

Investigating attitudes towards English accents from an ELF framework

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English has long functioned as a global language. Today, given the growing number of English speakers worldwide, the language no longer belongs solely to its native speakers, but is used among speakers of many first languages as a lingua franca. Against the paradigm of English as a lingua franca (ELF), this research investigates Chinese university students' attitudes towards their own and other English accents, and to what extent these attitudes are informed and affected by standard language ideology. In the process of data collection, a questionnaire was administered to students at a university in southeast China, and followed by face-to-face interviews. Based on the ELF framework, implications of the research are discussed for English higher education in China.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca; accent attitudes; language ideology; English language teaching; China

Introduction

Traditionally, English has been regarded as the property of native English speakers (NSs). It has been taken for granted that non-native English speakers (NNSs) should aim to learn English according to the native model. However, in the paradigm of English as a lingua franca (ELF), and against the backdrop that NNSs have outnumbered their native counterparts, it has been argued that the native model should not act as the unquestionable yardstick for the majority of learners of English (Jenkins, 2006; Piller, 2002; Ruecker, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011). ELF refers to “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). In this multilingual and multicultural world, instead of assuming *a priori* that English speakers should conform to the norms of NSs, we should take into account the majority of users who speak English as an additional language. It has also been argued that the “native fallacy” may create a false image of an idealised native speaker (Holliday, 2005; Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997; Phillipson, 1992). Therefore, against the ELF paradigm, the model of native English is not entirely constructive or beneficial. Indeed, for the majority of language learners, it is unrealistic and unnecessary to achieve.

Nonetheless, in the real world of English language teaching (ELT), native ideology remains largely entrenched and the native model is widely regarded as the only target that students should aim to achieve. Empirical research has found that real practice of ELT may generate a belief that the native model, especially based on traditional British and American English, is still a benchmark by which to judge the success of ELT and that English still belongs to the NSs (Galloway, 2013; Hamid, 2014; Jenkins, 2007; Lippi-Green, 2012). As “language beliefs are social and political products [...]

connected to the broad social-political context” (Pan & Block, 2011, p. 401), there is a need to research language learners’ attitudes towards English and consider how these attitudes might influence the field of ELT.

As mentioned, from a traditional perspective, the ultimate target of language learning is achieving a native standard. However, given the widespread and dynamic situation of English described above, learning English against the backdrop of globalisation should have a different goal. Previous research into language attitudes in relation to ELT finds that students and teachers hold language attitudes in relation to deeply entrenched native standard English ideology, to teaching and learning English internationally, and to whether the notion of ELF can be applied to English pedagogy in the future (Ferguson, 2009; Jenkins, 2007; Walker, 2010). From a broader perspective, “language attitudes research provides a backdrop for explaining linguistic variation and change” (Garrett, 2010, p. 15).

This paper will begin by briefly introducing the status quo of ELT in China and identifying a research gap. Previous literature examining language attitudes in the Chinese context will be discussed. Following a description of the context and methodology applied in this research, both quantitative and qualitative findings will be analysed to investigate students’ attitudes towards their own and other English accents. This paper will end by proposing a more appropriate approach to pronunciation teaching in the ELF paradigm. By exploring language attitudes in the ELF framework (see also, Jenkins, 2007), this paper will further raise some issues of ELT in terms of language policy and pedagogical principles in the Chinese context.

English in China

English is the leading foreign language taught and learned in China, in particular in the past three decades, as people have begun to realise that international stature is more attainable if they master this lingua franca (Lam, 2002). Today, in both academic and social settings, English is viewed as the essential foreign language to master. It is seen as vital for business, tourism, and gaining promotions in employment. Recent statistics show that there were more than 400 million English learners and users in China by the year 2000¹ (Wei & Su, 2012). According to statistics provided by the Chinese Ministry of Education, He (2015) records that 223.48 million Chinese students were receiving formal classroom learning of English in 2013 and this number is likely to increase. Another aspect of the popularity of English in global educational settings is the use of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). Currently, although EMI has been adopted in certain academic divisions at some universities, there is still debate as to whether it is appropriate for Chinese learners of English (Botha, 2014; G. Hu, Li, & Lei, 2014; Lei & Hu, 2014; Wong, 2010).

