance of the national language. She first learned Mandarin as a child. After moving to her grandparents' home, she gradually started to understand the Shanghai dialect. Currently, she can speak only a little of the Shanghai dialect. She also mentioned that she can now speak a little of the Shanghai dialect, along with Mandarin and English. E19: *"Now I can speak a little of the Shanghai dialect, as well as English and Mandarin. Mandarin is dominant for me. When I was young, I first learned Mandarin. After moving to a new residence, I began hearing neighbors speak the Shanghai dialect and picked up a few words."* (C3.2, age 19).

Their choice of daily communication language depends on their priorities. As shown in E20, C3.3 primarily used other languages due to school regulations. She attended an international boarding school where students were required to speak only English and Mandarin at all times. Third-generation participants predominantly favored Mandarin for daily communication. This trend was reinforced by institutional policies, as noted by C3.3 (16): *"At school... speaking dialects is prohibited"* (E20).

Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that most third-generation participants prefer using Mandarin over the Shanghai dialect for daily communication.

### 4.3. Language Maintenance

Many older participants stated that they continued to use the Shanghai dialect outside their homes to maintain the language. When interacting with non-Shanghainese speakers (e.g., in the market, school, or office), they occasionally used the Shanghai dialect to communicate and even attempted to teach them some of its expressions. Each generation, according to the interviews, had its own methods for maintaining their heritage language.

#### 4.3.1. Cohort 1

C1.1 (E21) stated that she always spoke the Shanghai dialect. However, when traveling outside of Shanghai, she would switch to the language predominantly spoken in the community, namely Mandarin. Participant C1.1 (83) restricted the Shanghai dialect to local contexts, noting in E21: *"I speak the dialect except outside Shanghai."* With younger generations rarely using it, she accommodated by switching to Mandarin for comprehension. To preserve the vernacular, she proactively taught her grandchildren despite their parents' avoidance of the dialect carefully respecting household language choices while seizing opportunities for transmission. As she stated in E22:

E22: *"If I speak with my grandchildren and they cannot respond in the Shanghai dialect, I switch to Mandarin. Even though they come from pure Shanghainese parents, the younger generation speaks Mandarin"*. Facing her grandchildren's exclusive Mandarin use, C1.1 (83) declared: *"What can we do? It's up to me to teach them."* Similarly, C1.2 asserted that consistent intergenerational transmission could prevent dialect loss. Despite acknowledging youth preferences for Mandarin/English (E23), she committed to speaking the Shanghai dialect with descendants to sustain heritage.

First-generation participants unanimously emphasized active vernacular transmission as vital for heritage preservation. C1.2 (83) articulated this in E23: *"If I keep speaking the Shanghai dialect with my grandchildren, our language survives. Their mother holds the key to its future once they enter school, Mandarin-dominated environments and media limit our influence. Still, I persist in speaking the dialect with them."* participants acknowledged environmental pressures like education and media as major transmission barriers.

#### 4.3.2. Cohort 2

Participant C2.2 (E24) asserted resistance to heritage language attrition and external linguistic influence. Despite limited comprehension by non-native speakers, she maintained deliberate the Shanghai dialect usage to affirm cultural identity. She once introduced the Shanghai dialect to her new non-Shanghainese neighbors, hoping they could gradually learn basic phrases from her. E24: *"If non-Shanghainese people come to my home, I try to speak some Shanghai dialect with them"*. Participant C2.2 (45) justified code-mixing as pedagogical tool: *"When non-natives join our community, I progressively blend dialects to build their Shanghai dialect comprehension from basic foundations."*

Heritage language maintenance beyond domestic settings varied significantly. Several participants defaulted to Mandarin with Shanghainese interlocutors, prioritizing communicative pragmatism over ethnic solidarity. C2.3 (E25) exemplified this through accommodation strategies: *"I mirror my interlocutor's initial language choice."* E25: *"If they speak to me first in Mandarin, I respond in Mandarin; if they speak in the Shanghai"*

*dialect, I speak the Shanghai dialect.*" (G2.3, age 48). Interestingly, G2.1 (E26) claimed to be a true Shanghainese, despite previously stating that she used Mandarin with her family (see E7). She further implied that she would not be embarrassed to speak the Shanghai dialect if necessary, regardless of whether her Shanghainese interlocutors spoke to her in Mandarin. However, she still responded in Mandarin. E26: *"As Shanghainese, we must claim our linguistic heritage,"* urged C2.1 (46). *"This dialect warrants pride, never shame."* The responses from Cohort 2 indicate that, despite some of them still using Mandarin to communicate with other Shanghainese, they felt a strong desire to maintain their heritage language. They recognized that the Shanghai dialect is integral to their identity.

#### 4.3.3. Cohort 3

The decline in language maintenance is also evident among the third-generation participants. Universal adoption of interlocutor-driven code-switching was observed. As C3.3 articulated (E27): *"My responses mirror theirs: Mandarin input precludes dialect output"* (age 15).

