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Attitudes toward sexist/nonsexist language in Chinese

Chinese, as a grammatically genderless language with its potentially gender inclusive nature becomes exclusive when a huge number of expressions are widely used to treat man as the default person (e.g. 'Chinese people are the sons and grandsons of Yan and Huang emperors') (Ettner, 2002); to unnecessarily differentiate sexes (e.g. referencing individuals as female scientist or male nurse when the default noun scientist or nurse is grammatically standard and semantically sufficient) (Chan & Lin, 2019); to overrepresent women (e.g. emphasising woman's identity when sex is irrelevant in the discourse as in 'a car crash caused by a female driver') (Li & Luo, 2020); and to use feminine expressions as degradation and insults (e.g. Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018; Peng et al., 2021). However, while languages such as English, German, French were comparatively well examined in this research domain of linguistic sexism and gender-fair language (Hellinger & Buβmann, 2015), knowledge is rather limited in people's attitudes toward Chinese sexist and inclusive language. It is intriguing to examine (1) to what extent Chinese individuals recognise these related expressions as sexist, (2) how conservative/supportive these people are to reform Chinese language use to avoid linguistic sexism, and (3) how these first two factors are related to people's willingness to use the alternative gender-inclusive language.

To answer these questions, this study adapts Park and Roberton's (2000) Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General (IASNL-G) to a Chinese version to measure Mainland China's individuals' language attitudes in the earlier mentioned three aspects (8 items in each aspect). Note that though the nature and general structure of IASNL-G remains constant, the content of the items originally designed for English speakers has been inevitably adjusted to better fit the context of Chinese language use. Items particularly for recognition of Chinese sexist language were selected mainly based on the United Nation's Guidelines for gender inclusive language in Chinese (e.g., 领导携夫人 'the leader and wife' - man as default, 妇孺皆知 'even women and children know it' - degradation of women, 女强人 'a powerful woman' - no equivalent expressions in men), taking into account expressions stimulating heated discussions in social media and related research (e.g., 女科学家 'female scientist', 女司机 'female driver' - unnecessary emphasis on woman's identity). Selection of items for willingness to use Chinese inclusive language also followed a similar strategy, but it emphasises more on the inclusiveness of both women and men. Therefore, participants are asked not only to rate their degrees of willingness to use 博士 'PhD' rather than 女博士 'female PhD' to reference a female person, but also to rate the willingness to use 护士 'nurse' rather than 男护士 'male nurse' to address a male person. In addition, degrees of willingness to use inclusive third-person singular pronouns (i.e. 他/她 'he/she' or TA - the sex undifferentiated pronunciation of the two pronouns) instead of the male generic one (i.e. 他 'he'), and to use inclusive expressions for partners (e.g., 配偶 'spouse', 爱人 'beloved one') instead of the heterosexual and sex distinguished ones (e.g., 老公/丈夫 - 老婆/妻子 'husband-wife'), were also included.

Furthermore, Park and Roberton's (2004, 2008) later research found that attitude toward women and gender equality was a strong predictor to people's attitudes toward sexist/nonsexist language. These findings were generally supported by other studies (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2014; Sczesny, Moser, & Wood, 2015; Swim, Mallett, & Stangor, 2004) as gender belief systems were found to be related to individuals' detection, use, or adoption of sexist and non-sexist language. Therefore, in the present study, it is also worth measuring individuals' level of sexism to find out how this endorsement of sexism is correlated to people's general attitudes toward gender inclusive language in Chinese. Eight items from Modern Sexism scale (MSS) (Swim et al., 1995) and ten items from Neosexism scale (NS) (Tougas et al., 1995) are introduced in this measurement. Both the scales were designed to measure more covert and subtle forms of contemporary sexism such as the rejection of continued sexism, the incomprehension and even hostility to women's economic and political demands, the denial of lack of policies designed to help women, and the opposition to affirmative action for women. In this way, the participants are more likely to reveal their true attitudes or prejudices toward women comparing to directly asking their attitudes toward overt sexist statements admitting that men are superior to women

(Campbell et al., 1997). Finally, participants' personal information including sex, age, and education background are also collected as possible predictors to people's different attitudes toward gender inclusive language.

At present, data has been collected from 197 participants (101 women, 96 men) from three different generations (71 from 1980s, 101 from 1990s, and 25 from 2000s). Preliminary analysis already showed that participants' sex, levels of sexism, and attitudes toward gender inclusive language are highly correlated with each other. Further data is expected to be collected to reach around 100 participants per generation to have a balanced distribution to find out whether individuals' attitudes toward gender inclusive language significantly differ across generation.

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