Taiwan Mandarin

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(2,657 words)

Taiwan Mandarin, or *Taiwan huayu* 臺灣華語, is the indigenized variety of Mandarin spoken by the majority of Taiwanese people. It is the de facto standard Mandarin of Taiwan and its de facto official language.

Historical Development of Taiwan Mandarin

The indigenization of Taiwan Mandarin has been intimately intertwined with political and linguistic factors. Following World War II (1939–1945), Taiwan's ruling power shifted from Imperial Japan to the Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang 國民黨; KMT) government. Prior to this historic event, Mandarin was not used in Taiwan; the languages spoken there were two local Sinitic languages (Taiwanese Southern Min 臺灣閩南語, often called simply Taiwanese, and Hakka 客家), the Indigenous Formosan languages, and Japanese, which had been promoted under Japanese colonial rule (1895–1945).

According to a 1935 census, 79.73% of Taiwan's population was of Southern Min origin, 14.88% was Hakka, and 4.2% was Indigenous. A 1915 census reported that 96% of the Southern Min population spoke Southern Min dialects. The predominant language before KMT rule was Taiwanese.

The KMT government enforced the National Language Policy 國語政策 in Taiwan, promoting exclusive use of Mandarin in public domains – including schools, mass media, and government services – and suppressing local languages. This policy led to the emergence of three varieties of Mandarin: *biaozhun guoyu* 標準國語 (lit. standard national language), *waishengren guoyu* 外省人國語 (mainlander Mandarin), and *Taiwan guoyu* 臺灣國語

(Taiwanese Mandarin). Taiwan Mandarin is primarily the outcome of the evolution and leveling of the latter two varieties.

Biaozhun guoyu is the prescriptive standard, based on Beijing Mandarin, formulated in China in the 1920s. Despite government efforts, it never took hold in Taiwan, as most locals and the newly arrived immigrants had to learn Mandarin as a second language. However, there was a widespread misconception that *biaozhun guoyu* was the Mandarin spoken by *waishengren* 外省人 (mainlanders), particularly the second-generation *waishengren*.

The term *waishengren* was first used to refer to Chinese migrants who arrived between 1945, the year Taiwan came under KMT rule, and 1949, when the KMT government retreated to Taiwan after losing the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949). These migrants came from various regions of China and spoke different Sinitic languages and dialects. However, because of the Mandarin-only policy in Taiwan, *waishengren* were widely perceived as native Mandarin speakers, leading to an underestimation of their linguistic diversity.

However, from a sociolinguistic perspective, this oversimplification is not entirely unreasonable. The term *waishengren* is not defined ethnically but regionally, socially, and legally. It contrasts with *benshengren* 本省人 (lit. local-province people), referring to the local Taiwanese population. When *waishengren* migrated to Taiwan between 1945 and 1949, Mandarin had already been established as *guoyu* 國語 (national language) in China for nearly two decades. By then, many educated *waishengren* spoke Mandarin as a second language, and it functioned as a lingua franca among them.

Among first-generation *waishengren*, Mandarin accents varied based on native dialects and regional backgrounds. However, under the Mandarin-only policy, these differences gradually leveled out in the second generation, born in the 1950s and 1960s, leading to the emergence of *waishengren guoyu*, distinct from *biaozhun guoyu*. However, due to the strong historical, social, and political connections between *waishengren* and the KMT government, as well as the fact that a small portion of *waishengren* were indeed native Beijing Mandarin speakers, many Taiwanese came to equate *biaozhun guoyu* with the Mandarin spoken by *waishengren*. Consequently, linguistic differences became part of the *benshengren-waishengren* divide, reinforcing the misconception that Mandarin was the *muyu* 母語 (mother tongue, or native language) of the *waishengren* as an ethnic group.

Taiwan guoyu, in contrast, developed as a variety of Mandarin heavily influenced by the pronunciation and grammar of Taiwanese, the indigenized variety of Southern Min. Taiwanese had been Taiwan's dominant language before 1949. Both *Taiwan guoyu* and *waishengren guoyu* coexisted under the Mandarin-only policy, while the elimination of *Taiwan guoyu* was a major goal of the KMT government's policy from the 1950s to late 1980s, a period that largely overlapped with martial law. Consequently, *Taiwan guoyu* became stigmatized in comparison to other varieties of Mandarin. Over time, particularly in younger generations raised in environments where Taiwan Mandarin was dominant, many features of *Taiwan guoyu* gradually faded as people acquired Taiwan Mandarin as their first language.

Transfers of Language Features

As in most cases of second-language acquisition, phonological transfer from Taiwanese to Mandarin is a defining feature of *Taiwan guoyu*. Some consonant distinctions in standard Mandarin were lost in *Taiwan guoyu*, and this became a key target for elimination under the Mandarin-only policy. Primary schools emphasized these phonetic distinctions, and proper pronunciation of these sounds was seen as a marker of "good Mandarin." While these contrasts remain in the natural speech of Taiwan Mandarin, they are subject to great variations due to sociolinguistic factors (e.g., gender and region), and language-internal categorization (e.g., prosodic prominence and word class). Such contrasts are also more noticeable in speech, especially in formal and semiformal settings, where overcorrection sometimes occurs. Another key difference is the absence of the *-er* 兒 suffix, which is a distinctive feature of Beijing Mandarin but rarely used in Taiwan.