English policy in China is under regular review and the ELT situation in China is complex and full of ideological debates. The popularity of English learning is “generated by the desire of the country for modernity and prosperity and of individuals for life opportunities” (Feng, 2012, p. 365). Chinese people have recognised the importance of English learning in relation to their personal enhancement. As a compulsory subject, English is normally learned from the third year of primary school to university, regardless of students’ majors. Apart from public English education in China, many people also choose to enrol in private English institutions or language schools, either for the purpose of passing English proficiency tests or simply to improve their English skills. It is reported that the ELT industry is worth about £1.3 billion per

year (The Independent, 2009). Therefore, it is argued that English is commodified in China (Gao, 2012; Guo, 2012; G. Hu, 2008).

This educational boom has given rise to debates about English learning and Chinese identity. A recently proposed reform of the *Gaokao*, the Chinese university entrance examination, would cut the weighting of English from 150 to 100 points. Although it has been argued that English is a Chinese language (Jiang, 2003), the necessity for Chinese people to learn it is being questioned. Some critics contend that learning English is taking too many resources and too much time for the Chinese, and there is a worry that China will become a country that is neither Chinese nor Western, but a hybrid “Chingland” (Niu & Wolff, 2003). Although it may be excessive to argue that China will become westernised simply by adopting English, it should be recognised that English and ELT carry associations that are not purely linguistic. They are entangled in various historical and socio-political debates. Indeed, learning English today is “a choice fraught with conflicts of ideologies and interests” (Kirkpatrick, 2006, p. 71).

As English has entered many people’s lives and is used by a large number of Chinese people, there are also debates concerning whether English in China can be regarded as a variety of English in the paradigm of World Englishes (He & Li, 2009; W. Wang, 2015; Z. Xu, 2010). From another perspective, it is also argued that English is not widely used within the country, and English in China may be better considered from an ELF perspective as a “similect” (Mauranen, 2012) or Chinese ELF (Y. Wang, 2012).

Accent attitude research in the Chinese context

Previous literature about accent study in the Chinese context is mostly based on attitudes towards certain “inner circle” English accents (Evans, 2010; X. Hu, 2004, 2005; Kunschak & Fang, 2008; W. Xu, Wang, & Case, 2010), not based on the ELF framework. Not surprisingly, previous findings have shown that students prefer native to non-native English accents (Evans, 2010; X. Hu, 2004; Kunschak & Fang, 2008; W. Xu et al., 2010) and have a love-hate relationship with local China English accents (Bian, 2009; He & Miller, 2011; He & Zhang, 2010; X. Hu, 2005; Jenkins, 2007). However, Chinese students’ attitudes towards their own English accents need further investigation, especially against the backdrop of globalisation.

Previous literature on accent attitudes is strongly based on native ideology which suggests that language learners should aim to correct their pronunciation to conform to a standard model. In the Chinese context, the majority of research is based on the assumption of native standard ideology and points out the importance of abandoning Chinese-accented English to strive for a more standard accent (Fong, 2009; Huang, 2010). Although some language learners in China are aware of different forms of English with various accents, they still feel that English as a language belongs to the UK and the US (Fong, 2009; W. Xu et al., 2010). This gap indicates a need to research Chinese university students’ attitudes towards their own and other English accents from an ELF perspective in order to see the extent to which such attitudes are informed or affected by standard language ideology.

The study

Research context

Language attitude research should be contextualised within the local linguistic situation. The research reported here was conducted at a university in southeast China. With more

than 50 academic staff in total, the university's English Language Centre (ELC) has recruited half its language teachers from abroad. These teachers are not only from inner circle countries like the US and the UK, but also from outer circle and expanding circle countries. Most of the local Chinese teachers obtained their degrees abroad. As a result, students at the university are exposed to a wide diversity of English accents. This setting can be regarded as a relatively emergent ELF community.