C3.2 further cited Shanghai's national centrality and her Mandarin speaking migrant peers as motivations for adopting the national language. However, she intentionally code-mixed with Shanghainese interlocutors to maintain vernacular proficiency. Nonetheless, all third-generation participants remained aware of their heritage language. They believed that if they did not speak the Shanghai dialect now, the language would eventually die. As C3.2 stated in E28: E28: *"Yes, I have thought about what would happen if the next generation doesn't learn the Shanghai dialect. No one will be able to teach them the dialect. Therefore, I continue to maintain the Shanghai dialect and speak it occasionally."* (C3.2, age 19).

G3.1, however, demonstrated a decline in awareness in E29. Initially, she expressed indifference about her generation's inability to speak the Shanghai dialect, as her peers primarily spoke Mandarin at school and in the neighborhood. However, she later emphasized her strong desire to learn the dialect, though she acknowledged that her environment hindered her ability to do so. For instance, despite all being Shanghainese, her family did not speak the dialect at home. She also expressed concern about the potential loss of the Shanghai dialect, stating that she did not want this to occur. E29: *"I never mind, because we all speak Mandarin, and we all use Mandarin in education domain as well, so it doesn't matter. However, I am eager to learn the Shanghai dialect; I really want to speak it, but there is no one in my family who speaks it. My grandmother does, but we rarely see her. It's a pity. I don't know what will happen, but I hope the Shanghai dialect will not be lost."* (G3.1, age 16). All third-generation participants maintained heritage language consciousness despite Mandarin dominance. While acknowledging environmental constraints on Shanghai dialect usage, they expressed commitment to practice the dialect to forestall attrition.

## 5. Discussion

First-generation participants demonstrated robust ethnolinguistic vitality, using Shanghai dialect as their primary in-group communicative medium. This positive orientation drove active vernacular preservation efforts within familial and community domains. Consistent with prior research, elders endorsed multilingual child-rearing and prioritized inter-generational dialect transmission. Their language practices intertwined

with kinship, ethnicity, and cultural identity, and empirically validate [Brown's \(2009\)](#) and [Sapir's \(2003\)](#) theoretical nexus: language functions as identity infrastructure that strengthens relational bonds and communal participation.

However, one participant from the second generation has shown a gradual shift from the Shanghai dialect to Mandarin, failing to pass the dialect on to her children. Her Shanghai dialect use is domain-specific: reserved for affective expressions (e.g., resentment) and humor contexts where vernacular efficacy prevails. Mandarin dominates societal participation being nationally institutionalized in education, governance and inter-ethnic communication. This functional shift risks heritage language attrition and weakened linguistic self-identification. Crucially, interrupted inter-generational transmission may erode both positive language attitudes and ethnolinguistic identity among youth. Paradoxically, participants maintained robust Shanghainese identity despite vernacular disengagement.

The third generation exhibits a more noticeable shift toward Mandarin. The Shanghai dialect is endangered as the younger generation increasingly adopts Mandarin. As the heritage language is gradually abandoned, the dominant language will take over the community. Among the three participants, two still spoke the Shanghai dialect depending on the situation and their interlocutors, while one participant spoke exclusively in Mandarin. She expressed a desire to learn and speak the Shanghai dialect but argued that her environment, particularly the language spoken at home and with friends (Mandarin), did not provide her with the opportunity. The participant acknowledged dialect-learning barriers within her Mandarin-saturated social ecology (home/peer networks).

Despite ambivalent vernacular attitudes, participants maintained Shanghainese identity through ethnicity and residency. While functionally preferring Mandarin, they feared heritage language loss as identity erosion aligning with [Mirsky's \(1991\)](#) identity-attrition nexus. This reflects youth "proficiency-attitude misalignment": desiring vernacular competence amid acquisition barriers. Contrary to [Morcom's \(2017\)](#) bicultural esteem framework, environmental agents (family/school/government) failed to scaffold heritage affirmation. Thus, urgent institutional mobilization is needed. [Burke's \(1993\)](#) identity-marking principle necessitates community-wide preservation initiatives beginning domestically.

## 6. Conclusion

Findings confirm persistent daily use of the Shanghai dialect among most participants, with highest retention in cohort 1 and 2. Among the first generation, all participants strongly identified as Shanghainese through their use of the Shanghai dialect in daily communication and by their kinship and ethnicity. They spoke the Shanghai dialect exclusively with other Shanghainese, without mixing it with Mandarin. This demonstrated their positive attitude toward the Shanghai dialect. In the second generation, participants began shifting their language use to Mandarin. They answered the interview questions by mixing the Shanghai dialect with Mandarin, rather than using only the Shanghai dialect. Only one participant used the Shanghai dialect extensively. One-third of third-generation participants demonstrated heritage language alienation, reporting minimal the Shanghai dialect use and exhibiting production reluctance during interviews reflecting incipient transition toward Mandarin. Paradoxically, universal intergenerational resolve emerged to preserve the dialect against feared attrition.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researcher used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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