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"Can a minister say *qǐyè*?": How a non-standard tone becomes indexical of the national other

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Abstract

This study examines Taiwanese netizens' metapragmatic debates on tonal variation in Taiwan Mandarin, focusing on the pronunciation of 企業 *qìyè* 'company/enterprise' by two government officials during a nationally broadcast press conference. It investigates how the non-standard variant *qǐyè*, a relic feature historically present in Taiwan, becomes enregistered as a linguistic emblem of imported Chinese influence through the processes of clasping and semiotic differentiation. The study highlights the ideological stakes in linguistic boundary-making and explores how tonal variation functions as a site for negotiating national identity. It further connects this linguistic debate to broader ideological projects such as democratization, Taiwanization, and shifting Taiwan-China relations. By integrating variationist and metapragmatic approaches, this study contributes to discussions on the indexical field and the role of explicit metapragmatic commentary in shaping linguistic change. (Indexicality, language ideology, tonal variation, enregisterment, language policing, metapragmatics, Taiwan)

Introduction

In recent waves of variationist sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012), variation is approached as part and parcel of speakers' stylistic practices, framed within a semiotic, metapragmatic perspective on language (e.g. Silverstein 1976, 2003). Instead of treating variation as statically correlating with macrosocial categories, this approach highlights the semiotic negotiation involved in the social use of linguistic variants, arguing that the social meaning of a linguistic variable is underspecified and contextually constructed. A linguistic variable constitutes an indexical field (Eckert 2008), or 'constellations of ideologically related meanings' (Eckert 2008:453), which can be activated in situated use. The indexical field is fluid, as new ideological connections can build on older ones to create new indexical meanings (*n*th order indexicality and $n + 1$st order indexicality in Silverstein's (2003) terms). In other words, the indexical field is constantly reshaped (e.g. Podesva 2007; Zhang 2018; Wan 2022a; Lin & Wang 2024).

Yet, indexical multiplicity does not just occur in speakers' situated use of linguistic variables but also in the interpretation, evaluation, and uptake (Agha 2011) of such use by the listening subject (Inoue 2003). Third-wave variationist sociolinguists have investigated listeners' social evaluation of linguistic variables experimentally (e.g. Campbell-Kibler 2008; Podesva, Reynolds, Callier, & Baptiste 2015; Gao & Forrest 2023). They draw on the long tradition of language attitude studies (e.g. Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum 1960) and apply methods such as matched-guise techniques to single linguistic variables (e.g. Campbell-Kibler 2008; Boyd, Fruehwald, & Hall-Lew 2021). Significantly, this body of research regards perceptions as outcomes of indexical processes (Drager, Hardeman-Guthrie, Schutz, & Chik 2021), thus bringing in new potentials—a semiotic and language ideological perspective—on evaluations of language variation. Nevertheless, in the expanding body of research on the indexicality of linguistic variables in political discourse, which the current study focuses on, much of the attention has been on speaker design (e.g. Hall-Lew, Coppock, & Starr 2010; Podesva et al. 2015; D'Onofrio & Stecker 2022). While Podesva and colleagues (2015) notably examine both the production and perception of American politicians' use of /t/, the role of listener agency remains underexplored, in that we know little about how listeners negotiate the indexicalities related to political actors. A rare exception is Hall-Lew & Trousdale's (2020:97) study, which examines how British speakers have rapidly ideologized the [bɹɛgzɪt] variant of Brexit as an index of 'the incorrect political stance', with incorrectness emerging as an $n + 1$st order indexicality derived from phonetic markedness. In this article, we further unpack the role of listener agency and investigate how such indexical derivation of phonetic markedness should be studied as a product of metapragmatic negotiation.

This current study sits at this juncture of sociolinguistic variation, evaluation of language, political discourse, and a semiotic and language ideological approach; it examines the uptake of a linguistic variable in Taiwan Mandarin—online metapragmatic debates about the appropriateness of two government officials' pronunciations of the Mandarin Chinese word 企業 *qìyè* 'company/enterprise' in a high-profile press conference. We see these metapragmatic responses as an uptake, a dynamic process that refers to 'a kind of perception or awareness of a fragment of semiotic behavior that can lead to the recycling or reinterpretation of the fragment' (Cole & Pellicer 2012:451). Such (re)interpretation and evaluation serve as sites where linguistic authority (Woolard 2016; Gal 2019; Wong 2024) is negotiated and may potentially influence future cycles of interaction on both the speaker's and listener's ends. We argue that such metadiscourse serves as an enregistering process (Agha 2006) and a discursive space that shapes both the indexicality of the variable in question and the ideologies concerning language variation per se beyond this particular case. Though this study shares a similar focus on evaluation of a linguistic variable with the perception-focused third-wave variation studies, it places stronger focus on the agentive role of the listeners in the act of enregisterment.

A brief sketch of the communicative event in question may provide a glimpse into how the literature reviewed above are relevant to this study. On May 16, 2021, amid the Covid-19 outbreak, then Minister of Health and Welfare of Taiwan, Chen Shih-Chung, and Vice Minister, Shih Chung-Liang, announced pandemic control guidelines to Taiwanese businesses in the daily press conference held by the Taiwan

Central Epidemic Command Center. Upon saying the Mandarin word 企業 'company/enterprise', Shih and later Chen pronounced it as *qǐyè*, which deviated from the standard Taiwan Mandarin pronunciation *qìyè*. The two pronunciations differ only in the tone of the first character 企 (also the first syllable): the marked variant arousing metapragmatic debates is in the third tone, which is characterized by a dipping or mid-falling tone contour. Contrastively, the standard Taiwan Mandarin pronunciation, as prescribed by Taiwan's Ministry of Education, is in the fourth tone, with a high-falling tone contour (See the section *Mandarin tones and the tonal variation between* qǐyè *and* qìyè for details). Heated discussions immediately occurred in online forums even before the press conference ended, and the incident was reported by news media subsequently. All the stir occurred for one main reason: the marked third-tone pronunciation *qǐyè* is widely associated with *Putonghua*, the standard Mandarin spoken in China. Given the political tension between Taiwan and China and Chen's and Shih's roles as minister and vice minister of the Taiwanese government, their use of the third-tone variant received much attention, seen by some as an index of cultural invasion. Nevertheless, it is not entirely accurate to say that *qǐyè* is an imported pronunciation; it is also a relic feature associated with the non-standard language of some members of the older generations in Taiwan.

Taking the indexicalities of *qǐyè* and *qìyè* as the starting point, this study examines the processes of semiotic differentiation (Gal & Irvine 2019) and ideological contestations involved in the metapragmatic debates about the (in)appropriateness of using the third-tone variant by Taiwanese government officials. Propelling the indexical trajectory from markedness to cultural invasion and to (in)appropriateness, such metapragmatic debates can be seen as clasping (Gal 2019), enregistering moments where identities, the variable in question, and *Putonghua* and Taiwan Mandarin as two registers are connected. They are also bottom-up acts of language policing (Blommaert, Kelly-Holmes, Lane, Leppänen, Moriarty, Pietikäinen, & Piirainen-Marsh 2009) or a checkpoint (Milani & Levon 2019) that regulates or contest the normativity of language. Although the debate begins with a rather confined linguistic focus—the non-standard variant of one single lexical item, the related discussions, nevertheless, serve as a centerpiece (Gal & Irvine 2019) that connect outward to a range of sites of ideological contestations.