Participants

The university is regarded as a multilingual context, and this is reflected in the student participants. Most of them are from the local province, where three main dialects are spoken but the university also recruits students from other provinces in China, which adds to the diversity of regional dialects among the students. Although some students have their own dialects as their first language, all the participants were able to use Mandarin Chinese as a common language for communication. All participants had learned English for at least one semester at university and achieved an intermediate to higher-intermediate level of proficiency.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted for this research. First, a bilingual English-Chinese questionnaire was administered to non-English majors, with 309 valid samples collected. The questionnaire included multiple choice questions about accent beliefs and pronunciation teaching and participants were encouraged to provide additional comments to explain their answers. Students completed the questionnaire either during a class break or after class, with the research purposes explained by the researcher. It took about 15 minutes for students to complete the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, students had an option to provide their contact information if they were willing to participate in further research. Nine students were selected to take part in a series of face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese to make sure that students felt comfortable, which helped them to understand questions and better articulate their ideas.

Findings

The following sections will report students' attitudes towards English accents in general, towards their own English accents, and towards English accents that they aspire to.

Questionnaire findings

Attitudes towards English accents in general

When asked whether some English accents are better than others, slightly more than half of the respondents either had no idea or argued that there is no better accent (N = 162, 52.4%), the remainder believed that certain accents (mostly UK and US accents) are preferable (N = 147, 47.6%). Some respondents believed that languages or accents cannot be judged because they only reflect differences between regions and cultures. That is, accent is only a representation of different first languages (L1s). One respondent commented that variation among English accents is like differences among Chinese dialects; people cannot judge which one is better. This reflects the concept that

people's attitudes towards their L1s may, to some extent, influence their attitudes towards other languages (see also, Widdowson, 2003).

However, native ideology is still quite deeply-rooted in relation to accent. Respondents described UK accents as formal and authentic, while US accents seemed to be more popular in respondents' minds. This can be explained by the power of the US and "the relative proximity of the United States to China" (X. Hu, 2004, p. 30). One respondent commented that "I think history is an important factor, so UK and US accents are more authentic in this aspect"; another student believed that a person who speaks "pure British English sounds like an aristocrat".

In terms of preference, accents that are more comfortable, beautiful, or standard were more favoured by some respondents. It seems that due to the level of familiarity, UK and US accents were regarded as easier for respondents to understand than other accents (Figure 1). Among respondents who ranked particular accents they liked (N = 193), US and UK accents were, not surprisingly, ranked as the first two preferred types of English accents². This narrow understanding of English accents can probably be explained by exposure to such varieties of English during the process of English learning, along with a lack of exposure to other kinds of accents.