However, some Taiwan Mandarin variations are not necessarily contact-induced. One example is the merging of final nasal sounds. Standard Mandarin distinguishes between endings represented by English-language sounds *-n* and *-ng*, but studies show Taiwan Mandarin tends to merge these sounds in certain contexts, influenced by dialectal and sociolinguistic factors. These mergers can be stigmatized due to perceptions of Taiwanese transfer, but are sometimes viewed positively as markers of regional identity, with gender also playing a role.

In addition to vowels and consonants, Taiwanese tonal features have also influenced *Taiwan guoyu*, though most have been unnoticed or unstigmatized and thus have become stabilized as part of tonal features of Taiwan Mandarin.

Taiwanese has seven contrastive tones – five long and two short tones – whereas standard Mandarin has only four regular tones plus a neutral tone. The Mandarin tone system in Taiwan reflects a tone mapping process influenced by Taiwanese phonology. The four standard Mandarin tones (T1–T4) were generally mapped to Taiwanese T1, T5, T3, and T2.

As shown in Table 1, the pitch contours of Mandarin T1 and T4 match Taiwanese T1 and T2 as high-level and high-falling tones, respectively. However, the pitch contours of T2 and T3 of Taiwan Mandarin do not fully align with standard Mandarin T2 and T3. It has long been observed that T3 in Taiwan Mandarin is typically realized as a low falling tone, rather than the falling-rising contour found in standard Mandarin.

Table 1: tones and tonal contours in standard Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Taiwan Mandarin.

Standard Mandarin		Taiwanese		Taiwan Mandarin
T1	high level	T1	high level	T1
T2	rising	T5	mid falling-rising	T2
T3	low falling-rising	T3	low falling	T3
T4	high falling	T2	high falling	T4

The contour of Mandarin T2 is prescribed as a rising tone but, in Taiwan Mandarin, it is consistently realized as a dipping shape, with a shorter falling portion and a longer rising portion. This pattern is likely a transfer from Taiwanese T5, which has a similar dipping contour. Unlike T3, which has been widely recognized as differing from standard Mandarin, the variation of Taiwan Mandarin T2 has largely gone unnoticed. In fact, the influence of Taiwanese extends beyond T2 and T3 and affects the overall pitch realizations of Taiwan Mandarin tones, making them receptive to the local phonetic system.

Another example of Taiwanese influence is seen in the neutral tone in Taiwan Mandarin. In standard Mandarin, the neutral tone has a shorter duration and weaker pitch, influenced by the preceding syllable's tone. This irregularity has been carried over into Taiwan Mandarin, but its use is more restricted. It primarily appears in suffixes, such as *-de* 的, *-men* 們, and *-zi* 子; in sentence final particles, such as *ne* 呢, *ma* 嘛, *le* 了, and *ba* 吧; in the general classifier *ge* 個; and in the second syllable of certain reduplicated kinship terms, particularly those with T4, such as *bàba* 爸爸 'dad' and *jiùjiu* 舅舅 'uncle.'

While phonological transfer from Taiwanese to Taiwan Mandarin has been well-documented, direct lexical borrowing was rare in the early years, likely due to the Mandarin-only policy. Unlike typical language contact, where

word borrowing occurs through spontaneous communication, the relationship between Mandarin and Taiwanese in postwar Taiwan was shaped by second-language acquisition under a strict prescriptive norm. Under such sociolinguistic circumstances, any noticeable borrowing from Taiwanese would have been stigmatized and consciously avoided. However, loans from English, Japanese, and Hong Kong Cantonese, along with internal lexical innovations, were common.

This resistance to Taiwanese lexical transfer loosened in the late 1980s as part of Taiwan's social, economic, and political liberalization. The suppression of Taiwanese and other local languages also began to ease, allowing Taiwanese to reappear in mass media and public domains. Since then, Taiwanese loanwords have steadily increased in Taiwan Mandarin, especially among younger generations, with little or no stigmatization attached. In some cases, using Taiwanese loanwords may even be considered trendy.

Taiwanese loanwords in Taiwan Mandarin can be broadly classified into two types: untranslatable loanwords and emotional loanwords. Untranslatable loanwords fill cultural gaps, often referring to food and folklore, such as *mashu* 麻糬 'sweet rice cake' and *weiya* 尾牙 'company's year-end dinner party.' Emotional loanwords, in contrast, have equivalent or near equivalent Mandarin words but are preferred for their Taiwanese flavor, serving as softeners to express solidarity, friendliness, or humor. Examples include *chuaigong* 踹共 'come out and talk' and *tiechi* 鐵齒 'stubborn.'