We argue that ideologies about language variation are highly contested and complexly linked with a range of factors. First, at the linguistic level, variation in Mandarin, a tonal language, displays distinctive characteristics from variation of better studied languages such as English. Ideologies about language variation are also shaped by unique pedagogical practices concerning language learning in the local communities. Second, the ideologies about *qǐyè* intersect with two additional social dimensions that compete in (de)legitimizing its use: local vs. imported linguistic features and young vs. old age. Third, as the metapragmatic discussions challenge or reinforce the boundedness of language in relation to locality, the seemingly linguistic discussions are, on the one hand, a process of enregisterment (Agha 2006), and, on the other, sociopolitical debates concerning national boundaries and imagined communities (Anderson 1983), as Taiwan has an ambiguous international status and an unclear future. Fourth, the three dimensions are interlinked and inevitably backgrounded by the Taiwan-China relations, which have been a persistent issue

that motivates metapragmatics in Taiwan (e.g. Su & Chun 2021; Wan 2022b; Su 2023) and have drawn considerable international attention recently, as exemplified by the description of Taiwan as 'the new Cold War's flashpoint' by *The Economist* (March 2023).

Indexicality, enregisterment, and clasping

As briefly mentioned above, what motivates the recent wave of variationist sociolinguistics research is the attention to indexicality. Originating in linguistic anthropological research such as Silverstein (1976, 2003) and Ochs (1992), indexicality emerges as a useful concept to connect a linguistic variable and its potential social meanings, and such connections can be seen as resources for speakers to take stances and construct identities. Silverstein (2003) further develops the concept of indexical order, arguing that indexicalities can be constantly rebuilt and shaped. Therefore, indexical shifts in the social meanings of linguistic features are commonly observed. An important related concept is *enregisterment*, the 'processes whereby distinct forms of speech come to be socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users' (Agha 2005:38). Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson (2006), for example, discuss the process of enregisterment of 'Pittsburghese' and how features that previously indexed the working class became associated with localness. They argue that the emergence of 'Pittsburghese' as a register goes hand in hand with the emergence of Pittsburgh as a place to identify with, hence motivating the indexical shift from class to place. These processes are largely driven by social and economic change (see also Hall-Lew, Cardoso, & Davies (2021) on the indexical shift of GOAT vowel fronting in California).

Focusing on variation in Mandarin, Zhang (2018) also observes indexical shift, albeit in a different direction, in the enregisternment of *Gangtai qiang* (lit. 'Hong Kong-Taiwan accent') in China. Prominent *Gangtai qiang* features, such as full tone (as opposed to neutral tone in *Putonghua*), are initially indexical of geographical difference but are further associated with social distinction (cosmopolitan, stylish, inauthentic, etc.) Zhang's research presents an interesting contrast with the current study. In both cases, varieties of Mandarin compete with each other; the standard feature in one variety becomes non-standard and acquires additional meanings in another place, and the meaning-making processes necessarily involve identity and ideological work.

Ideological work may also lead forms of speech to be perceived as indexically the SAME or DIFFERENT; one such mechanism is *axes of differentiation* (Gal & Irvine 2019) that assemble or conventionalize register contrasts. Gal (2019) identifies three moments of such assemblage and conventionalization in political discourses: clasping, relaying, and grafting. Most relevant for the current discussion is clasping, a first moment of enregisterment, which identifies and assembles a register and links it with a person-type, just as the netizens' first moment of linking *qǐyè* as an 'imported' feature in the current study. At first glance, there seems to be a difference between the register makers actively producing the discourse in Gal's examples and the netizens responding to a press conference in this study. Yet the difference is only superficial: the netizens play an agentive role in enregistering *qǐyè*, evoking linguistic authority and national identity through this process. It is parallel to

Inoue's (2003) discussion of the *listening subject*: the register of Japan's schoolgirl speech (later evolving into women's language) was largely made by male intellectuals who listened to, interpreted, and commented on young women's speech in the late nineteenth-century Japan.

Background of the study

Historical background

To fully understand the online debate about *qǐyè* and *qìyè*, it is essential to explore Taiwan's sociolinguistic history. Located about 180 km off the southeast coast of the Chinese Mainland, Taiwan has seen waves of migration and colonization. Initially home to Austronesian-speaking groups, the island experienced significant settlement by Han Chinese in the seventeenth century, particularly Southern Min and Hakka speakers. During Japanese colonial rule (1895–1945), Japanese dominated education and public life. After 1945, the Nationalist government of the Republic of China (ROC) took over Taiwan and imposed Mandarin as the national language to unify and 're-Sinicize' the population, sidelining the previously dominant local languages.

In 1949, following defeat by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan to reestablish its regime. The People's Republic of China (PRC), led by the CCP, was founded on the Chinese mainland. The Nationalist government's retreat brought a sudden wave of immigration: about 1.2 million Mainlanders moved to Taiwan, accounting for approximately 10% of the Taiwanese population. These immigrants, though linguistically heterogeneous, were labeled by the Taiwanese locals as *wàishěngrén* (lit. 'people from outside of the province'). The state of Mandarin in Taiwan at this time was quite chaotic: among the Taiwanese locals (aka *běnshěngrén*, lit. 'people of the province'), there were very few speakers of Mandarin. Even among the immigrating Mainlanders, there were not many native Mandarin speakers; most of them were Southerners speaking Southern Chinese languages. Yet the Nationalist government employed strong measures to promote Mandarin as the only legitimate language in public domains. Consequently, great variation occurred at this initial stage of the development of Taiwan Mandarin. This historical development is also responsible (at least partially) for the differences between Taiwan Mandarin and *Putonghua* spoken in contemporary China (see Cheng 1985; Her 2010; Su 2018).

After decades of political stalemate and no-contact policy between the ROC and PRC governments (better known as Taiwan and China internationally nowadays), in the late 1980s, Taiwanese and Chinese were finally allowed to have limited contact. By the 1990s, increasing numbers of Taiwanese migrated to the Chinese Mainland for investment opportunities. According to the national statistics in 2019, around 395,000 Taiwanese citizens worked in China.[1] Other informal sources suggest around 1.5 million lived there pre-Covid.[2] Concurrently, Taiwan transitioned into a democratic country. These rapid social, political, and economic changes significantly impacted Taiwanese people's identities. Figure 1 below shows longitudinal survey results of the self-identities of Taiwanese since the early 1990s. In the early 1990s, the dominant choice was 'both Taiwanese and Chinese' (close to 50%), followed by
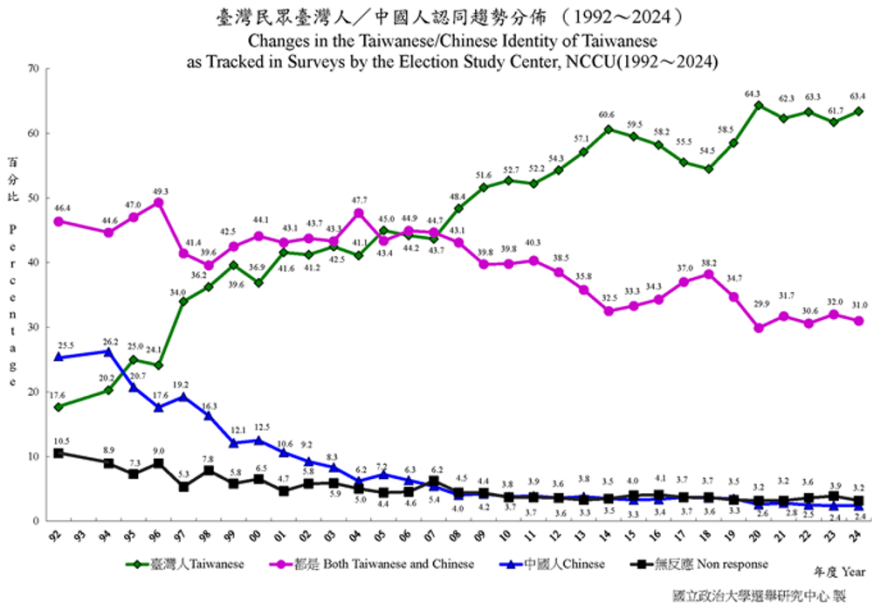
Figure 1. Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese identity of Taiwanese as tracked in surveys by the Election Study Center, NCCU (1992–2024) (Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University (2025)).