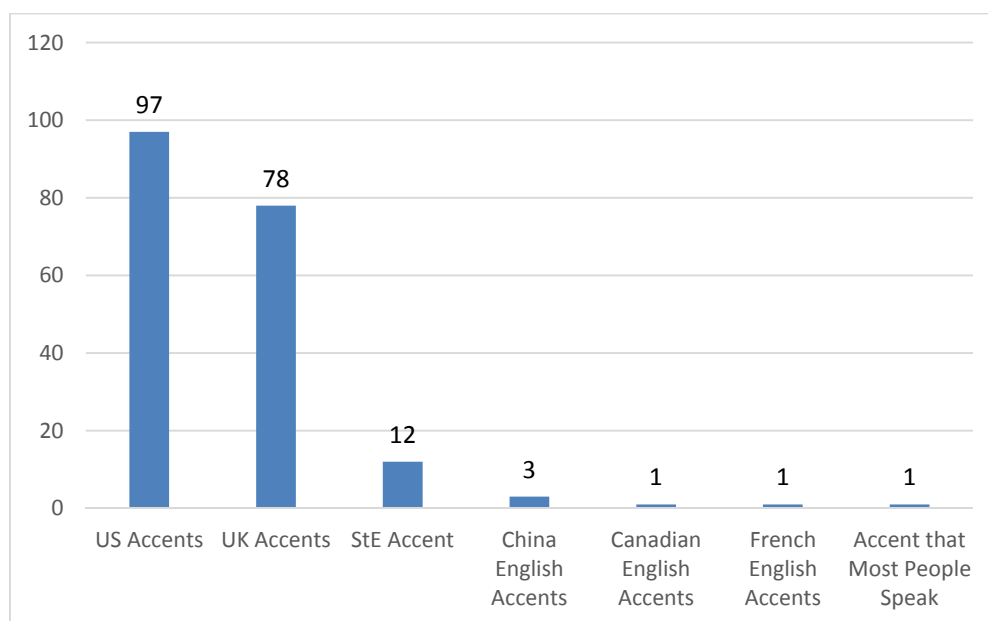


Figure 1. Accents respondents preferred (as their first choice)

Although many respondents expressed a preference for native English accents and took a traditional viewpoint that native accents are easier for them to understand, some expressed an opposite view, for example:

Because some native English accents are hard for me to listen and know the meaning. [written by the respondent in English]

When I watched British TV series and BBC talk show, as well as watching American TV series and listening to the radio, sometimes UK accents are more likely to cause some understanding problems. [translated]

Some senior American people speak very muddy, which totally cannot be understood.
[translated]

Based on these comments, it is possible that when students have more contact and exposure to additional English accents, especially the regional varieties of native English accents, they may change their opinions about the native English accents being preferable. However, at the time of this research, the majority of respondents still seemed to favour UK and US accents.

Attitudes towards own English accents

Only 53 out of 309 (17.1%) respondents felt satisfied with their own English accents, with 220 (71.2%) respondents providing a negative answer. It is self-evident that the majority of respondents perceived themselves as language learners rather than users, holding the view that Chinese-accented English is inadequate to fulfil the needs of communication. However, the Confucian doctrine of being moderate is embedded in Chinese culture. This might explain why students did not want to appear over-confident about their English accents. In addition, students' own L1s were seen as interfering with the process of making English pronunciation more native-like. For example, one respondent said that "some pronunciations and intonations of non-native accents are different from native ones. They are not authentic enough". Another respondent mentioned: "I need to improve my oral English so that I can speak like a native speaker of English". Despite the fact that the majority of respondents did not have experience abroad, it can be seen that students still projected an "imagined identity" when learning this international language. Unable to live up to this imagined ideal, they did not regard themselves as legitimate users of English (Norton & Toohey, 2011; H. Xu, 2012).

Although comments were few, some respondents did possess positive attitudes towards their own English accents. This echoes what Jenkins (2014, p. 140) describes as "non-conforming positions", in which people are able to "see differences from native English as legitimate English forms rather than errors" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 151). For example, one respondent commented that "I'm a Chinese. I can't speak as a native but I don't feel ashamed of it". Still, such comments were relatively few. Students will aspire to a comfort zone, believing that they would feel more satisfied or secure if they could produce sounds closer to native accents, which were unquestionably regarded as the target model during the process of English learning.

Accents to aspire to

The majority of respondents, 245 out of 309 (79.3%), hoped to sound like a NS, while only 33 (10.7%) felt happy to keep their own English accents and 3 (0.9%) simply did not care about their pronunciation. This echoes the findings about students' accent attitudes in general, indicating that native ideology is still quite entrenched and students regarded themselves as language learners.

However, from participants' additional comments, it can be seen that intelligibility is also emphasised. Some respondents seemed to realise that they did not need to sound like a native speaker to achieve the goal of communication, since clear pronunciation is more pivotal as an overarching concern to facilitate communication. For example, one respondent commented: "I aim for other people to understand me, while I can also understand the accents of other people. It is normal to have a Chinese accent in English, as a Chinese, as long as it does not impede communication". It is evident that students are negotiating their own identities during the process of English learning.

Interview findings

Due to space limitations, this paper will only report interview findings from two students, James and Carol (pseudonyms). James was a fourth-year student majoring in Engineering, while Carol was a second-year student majoring in Journalism.