Compared to phonology and vocabulary, syntactic structures are generally more resistant to contact-induced changes. However, given the scarcity of first-generation native Mandarin speakers in Taiwan, the long and isolated development of Taiwan Mandarin, and intensive contact with Taiwanese, influences of Taiwanese on Taiwan Mandarin syntax are still plentiful. Consequently, while Taiwan Mandarin remains a dialect of Mandarin, it also shares important syntactic features with southern Sinitic languages such as Southern Min, Hakka, and Cantonese, particularly in verb-object word order, as well as a large inventory of sortal classifiers.

One example is the use of the modal verb *hui* 會 as a future tense marker, a feature present in Taiwanese but absent in Beijing Mandarin, where future tense is typically unmarked. Taiwan Mandarin also allows more preverbal modal verbs than standard Mandarin, with *you* 有 being particularly notable, as it may be used as a habitual marker, past tense marker, or assertion marker, as shown in Examples 1–3.

Example 1: *you* 有 as habitual marker.

Ni	*you*	*chi*	*niurou*	*ma?*
you	*you*	eat		QST

"Do you eat beef?"

Example 2: *you* 有 as past tense marker.

Ni	*zuotian*	*you*	*qu*	*xuexiao*	*ma?*
you	yesterday	*you*	go	school	QST

"Did you go to school yesterday?"

Example 3: *you* 有 as assertion marker.

Ni	*xianzai*	*dique*	*you*	*bijiao*	*shou.*
you	now	indeed	*you*	more	thin

"You are indeed thinner now."

Note that in Example 3, *you* is used before a stative verb.

Another Taiwanese-influenced feature is the use of the adverb *zai* 在 to mark the progressive aspect in stative verbs, which is typically limited to action verbs in standard Mandarin; see Example 4.

Example 4: *zai* 在 used to mark progressive aspect.

Wo-de	*shou*	*zai*	*suan.*
my	hand	*zai*	sore

"My hand is sore."

Taiwan Mandarin has also adopted the Taiwanese verb *kong* 講 'say,' which has influenced the use of *shuo* 說 as a complementizer (see Example 5), similar to *that* in English. It can thus be argued that the prevalent English education and exposure to the frequent use of English in Taiwan may have also played a role in the development of Taiwan Mandarin.

Example 5: *shuo* 說 used as a complementizer.

Wo	*renwei*	*shuo*	*ta*	*dagai*	*bu*	*hui*	*lai.*
I	think	COMP	he	probably	not	will	come

"I think that he is probably not coming."

Likely due to the same factors, Taiwan Mandarin uses *lai* 來 'come' and *qu* 去 'go' to mark infinitive complements, as shown in Examples 6 and 7.

Example 6: *lai* 來 used as an infinitive complement. marker.

Ni	*yinggai*	*mai*	*zhe-ben*	*shu*	*lai*	*kan.*
you	should	buy	this-CL	book	to	read

"You should buy this book to read."

Example 7: *qu* 去 used as an infinitive complement. marker.

Ni	*buyao*	*da*	*dianhua*	*qu*	*fan*	*ta.*
you	do not	make	phone	to	bother	he

"Don't you call him to bother him."

Compared to Beijing Mandarin, Taiwan Mandarin tends to simplify and regularize syntactic structures, likely due to the fact that many of its speakers acquired Mandarin as a second language. For example, the distinction between the inclusive and exclusive first-person plural pronouns, *zanmen* 咱們 ('we' inclusive) versus *women* 我們 ('we' exclusive), present in both Taiwanese and Beijing Mandarin is absent in Taiwan Mandarin, which uses only *women*.

Current and Future Status of Taiwan Mandarin

Despite its indigenized and "nonstandard" lexical, phonological, morphosyntactic, and pragmatic characteristics, Taiwan Mandarin has become the de facto standard Mandarin in Taiwan. However, the prestige of *biaozhun guoyu* and *waishengren* Mandarin persists. A 2019 study by Khoo Hui-lu 許慧如 surveyed attitudes toward five Mandarin varieties. Results showed that, among the five varieties, *waishengren* Mandarin received the highest evaluation: it was the most favored, and its speakers were regarded as high achievers in school and as professionals in the workplace. However, it ranked the lowest in intimate settings, such as household interactions.

It thus appears that Taiwanese Mandarin, or *Taiwan guoyu*, still carries stigma. Taiwan Mandarin, meanwhile, consistently ranks second in all contexts.

Due to the scarcity of first-generation native speakers of *biaozhun guoyu* in postwar Taiwan, both *waishengren* Mandarin and Taiwanese Mandarin were often seen as temporary transitional varieties, with *biaozhun guoyu* imagined as the ultimate linguistic ideal. However, Taiwan Mandarin gradually emerged as a result of the leveling between *waishengren* Mandarin and Taiwanese Mandarin, a process resembling creolization. As speakers of *waishengren* Mandarin and Taiwanese Mandarin age, these varieties will likely fade away, further solidifying Taiwan Mandarin as the island's indigenized Mandarin variety and its de facto standard.

Like the Formosan landlocked salmon (*yinghua gouwen gui* 櫻花鉤吻鮭, *Oncorhynchus masou formosanus*), Taiwan Mandarin has its origin in mainland China but has undergone decades of isolation and local adaptation; it has now evolved into a distinct Mandarin dialect unique to Taiwan.

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