'Chinese' (around 25%), with less than twenty percent labeling themselves solely as 'Taiwanese'. But in the recent decade, 'Taiwanese' has risen to be the majority choice (around 60%). The increasing contact between Taiwan and China and the rising awareness of local identity put the differences between Taiwan Mandarin and *Putonghua* in the spotlight, triggering the bottom-up policing of language use (Blommaert et al. 2009) at issue in this study.

Mandarin tones and the tonal variation between qǐyè and qìyè

Taiwan Mandarin has four lexical tones differentiated by pitch height and pitch contour: high-level (T1), rising (T2), dipping or mid-falling (T3), and high-falling (T4). The tonal variants involved in this study are T3 and T4. Figure 2 shows the four lexical tones realized with the target syllable of this study—*qi*.

According to the National Pronunciation Standard Compilation, published by the ROC government in 1947—two years after the ROC took over Taiwan—the character 企, as used in the word 'enterprise', has only one standard pronunciation: *qì*, in the fourth tone. This prescriptive pronunciation has remained unchanged in Taiwan. However, in the PRC, the standard is the third tone, indicating possible regional variation that ROC and PRC drew on when establishing their respective prescriptive standards.

Mainlander immigrants in Taiwan, influenced by regional varieties of Mandarin, may have contributed to tonal variation in Taiwan when Mandarin-only policies
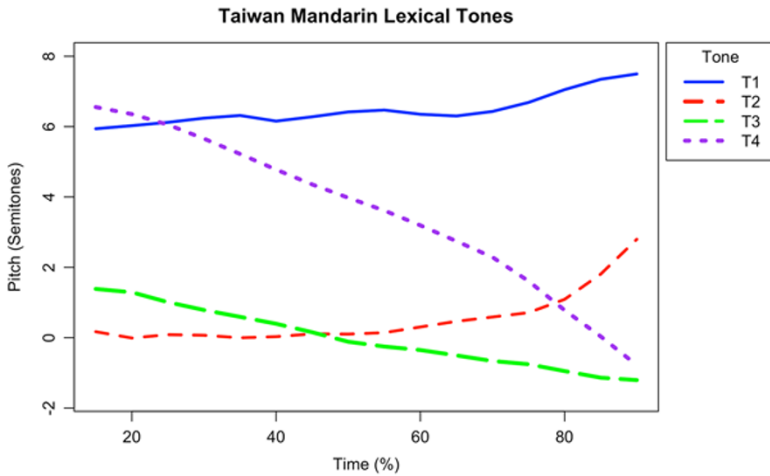
Taiwan Mandarin Lexical Tones

Figure 2. Tone contours of *qi* in the four lexical tones.

were implemented in schools and media. Archival footage from the 1970s, during Taiwan's economic rise, reveals variation in the pronunciation of *qìyè* and *qǐyè* even among broadcasters. This suggests that empirically, the third-tone variant was present in Taiwan well before China became a significant source of Mandarin cultural production in the 2000s.

Also related to the current discussion is the concept of *pòyīnzì* (破音字), a linguistic and pedagogical term in Mandarin that superficially resembles the concept of variation. *Pòyīnzì* is a concept often invoked in Chinese language education in Taiwan, which is somewhat similar to a heteronym or polyphone. In Mandarin, some characters can have more than one standard pronunciation. In some cases, the different pronunciations are in complementary distribution; that is, their meanings determine their prescribed pronunciations. For example, the character 省 is pronounced as *shěng* when meaning 'to save (money, time, etc.)' and as *xǐng* when meaning 'to reflect'.

In other (but rarer) cases, two pronunciations are used interchangeably, often having to do with register differences. For example, the character 熟 'ripe' could be read as *shóu* or *shú*, depending on whether it appears in oral or written registers. In other words, *pòyīnzì* is similar to prescribed, standardized variation. Chinese classes often devote much time to differentiate the standard pronunciations of the characters in use. As we show later, some netizens evoke and broaden the concept of *pòyīnzì* in their responses to the officials' use of *qǐyè*.

The incident

The press conference in question is situated in the aforementioned historical and linguistic context. When the host, Minister Chen, first introduced the topic of pandemic control guidelines to businesses, he initially used the standard variant in Taiwan, *qìyè*. However, the next speaker, Vice Minister Shih used *qǐyè* consistently (five times) throughout his three-minutes fifty-two-seconds turn. Chen then switched to *qǐyè*

after Shih's turn, an act of linguistic convergence that caught many netizens' attention. The transcript of the section in question is included in the appendix. As we show later in data analysis, netizens immediately 'clasped' *qǐyè* as an imported feature from China and deemed it inappropriate for government officials to use. Netizens' strong reaction may also originate from Chen's status as a rising political star in the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the governing party of Taiwan, which holds a more resistant stance to China in Taiwan's political spectrum (see Wan 2022b). In other words, it is particularly surprising for a DPP official to use the variant potentially linked to *Putonghua*.

Methods

Site of data collection

The data of our study are collected from PTT, a text-based Bulletin Board System (BBS) in Taiwan with over 1.5 million registered users. A 2010 survey reported that PTT users generally have at least a bachelor's degree. The peak in user numbers occurred around 2014 during one of Taiwan's largest student movements against a free trade agreement between Taiwan and China, clearly indicating that the user base was relatively young at that time and was politically engaged. The discourse collected from PTT likely reflects the views of educated, politically engaged individuals in their thirties or forties.

The PTT Gossip Board, where we drew our data, is a popular forum on PTT and plays a significant role in shaping public opinion. Known for its 'live comments', the Gossip Board attracts users who discuss real-time events, such as press conferences, presidential speeches, or everyday occurrences like earthquakes and typhoons. This makes the Gossip Board a valuable space for observing users' immediate reactions to various events. Although the anonymity of PTT can intensify polarization, journalists often use content from the Gossip Board as a microcosm of broader societal sentiment—a more immediate form of evidence than time-consuming polls. Consequently, it further influences public discourse through media coverage and circulation. An illustrative example is the news coverage by *Liberty Times*, with headlines such as 'Chen Shih-Chung keeps saying *qǐyè*, upsetting a lot of netizens'—where 'a lot of netizens' explicitly references users from the Gossip Board.

Data collection and exploration

We collected our data by manually scraping fifteen online articles and 754 comments about *qǐyè* on the Gossip Board of PTT within two days of the incident, that is, May 16 and May 17, 2021. There are two focuses of data exploration. First, we identify an overarching theme across the posts and comments: namely, what is acceptable language? This is not surprising, given that the nature of the controversy has to do with linguistic correctness/appropriateness. Yet the discussions go beyond this particular case of *qìyè* and *qǐyè*, as we show in the later analyses. Second, to closely capture the various positions about (un)acceptable language manifested in the data, we code the data in terms of what contrasts are constructed.

