

Phonological Patterns in Xiang Non-Lexical Hesitation Markers: New Forms of Typological Evidence?

This study examines the phonetic forms of hesitation markers (HM) across dialects in the Xiang group. Based on the obtained data, attempts are made to uncover the variations in HMs and to link the difference in the forms of HM and the subgrouping of the relevant dialects. The typological investigation of HM markers, in particular their phonetic forms, are relatively rare, and even fewer attempts have even been made in the literature referring to them in discussing dialectal grouping. The current study is novel in its attempt and is decent in its amount of data processed.

With the novelty and strength laid out above, there are some general and fundamental issues with the research, in particular the lack of a strong logical link between the division of dialectal (sub)groups and the phonetic forms of the non-lexical hesitation markers. To the best of my judgement, it is highly challenging, if ever possible, to squarely establish such a connection. That being the case, the obtained data might be analyzed to address some other meaningful linguistic issues, if it could be framed into a study different from the current one.

Below are some general comments for the authors' consideration:

1. The current manuscript is framed in a way that seems to (i) question the properness of using phonological properties to decide the grouping of dialects (c.f. lines 44-50) and (ii) motivate the use of HM as a non-lexical property to inform the division of dialectal groups.

The position (i) does not seem to be fair or well-grounded as the decision of dialectal groups in the literature were usually based on the integration of multiple linguistic properties, e.g., phonological, lexical, grammatical comparisons between dialects. It is possible that the author(s) might not really hold such a strong position, but the wording in lines such as 44-50 gave such a taste.

The motivation (ii), as mentioned above, lacks a strong logic. A natural question would be why non-lexical HM makers would inform us about dialectal grouping better than phonology, lexicon, and grammar? – If a metaphor could be allowed here: it might not be directly convincing if one (i) refutes the categorization of marine animals based on their biological structures but (ii) categorizes them relying on the forms of bubbles they produce.

2. The above being my perspective, I am not denying the meaningfulness of studying the phonetic forms of HMs. As mentioned in the manuscript, there have been studies on the typology of HM markers in the literature. For the same materials in the manuscript, the reader might find the study more straightforward if (i) it focuses on the phonetics forms of HMs in different dialects and (ii) it tries to connect the observations with other aspects, e.g., the vowel inventories of the dialects and the typological differences among the relevant dialects.

As a suggestion, for the analysis of the phonetic forms of HMs, a potential direction could be to uncover the mechanism underlying the substantial variation. I wonder if the variation can be predicted by other linguistic factors, for example, the phonetic forms of its neighboring segments.

3. In analyzing the phonetic data, the authors may need to consider the difference between male speakers and female speakers when referring to formant values. In Table 3, for example, no separation was made for the two groups of speakers.
4. In the current draft, the discussion in 5.1 is literally a substantial analysis that could be moved to the Results part. It may give a more straightforward flow of the contents to the readers, who may go through less twists and turns in understanding the patterns in the results.