Table 1. Transcription conventions for interviews

| Convention | Meaning |
|----------------------------|--|
| @@@ | Laughter |
| : | Lengthening (Length indicated by number of colons) |
| (.) | Brief pause in speech |
| . | Completion of a sentence |
| (1) | Longer pauses are timed to the nearest second with the number of second in parentheses |
| = | Latching |
| <low voice>text<low voice> | Modes of speaking |
| R | Researcher |

Attitudes towards English accents in general

Both students were asked whether they believed that certain English accents are better than others, and their responses indicated that native English accents are still preferred.

Excerpt 1

- 1 R: do you feel that er some English accents are better
than
2 other English accents=
3 James: =of course. for example American (1) or British they
are
4 much better than others
5 R: erm American or British. why (.) are these accents
easier
6 for communication
7 James: (1) er: if one speaks American accent it certainly (1)
8 will communicate more:: more convenient
9 because it has less misunderstanding

James responded to the question quickly, as he was confident using “of course”. This might also indicate that US and UK accents, which he mentioned, should be regarded as the *de facto* correct answer when asked about better accents. However, when asked whether he believed that US and UK accents made communication easier, he was not quite sure and answered with hesitation and repetition, although he seemed to believe that US accents should be the answer.

Similarly, Carol held a restricted understanding of native accents and believed that UK and US accents are better because “everyone who learns English can understand, as they are mainstream English accents that people gain much exposure to”. This is further reflected in her comments on her own English accent (see excerpt 3).

Attitudes towards own English accents

It seems that both James and Carol were unsatisfied with their own English accents. For example, James felt that his English accent did not sound comfortable for others, because when he listened to his own recording, he did not feel that his accent pleased his ears (see excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2

- 1 R: emm alright so how do you describe and evaluate
- 2 your own English accent
- 3 James: I feel it might be quite bad. I am not so satisfied
- 4 with
- 5 my accent.
- 6 R: satisfied or not
- 7 James: no
- 8 R: why why do you feel bad of your own accent
- 9 James: (2) probably:: I have (1) had recorded my voice. I feel
- 10 quite
- 11 uncomfortable @ when I listened to me speaking English
- 12 R: really
- 13 James: yes
- 14 R: emm: do you think that it is related to the influence
- 15 of
- 16 your mother tongue
- 17 James: err:: I am not quite sure. It is because that I do not
- 18 have
- 19 enough training during English class. And <low voice>
- 20 so
- 21 when I listen to my English <low voice> I feel quite
- 22 uncomfortable and I do not have any specific training

In this excerpt, James did not feel that his English accent met the standard. He felt bad when expressing his dissatisfaction with his accent. It is evident that James perceived his identity as that of a language learner who needed more training. The pauses and laughter in lines 8-9 indicate that he might feel ashamed of his own English accent. However, it is interesting that when asked how he would feel when someone speaks English with a Chinese accent, James mentioned: “We are friends (...) because (laughing) we are all from China we should feel a kind of friendliness (laughing)”. Hence, it can be noted that although he still considers himself a learner of English and thinks he should strive to improve his own English accent, he was aware of the issue of identity when communicating with others, especially shown by his laughter.

When asked the same question, Carol then compared her own English accent with native English accents and set her goal to sound like a native speaker, as can be seen in excerpt 3:

Excerpt 3

- 1 R: so how do you describe and evaluate your own English
- 2 accent
- 3 Carol: emm:: typical Chinese English
- 4 R: emm why
- 5 Carol: because (.) because I feel that my previous teachers
- 6 did
- 7 Carol: not care about my (.) our pronunciation
- 8 R: emm then do you feel satisfied with your English
- 9 accents
- 10 Carol: not satisfied @
- 11 R: why
- 12 Carol: because (.) err:: (1) I am (.) I also want that kind of
- 13 (1)
- 14 Carol: err:: feeling very native
- 15 R: emm

- 12 Carol: emm as my goal <low voice> so I am not satisfied at the
moment
- 13 Carol: <low voice>

This excerpt indicates that Carol still referred to native English as her target, while her own English accent should be abandoned. In lines 12-13 she even lowered her voice, apparently embarrassed when mentioning her dissatisfaction with her accent. However, it can also be recognised from this excerpt that Carol expressed her opinions with several pauses and laughter. Although it seems that Carol was keen to improve her accent to be native-like, she was also negotiating her own identity, as indicated by those prosodic features and discourse markers.