Out of the 754 lines of comments, 217 were given a coding of contrasts. A portion of the comments did not communicate salient contrasts identifiable by the

Table 1. Summary of contrast coding.

Codes of contrast	Cue	*N*	Example
Taiwan vs. China	Communists, *zhīyǔ jǐngchá* 'China language police', etc.	107	'Probably a spy sent by the CCP. The moment they speak, the act falls apart.'
language purism vs. linguistic diversity	*zhīyǔ jǐngchá* 'China language police', *pòyīnzì* 'polyphonic character', etc.	45	'The China language police really never take a day off.'; 'Why take this polyphonic character so seriously? Are you letting an anti-China mindset take over?'
correct vs. incorrect pronunciation	Ministry of Education, dictionary, bad Chinese, *pòyīnzì* 'polyphonic character', etc.	24	'The Ministry of Education's pronunciation has never included "qi3".'
older vs. younger generation		17	'I heard many adults saying this over 30 years ago.'
bengshengren and *waishengren*		12	'Older *waishengren* mostly use this kind of pronunciation. Textbooks teach the fourth tone, but they still unconsciously pronounce it this way.'

authors. For example, comments such as 他媽的到底在起三小 'what the fuck are you pronouncing *qǐ* for' showcase how the third-tone variant is sociolinguistically marked, yet no contrast was identifiable. These instances were excluded.

Among the 217 cases coded for contrast, we focus on 123 highly relevant ones. The most frequent code is Taiwan vs. China, followed by language purism vs. support for linguistic diversity, correct vs. incorrect pronunciation, generational difference, and the ethnic contrast between *bengshengren* and *waishengren*. The codes are not mutually exclusive. Table 1 presents the codes along with examples where contrasts are either explicitly shown or can be inferred from contextual cues, based on the unanimous consensus of the authors. Other contrasts less relevant to this study, including different political parties in Taiwan, various political figures, and different types of netizens (e.g. trolls vs. onlookers), were coded but were not the primary focus.

Data analysis

This section presents our analysis of the data, starting from the early moments of enregisterment, followed by the general picture of the contestation of acceptable language. We then unpack each recurring ideological theme.

The clasping moment of enregisterment

As mentioned previously, the occurrence of *qǐyè* in the press conference caught netizens' attention right away, and these first moments of attention can be seen as acts of clasping (Gal 2019). In the press conference, the first *qǐyè* was produced by Vice Minister Shih, which occurred at around 2:18 pm on that day, and he produced five

such occurrences within the following three minutes when he gave guidelines for pandemic control in the workplace. Our data have captured some immediate reactions on PTT. For example, the following excerpt was posted at around 2:20 pm, just about two minutes after the first occurrence.

(1) [Code: Taiwan vs. China]
[問卦] **起業**？
問卦
現在在報告的這位是誰啊?
身為台灣國公務人員
怎麼起業起業的唸?
我聽到起碼超過五次的起業了
真的愈聽愈怒
真的很不爽
為什麼要唸起業?
有沒有八卦?
'[Inquiring] *qǐyè*?
I'd like to ask
Who is presenting now?
As a government employee in Taiwan
Why does he keep saying *qǐyè*?
I've heard *qǐyè* at least five times
I am getting infuriated
I am really mad
Why *qǐyè*?
Is there anything to it?'

The post title first indicates the genre of this post as 問卦 in square brackets, a unique label originating on PTT indicating the speech act of 'inquiring'. The main part of the title is composed of two Chinese characters, 起 and 業 (pronounced as *qǐ* and *yè*), and a question mark. 起業 is not a conventional lexical combination in Chinese; it is non-sensical morphologically and semantically and yet captures the non-standard pronunciation of *qǐyè*.

   Another early post, which contains aggressive language, is excerpted in (2). In this case, the non-standard pronunciation of *qǐ* is represented by ㄑㄧˇ, the *Zhuyin* symbols (aka Mandarin Phonetic Symbols and Bopomofo), a transliteration system used in Taiwanese elementary education.

(2) [Code: Taiwan vs. China]
[問卦] 幹你娘舔共仔講三小**企(ㄑㄧˇ)業**？
幹你娘
肥宅我看到一個舔共仔
在電視上講企(ㄑㄧˇ)業
真他媽的該怎麼辦
......
'[Inquiry] The fucking communist (arse-)licker said ***qǐyè***
Fuck

I (a fat nerd) saw a communist (arse-)licker
Said ***qǐyè*** on TV
What the hell should we do
......'

These posts revealed the first moments of attention to *qǐyè* as a marked, non-local pronunciation, and the clasping of *qǐyè* with political boundaries. In (1), *qǐyè* is marked as incompatible with Shih's role as a government official of Taiwan. In (2), *qǐyè* is directly linked with Chinese communists and thereby with the PRC. Within just a few minutes of the *qǐyè* occurrences, they are recognized as indexing certain person-types along the national border; *qǐyè* and the contrastive, standard Taiwanese pronunciation *qìyè* (though not explicitly mentioned), are enregistered respectively as parts of *Putonghua* and standard Taiwan Mandarin. In addition to enregistering *qǐyè*, these posts also delegitimize the use of *qǐyè* in the Taiwanese context, thereby attributing authority to *qìyè* as the norm, a bottom-up act to regiment language (Costa 2019).

While linking the linguistics with social types, the clasping (2019) moments identified above also involve the linking of two social arenas: the formal political domain of public officials and the informal, politically charged discourse of the PTT Gossip Board. The clasping moment occurs as the Gossip Board participants—characterized by their politically sensitive and often satirical engagement with current affairs—capture and link this tonal variation originally with underspecified indexicalities to broader narratives of national identity and cross-strait tensions between Taiwan and China. These posts contextualized this tonal choice as a marker of political allegiance, portraying officials using *qǐyè* as betraying the DPP's pro-Taiwan political ideology. In other words, the linguistic variable becomes a 'clasp' linking the political sphere, where officials performatively represent state authority, with the online sphere, where informal yet incisive political commentary thrives. The reframing of the variable as an index of political allegiance is further reinterpreted and disseminated by netizens, journalists, and influencers; consequently, *qǐyè* not only entered but also transformed the ideological terrain of cross-strait politics, further illustrating the bidirectional influence between top-down political authority and bottom-up grassroots critiques.

These early posts questioning the legitimacy of the use of *qǐyè* soon elicited numerous responses, which, unlike the early posts, show a diverse range of ideological positions: some find the *qǐyè* pronunciation acceptable, some don't, while others find it conditionally acceptable and hold various positions in between. The next section turns to a more detailed analysis of these language ideological contestations.

Overall picture of the contestations of acceptable language

These posts and responses provide us a chance to observe the uptake of the *qǐyè* variant and the language ideologies undergirding various positions. Overall, two main questions surface in these debates: What is acceptable language? To what extent is variation allowed? Figure 3 below summarizes the spectrum of language ideological positions we have observed in the posts and responses.
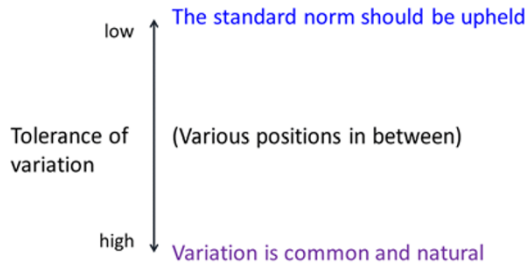
Figure 3. Various positions concerning language variation.

At the end of low tolerance of variation, some netizens believe that the standard norm should be upheld, as illustrated in (3) and (4).

(3) [Code: Correct vs. incorrect pronunciation]
教育部字典企業ㄑㄧˋ https://tinyurl.com/7p8z798j
'Dictionary by Ministry of Education "*qì*" https://tinyurl.com/7p8z798j'

(4) [Code: Correct vs. incorrect pronunciation]
真的不懂起是哪裡來的音?中文沒學好嗎
'I don't understand where that pronunciation comes from. Didn't learn correct Chinese?'

In (3), the post responds to the debate about *qǐyè* with a citation from the Dictionary by the Ministry of Education and the link to that page. The succinct, matter-of-fact manner indicates that the answer is so obvious that there is no need to elaborate on this matter. Example (4), likewise, shows bewilderment to the source of the variation and attributes the use of *qǐyè* to bad Chinese.

On the side of high tolerance of variation, variation is seen as common and natural. In example (5) below, the author of the response emphasizes mutual understanding as the criteria of acceptance, arguing that the non-standard Taiwanese-accented Mandarin is common too. The post in (6) stresses the bottom-up nature of language and culture instead of the top-down regulation force.

(5) [Code: Linguistic purism vs. linguistic diversity; Taiwan vs. China]
聽得懂就好 台灣人自己還不是台灣國語
'It's fine as long as people can understand it. Taiwanese also speak *Taiwan Guoyu* (Taiwanese-accented Mandarin)'

(6) [Code: Linguistic purism vs. linguistic diversity]
(excerpted from a longer post)
...
文化是在你我之中而不是別人規定你文化是什麼你就要怎麼做
...
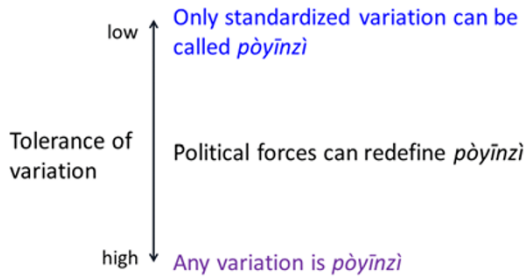'Culture exists between you and me. It's not that others stipulate what culture is and you just follow.'

Figure 4. Various positions concerning *pòyīnzì.*

While the two ends focus on prescribed standard and actual use respectively, there are various positions in between. That is, variation is conditionally acceptable, which often relates to two factors: whether it is considered local (Taiwanese) pronunciation or imported (Chinese) pronunciation, and the speaker's age. We address the two axes of differentiation later in the section *Two intersecting dimensions.* But before we turn to the two intersecting axes, netizens' invocation of the pedagogical concept of *pòyīnzì* is worth noting. Interestingly, some comments make reference to *pòyīnzì,* and the various related positions mirror those in Figure 3 and are presented in Figure 4. At the end of high tolerance of variation, *qǐyè* was interpreted by some as a case of *pòyīnzì*, thus acceptable (see example (7) below). At the other end is the position that only standardized variation, not all variation, can be called *pòyīnzì*. Since *qǐyè* is not prescribed variation in Taiwan, it is not acceptable (see example (8) below).

(7) [Code: Linguistic purism vs. linguistic diversity; Correct vs. incorrect pronunciation]
以前課程就有教破音字,吵這小事有夠智障
'We were taught *pòyīnzì* in school. It's a nuisance fighting over such a little thing.'

(8) [Code: Linguistic purism vs. linguistic diversity; Correct vs. incorrect pronunciation]
企就是四聲沒有破音字,企鵝也不會唸起鵝
'Qì (企)is the 4th tone. It's not a *pòyīnzì. Qìé* (企鵝) "penguin" wouldn't be pronounced as *qǐé.'*

Comments like (7) illustrate how a familiar, local pedagogical concept regarding prescribed variation is used to legitimize *qǐyè* (and by extension, any recognizable variation), a prime example of folk linguistics (Preston 2004). They reveal how *pòyīnzì* entails 'a prescriptive (correct) linguistic variation'. With the prescriptive authority associated with *pòyīnzì*, the contrast between prescribed variation (such as 省*shěng* and *xǐng*) and non-standard variation (such as *qìyè* and *qǐyè*) is reparameterized (Gal & Irvine 2019) to accommodate a revised vantage point: the acceptance of both *qìyè* and *qǐyè*. This view is in sharp contrast with James Milroy's (2001:535) observation that folk ideologies of standard language often posit that 'when there are

two or more variants of some word or construction, only one of them can be right', though both ideological projects rely on ideologies concerning standard language. This reparameterized view—that is, *qìyè* and *qǐyè* are *pòyīnzì*—is quickly refuted by others. Example (8), for example, clarifies that *qǐ* in *qǐyè* is not a *pòyīnzì* and draws other evidence from lexical combinations like *qìé* 'penguin', which shares the first character (syllable) 企 with *qìyè* and is not pronounced as *qǐé* (in Taiwan), to support the argument.

Between the 'any recognized variation is *pòyīnzì*' view and 'only prescribed variation is *pòyīnzì*' view lies the position that the acceptance is conditional, and the prescriptive standard is changeable. For example, in (9) the commenter notes sarcastically that the governing party, DPP, will make *qǐyè* a *pòyīnzì* right away to save its face, now that the officials of the DPP government used *qǐyè* in public. Implicit in this comment is the disapproval of the use of *qǐyè* and the recognition that issues about standard language are political.

(9) [Code: Linguistic purism vs. linguistic diversity; Correct vs. incorrect pronunciation]
酸啥?等一下DPP直接讓他變破音字
'Why so sarcastic? The DPP will make it a *pòyīnzì* right away.'

The discussion above reveals contestations of ideological positions about *qǐyè* and language variation in a general sense. The pedagogical concept of *pòyīnzì*, interestingly, opens more space for recognition of language variation through reparameterization and lends *qǐyè* and other recognizable, yet non-standard variants more authority.

Two intersecting dimensions

In the previous section, we have noted that tolerance of variation interacts with two intersecting dimensions: whether *qǐyè* is seen as an imported or local pronunciation, and whether it is produced by members of younger or older generations. This section explores the two dimensions and their interactions.

Qǐyè as a fading local feature

Although we have seen how the first batch of online posts connects *qǐyè* with imported pronunciation from PRC in the section *The clasping moment of enregisterment*, *qǐyè* has existed in Taiwan for quite a long time. As mentioned previously, the state of Mandarin in Taiwan after the Second World War was chaotic. Many Mandarin teachers did not even have a good command of the standard variety. A wide range of language variation is expected in such a linguistic environment; the variation between *qìyè* and *qǐyè* is no exception. Despite *qìyè* being the standard usage, *qǐyè* was used in Taiwan, as the comments below show.

(10) [Code: Older vs. younger generation]
我三十幾年前就聽很多大人這樣講了。
'I heard many adults say this [*qǐyè*] more than thirty years ago.'

(11) [Code: Older vs. younger generation; Taiwan vs. China]
老教授都會講起業尤其60歲以上的 中國人也是講起業
'Elder professors, especially those over 60 years old, say *qǐyè*. Chinese also say *qǐyè*.'

Examples (10) and (11) use observations made thirty years ago and observations made currently about elders, respectively, to support the idea that *qǐyè* is also part of the local repertoire.

Additionally, example (11) points out the dual nature of *qǐyè*, as a fading local feature used only by certain Taiwanese elders and simultaneously a feature of *Putonghua*. This simple observation cuts across the core of the debates: whether *qǐyè* is acceptable or not depends largely on the hearer's interpretation of its indexical meanings (i.e. a local feature by some elders or an imported feature), and such interpretation, undoubtedly, is closely connected with the perceived traits of the speaker (see Campbell-Kibler 2008).

In our data, twenty-seven comments explicitly label *qǐyè* as a fading local feature, a smaller number than comments on *qǐyè* as an imported feature from China (see the next section for details). Yet the imbalance between the two dimensions is expected for several reasons. First, as a relic feature, not every user was exposed to the third-tone variant previously. Second, this contesting dimension is only one type of responses to the feverish discussion of *qǐyè* as an 'imported' feature and as an index of political allegiance; it is less ideology-loaded and does not garner as much attention.

Qǐyè as an imported feature from Putonghua

We have seen above how the initial online posts linked *qǐyè* with Mainland Chinese Mandarin and deemed it incompatible with the role of a government official. This section further explores the various discussions concerning *qǐyè* as an imported feature. Respectively, examples (12), (13), and (14) connect *qǐyè* with the locality of China, Chinese drama, and communists. In all cases, *qǐyè* is enregistered as a non-local linguistic feature from China.

(12) [Code: Taiwan vs. China]
乞業,緊量,看個記者會以為是在中國呢
'*Qǐyè, jǐnliàng,* I thought this press conference was held in China.'

(13) [Code: Taiwan vs. China]
中國劇看太多啊
'Watching too much Chinese drama.'

(14) [Code: Taiwan vs. China]
共產黨滲透範圍真廣
'Communists are everywhere.'

The enregisterment of *qǐyè* provides the backbone to question the appropriateness of such use by government officials of Taiwan. In (15), also an early post within minutes of the *qǐyè* occurrences in the press conference, the author argues that government employees should use the standard language of Taiwan (fully spelled out as

the Republic of China) and suggests a penalty for such acts. This post shares a similar stance with example (1) above.

(15) [Code: Taiwan vs. China]
公務員受到中華民國栽培訓練 用字遣詞應該要以我國為準
但剛剛居然從某公務員口中聽到ㄑㄧˇ業 這是不是該開罰了?
......
'Government employees are trained by the government of the Republic of China. Their language use should follow the standard of our country. Yet I just heard some government employee say *qǐyè*. Shouldn't he be penalized?
......'

Interestingly, this post is challenged by a rhetorical question in one of the responses.

(16) 你怎麼不說發音該捲舌的音不捲也要罰???
'Why don't you say people should also be penalized if they do not pronounce retroflex sounds fully when they are supposed to?'

Taiwan Mandarin is known for a lesser degree of retroflexion than *Putonghua*, to the extent that some Taiwanese speakers de-retroflex consonants such as /tʂ/ /tʂʰ/ /ʂ/ /ʐ/ altogether. Although de-retroflexion is considered non-standard and often corrected during schooling, Brian Brubaker (2012) has pointed out that the prescribed, fully retroflex consonants are, in fact, socially disfavored in Taiwan; the socially favored, de facto standard pronunciations are the intermediate forms between full retroflexion and de-retroflexion Penalizing people who do not pronounce retroflex fully, therefore, sounds absurd in the Taiwanese context. The main argument behind this rhetorical question is that it is absurd to penalize people who use non-standard linguistic variants like *qǐyè*.

This rhetorical question is further challenged by another comment, also in the form of a rhetorical question.

(17) [Code: Taiwan vs. China]
該捲舌的音不捲是中國規定的發音嗎? 不是的話罰啥?
'Is de-retroflexed sound a prescriptive pronunciation in China? If not, why should we penalize it?'

While in (16), de-retroflexion and *qǐyè* are seen as in the same category of acceptable variation, in (17), they are differentiated along the national prescriptive standards. De-retroflexion is not a prescriptive standard in China; therefore, there is no need to penalize the speaker. In contrast, it is only because *qǐyè* is the nationally prescribed pronunciation in China that a penalty should apply.

Despite a short comment, (17) is ideologically rich. *Qǐyè* is enregistered as China's prescriptive standard, and a state-standardized usage is seen as indexing the nation-state where it is prescribed. Therefore, a competition between two state-standardized variants, such as *qìyè* and *qǐyè*, indexes a competition between the two states. It is thus inappropriate (and unacceptable) for government officials, as the

representatives of the nation-state, to adopt the competitor's prescriptive usage. In this line of argument, the axe of differentiation (Gal & Irvine 2019) is placed along the national border. *Qǐyè* ceases to be a local, alternative form, but a national other.

Correcting qǐyè as an authoritarian move

The above nationalistic view on language variation, however, frustrates some netizens. The perspective that language should be purified of Chinese influences sparks debate among internet users. The satirical term 支語警察 (*zhīyǔ jǐngchá*) 'Chinese language police' has been used to mock those who excessively criticize the use of terms they perceive as imported from China. The origins of the term are somewhat obscure, but Google Trends search shows that it surged in usage towards the end of 2020 and has since sustained a level of popularity. The incident in question occurred in May 2021, around the peak. The trend analysis reveals how laypeople have noticed an increasingly common act of language policing and, additionally, how language policing has faced backlash.

Example (18) showcases the facetious remarks by internet users regarding the critique of using China-imported pronunciations.

(18) [Code: Taiwan vs. China; Linguistic purism vs. linguistic diversity]
建議未來記者會現場現場配置支語警察
'I suggest that in future press conferences, *zhīyǔ jǐngchá* should be present on-site.'

In example (18), the irony is laid bare, as the suggestion implies that officials should be monitored for their language during future press conferences. This mock proposal highlights the absurdity of scrutinizing pronunciation, suggesting that such behavior is preposterous and should not be endorsed. In the context of Taiwan, which prides itself on being a liberal democracy, the idea of policing pronunciation is seen by some as an authoritarian imposition that clashes with the country's democratic values. Example (19) provides further insight into this sentiment.

(19) [Code: Taiwan vs. China; Linguistic purism vs. linguistic diversity]
我以為台灣是自由民主國家,連發音也要管啊?
'I thought Taiwan was a liberal democratic country. Now trying to control people's pronunciation?'

When netizens critique the policing of linguistic variants imported from China in everyday life, they are engaging in the metapragmatic debate about which linguistic expressions are deemed acceptable within Taiwanese official discourse. This policing by the general public acts as a form of 'checkpoint' (Milani & Levon 2019), screening out people whose language use may threaten the imagined community of Taiwanese people, marking it for scrutiny and potential correction. The discourse surrounding *zhīyǔ jǐngchá* serves as a meta-level 'checkpoint' of its own. It scrutinizes the indexical meanings associated with either the act of correcting or accepting China-imported linguistic variants, questioning how these practices align with Taiwan's political ethos as a liberal democracy.
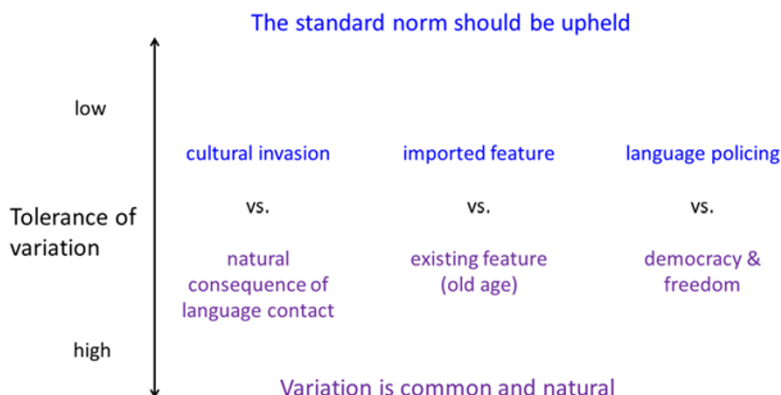
Figure 5. Positions regarding variation and three sets of related indexicalities.

Interestingly, while these views show acceptance of *qǐyè,* they do not include *qǐyè* as a local, alternative pronunciation either. Rather, the focus is on the democratic nature of Taiwan as a state and the authoritarian nature of correcting the pronunciation. In other words, the axis of differentiation is still along the national border. Yet the contrast is not in ethnic terms (i.e. Taiwan vs. China) but in civic terms (i.e. democratic vs. authoritative), reminiscent of the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism (R. Brubaker 1999; McPherson 1999).

In sum, three main sets of ideological contrasts undergird netizens' acceptance level of *qǐyè* in our data, as Figure 5 above indicates. If one sees *qǐyè* as an imported feature invading Taiwanese culture and believes that regulation of language is necessary, they are likely to take the position that *qǐyè* is unacceptable and the standard norm should be upheld. In contrast, if one sees *qǐyè* as an existing local feature in Taiwan, or as a natural consequence of language contact with speakers of other dialects of Mandarin, or if they believe that a democratic country should not interfere with language issues, they are more likely to take the position that the use of *qǐyè* is acceptable. In short, *qǐyè* is ideologically linked to a variety of indexical meanings; metapragmatic comments about *qǐyè* become a site where the variant is enregistered and connected to either Taiwan Mandarin or *Putonghua* to different extents. The seemingly linguistic act of enregisterment, however, touches on larger ideological issues on the complexities between language, locality, and identity, to which the next section turns.

General discussion

Indexical shift, identity, and enregisterment

Silverstein's (2003) indexicality order indicates that indexicalities can be constantly rebuilt and shaped. Therefore, it is likely that an indexical shift in the social meanings of linguistic features may be observed. As mentioned previously, Johnstone and colleagues (2006) discuss the process of enregisterment of 'Pittsburghese' and how the features previously indexical of the working class now have a stronger association with localness. Similarly, the metapragmatic comments about *qǐyè* are also part

of the enregistering process that connects *qǐyè* solely with *Putonghua*, for some (e.g. examples (1) and (2)), and with both Taiwan Mandarin and *Putonghua*, for others (e.g. examples (10) and (11)). The contested views indicate that an indexical shift is still ongoing. As examples (10) and (11) have shown, and as discussed in the section BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY, *qǐyè* co-existed with the standard variant *qìyè* in post-Second World War Taiwan when Mandarin Chinese suddenly became the 'national language' after fifty years of Japanese colonization. Even though there was a prescriptive standard, a great variety of accents co-existed until several decades later when Taiwan Mandarin finally stabilized. Given such historical context, in post-war Taiwan, *qǐyè* was likely seen as a local, non-standard variant initially, but as the users of *qǐyè* aged and the younger generations learned the prescriptive standard through schooling, *qǐyè* began to index old age and would likely have faded out eventually in Taiwan if it were not for the new development in Taiwan-China relations from the 1980s onward.

Since the late 1980s, there has been increasing contact between Taiwanese and Chinese, which necessarily leads to mutual influences between Taiwan Mandarin and *Putonghua*. *Qǐyè* likely made a comeback in Taiwan via language contact, this time mostly regarded as the prescriptive standard of the PRC. The contested views on the indexical meanings of *qǐyè* in our data may originate from the commenters' different life experiences and interpretations of its indexical associations. In other words, to some Taiwanese, the indexical shift from local non-standardness and old age to the prescriptive standard of China has completed; they no longer see *qǐyè* as a local feature. But to others, the indexical shift is still ongoing: *qǐyè* could have multiple indexes: local non-standardness, old age, *Putonghua*, contact with Chinese culture, and so on.

The increasing contact with China since the late 1980 and the wave of Taiwanization starting roughly the same time caused Taiwanese to identify themselves more with their Taiwanese identity (Hsiau 2000; see Figure 1 above). Similar to the simultaneous emergence of 'Pittsburghese' and Pittsburgh as a place to identify with (Johnstone et al. 2006), the rising Taiwanese identity also goes hand in hand with the enregisterment of Taiwan Mandarin as a register distinct from *Putonghua*. As early as in the mid 2010s, the first author has observed online metapragmatic comments about Taiwanese entertainers who moved their careers to China adopting *dàlùqiāng* 'a Mainland accent'. In recent years, the emergence of terms such as *zhīyǔ*, lit. 'Chinese language' (referring to *Putonghua* usages), and the aforementioned *zhīyǔ jǐngchá* 'Chinese language police' also indicates the prevalence of the enregistering acts in everyday interactions. It is likely the same ideological force that highlights the indexical salience of *qǐyè* as an imported Chinese feature, downplaying or erasing its possible connection with localness and turning *qǐyè* into a national other, a case of indexical inoculation in Silverstein's (2022) term.

Why does *qǐyè* become a linguistic emblem?

But why does *qǐyè*, rather than many other Mainland Chinese pronunciations distinct from the Taiwanese ones, become emblematic of an imported feature? Prior to this incident in the press conference, *qǐyè* had emerged as an emblem (Agha 2006) of *Putonghua*, or a sociolinguistic icon, in Woolard's (2008) terms. In April 2021,

about one month before the press conference in question, Sabrina Lim, a Taipei City Councilor, posted a complaint on her Facebook wall that she was annoyed by the use of *qǐyè* by some Taipei City officials. Her comment was rather similar to example (8) above, noting that the first syllable of *qìyè*, 企 *qì*, is not a *pòyīnzì* and has only one standard pronunciation. She points out an inconsistency: *qǐyè* is used in Taiwan, but *qǐé* (the *Putonghua* pronunciation of 'penguin') is unheard of, even though the first syllable of the two terms is composed of the same character 企, and the prescriptive standards in Taiwan and China are consistently *qì* and *qǐ* respectively. In other words, in Taiwan, in the case of 'penguin', there is no variable pronunciation between *qìé* (Taiwan's standard) and *qǐé* (China's standard), but there are variable uses between *qìyè* and *qǐyè* 'business/enterprise'. Why does the *qìyè/qǐyè* pair stand out among other terms containing the same element of *qì/qǐ*?

A possible explanation concerns the context of language contact. As mentioned previously, Taiwanese migration to China since the 1990s is mostly motivated by economic factors. In business encounters, the word *qǐyè* 'business/enterprise' is likely more frequently occurred—and also more emblematic—than *qǐé* 'penguin' and other *qǐ*-containing terms. This group of Taiwanese with considerable contact with the Chinese is likely the 'broker' (Milroy & Milroy 1992) who spread the variant to the broader Taiwanese population.

But the above speculation is less of our concern than the uptake of *qǐyè* in Taiwanese society. Su (2023) discusses how the prevalent discourse about Taiwanese politeness among Taiwanese in China is undergirded by an insecurity about Taiwan's competitive edge in comparison to China's rapid economic rise in the 2000s and 2010s. Within Taiwan, similar concerns over China's economic power and Taiwan's competitiveness also prevail. Seen in this light, *qǐyè* can be said to carry both the literal meaning of 'business/enterprise' and the implication of economic and linguistic competition between Taiwan and China, making it particularly salient and emblematic to the Taiwanese ears (see also Wong (2021) on Cantonese tones as linguistic emblem). Indeed, we can find some commenters in our data play with the *qìyè/qǐyè* contrast with the Chinese characters. Some sarcastically wrote *qǐyè* as 乞業, lit. 'beg for career/business' (see example (12) above). One commented that 'Taiwanese can only *qìyè* (棄業, lit. 'abandon career/business'), can't *qǐyè* (起業, lit. 'start career/business').' Such linguistic play, interestingly, all contains implications of economic competition. In other words, *qǐyè* is not just any expression from China, but a linguistic emblem subtly indexing competition between Taiwan and China.

Centerpiece approach and the indexical field

This study takes metapragmatic comments about *qǐyè* as a centerpiece (Gal & Irvine 2019) to explore how it is semiotically differentiated from the national standard *qìyè* and enregistered as a non-Taiwanese, imported feature by some, while being associated with a local past or acceptable variation analogous to *pòyīnzì*, a well-known pedagogical concept in Chinese language education, by others. Whether the commenters find *qǐyè* acceptable or not, they engage in ideological moves to either delegitimize the use of *qǐyè* (e.g. pitting it against Taiwan's prescriptive standard and national identity) or delegitimize the policing of *qǐyè* (e.g. pitting it against Taiwan's democratic value or Taiwan's linguistic history); both exercise linguistic authority

(Woolard 2016; Gal 2019) to enregister *qǐyè* either as a feature of *Putonghua* or as a possible local feature. In other words, the contested views about *qǐyè* reveal a variety of positions about linguistic and national boundaries and imagined national traits (see Anderson 1983). Linguistically speaking, the contrast between *qìyè* and *qǐyè* is as minimal as a difference in tone contour. However, the difference is so semiotically salient to Taiwanese that the two variants immediately index a range of contrastive social meanings, the complexity of which needs to be understood against the backdrop of Taiwanese history and Taiwan-China relations.

Starting from the micro-level tonal variation and yet taking a language ideological approach on metapragmatic comments, this study also attempts to bridge the gap between the third-wave sociolinguistic variation studies (e.g. Eckert 2018; Hall-Lew, Moore, & Podesva 2021) and semiotically based approaches to metapragmatics (e.g. Silverstein 2003; Agha 2006; Gal 2019; Gal & Irvine 2019). What sets the third-wave sociolinguistic variation studies apart from the previous waves is the shift of focus from identifying the correlation between identity categories and linguistic variation to seeing variation as agentive stylistic practices. This shift of paradigm moves variation studies much closer to the semiotic approach to language in the linguistic anthropological tradition. Yet, as Soukup (2018) notes, the third-wave approach has placed much more emphasis on the making of social meanings on the speakers' end, while the perception side of variation is less attended. Recently, there appears to be an increasing attempt to address perceptions of linguistic variables. But comparatively, attention to the listeners' constituting role in the meaning-making of language variation is still scarce.

While this study complements the third-wave research by exploring listeners' interpretations of a linguistic variable (see also Cutler 2020), more importantly, the investigation of the uptake of the variable may lead to more discussion about the indexical field as a theoretical concept and the related methodology. One potential question about the indexical field is where it lies. Is it a semiotic space in one's head (Campbell-Kibler 2016), or is it an intersubjective, ideological field representing a certain community's understanding of potential indexical links? Eckert's (2018:165) further elaboration seems to indicate the former when she points out that 'fluidity resides in the fact that no two people are alike, so we're left with the problem of the relation between my indexical field and those of others near and far, as well as anyone's indexical field over time'. However, judging from how she methodologically draws results from several studies about /t/ release to sketch its indexical field (Eckert 2008:469) (as well as other third-wave studies using the concept of indexical field), it seems that an indexical field represents an ideological space shared (at least partially) or brought together by a certain group of speakers. If such is the case, spontaneous metapragmatic comments about a linguistic variable are a prime site to explore its indexical field. In fact, the debate over the indexical meanings of *qǐyè* is a discursive space where multiple acts of construal (between *qǐyè* as a sign and its associated meanings) are performed and negotiated, and where ideologies concerning language and nation are contested but also regimented. The third-wave studies (e.g. Eckert 2018; Hall-Lew et al. 2021) generally emphasize the indeterminant, underspecified, and multiple relations between a linguistic form and its meaning(s). The metapragmatic comments in this study exemplify the activating process in the indexical field: they make explicit the previously underspecified association, and the

form-meaning connection is activated (or clasped in Gal's (2019) term), contested, and (de)legitimized in this process. These explicit metapragmatic comments (and enregisterment of *qǐyè*) may influence future cycles of interactions and likely steer the direction of language change in certain ways. For example, Taiwanese who are made aware of *qǐyè*'s strong association with political boundaries may begin to avoid it (see also Silverstein 1985; L. Milroy 2004; Starr 2021) or exploit the indexicality of the third-tone variant as 'imported' in moves of stylization to signal locally relevant interactional meanings such as parody or transgression (Snell 2010).

Conclusion

In sum, this study explores Taiwanese netizens' uptake of two Taiwanese government officials' use of *qǐyè* in a nationally broadcast press conference. It examines what indexical meanings are attributed to *qǐyè* and *qìyè*, how they are clasped and enregistered as linguistic emblems, what ideological contrasts are constructed throughout the process, and how the unique linguistic characteristics of Mandarin (i.e. syllable-based character writing and tone differentiation) and pedagogical practice of Mandarin language education (i.e. *pòyīnzì*) shape ideologies about language variability. Starting from a tonal variation, this study exemplifies how a minimal linguistic difference can be highly salient ideologically and how the related metapragmatic commentary is part and parcel of much larger ideological projects in the context of Taiwan-China relations. As Taiwan-China relations continue to evolve, future studies may further explore what other linguistic features are enregistered as non-Taiwan, how linguistic authority is exercised to delegitimize or legitimize them, and how, as Gal & Irvine (2019:1) have pointed out in the very beginning of their book, 'statements about language are never only about language—and they are never only statements'.

Acknowldgements

Notes

1. https://www.dgbas.gov.tw/public/Attachment/01217147167RLW6M7Z.pdf; accessed 28 March 2025.
2. https://www.chinatimes.com/realtimenews/20180803002327-260405?chdtv; accessed 28 March 2025.

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Appendix: Translation of the relevant sections of the press conference

Chen: Whether it's an individual, an *enterprise (qìyè)*, or an administrative unit, we all must implement relevant prevention measures. In order to ensure that *enterprises (qìyè)* understand how to make their own companies or operating departments safer, we issue 'Guidelines for Enterprise Planning of Business Continuity under The Covid-19 Pandemic. For this part, we ask Vice Minister Shih to explain further. ...

Shih: In response to the pandemic, many *enterprises (qìyè)* are also concerned about ... Last March, the command center has issued guidelines for *businesses (qǐyè)* to continue operating during the pandemic. ... All *enterprises (qìyè)* should strengthen hygiene management for their employees and workplaces ... Once [employees] feel ill or need to rest, [we] all hope that *enterprises (qǐyè)* will be more lenient with sick leaves. ... In companies or *enterprises (qìyè)*, staff restaurants should, in accordance with our catering guidelines, maintain social distancing. ...

Chen: I believe that everyone at government departments at all levels must work together to fight the pandemic. But, *enterprises (qǐyè)*, with their own systems, must also pay attention.