Discussion

From the data it is evident that native ideology is still somewhat entrenched in students' minds. This is not surprising given their process of learning English, as most of them seldom have opportunities to be exposed to other Englishes. Although native English accents are not necessarily the most intelligible for international communication (Jenkins, 2000, 2007; Walker, 2010), they may still tend to be regarded as the ultimate goal for the majority of English learners. Based on the current teaching materials, awareness of ELF is not yet widespread, so "most learners of English will assume that the only meaningful goal is native-like pronunciation" (Walker, 2010, p. 61). Therefore, it is necessary for language teachers to consider incorporating the concept of ELF and raising students' awareness during ELT practice, by "reevaluating the idealized, monolingual native speaker norms we often take for granted" (Kissling, 2013, p. 737).

Students' dissatisfaction with their own accents might also be attributable to traditional Chinese Confucianism, with its emphasis on being modest. Thus, students may always regard themselves as imperfect language learners, even if they can use English quite well to communicate with people from different cultures. At the same time, some students recognise that native accents are not a panacea, and may start to question the necessity to regard the native model as the benchmark, although these comments are quite few. At least some students are becoming aware of the global status of English, in particular when they have more contacts with people from different cultures. From this perspective, and from the negotiation process during some interviews, it can be seen that the local Chinese English accent is somewhat recognised, although the acceptability level remains relatively low.

Implications

The findings reflect students' complex perceptions of their own and other English accents. On the one hand, students see themselves as "perennial and error-prone ENL learners" (Zheng, 2013, p. 358) and may regard a native English accent as their ultimate goal, though "unrealistic and unattainable in their locale" (p. 358). On the other hand, against the backdrop of ELF, it can be understood that students recognise the use of English in different contexts. They learn to negotiate their identities between a language learner and a language user to some extent. The research findings have certain implications for ELT today, especially for pronunciation teaching in the ELF paradigm, since "accent plays an important role in perceptions of language proficiency" (Kuteeva, 2014, p. 337).

First, a restricted focus on a fixed standard of pronunciation teaching should be abandoned. Rather, if students are trained and prepared to use English in international settings, the goal of pronunciation teaching should be to reinforce concepts such as communication efficiency, communicative strategies, and pragmatic fluency (House, 2012; Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2010). The approach of pronunciation drilling, which breaks away from teaching contexts and learners' needs, is no longer being considered conducive. More importantly, as Deterding (2013) states, "the most useful thing that can be done in terms of pronunciation teaching is to make students aware of their own pronunciation and where this causes problems, and this represents one type of accommodation skill" (p. 172).

Second, language teachers and educators need to acknowledge the global spread of English and the importance of accent exposure to raise students' awareness of global Englishes. Teachers need to develop a pluricentric approach to introduce the diversity of English and accommodation skills when teaching students. This will help students build confidence to transition from perennial language learners to legitimate language users (Dewey, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011). Although students may need some exposure to native accents in an earlier stage of English learning, they need to be made aware later that in international settings, it is not beneficial for them to only imitate native accents without knowing why they are doing so. Raising students' language awareness can, in turn, help them to perceive themselves as legitimate language users and avoid the danger of being trapped into the pursuit of a native phantom (Zheng, 2014).

Conclusion

This research investigates university students' attitudes towards English accents, including their own, by employing the instruments of both questionnaire and interview. The findings show that many students still view native English accents as their learning target, while some feel resistance to this standard. The ELT context in China is rather complex so the findings may not be generalisable to the whole population of Chinese university students, but could resonate with similar groups of students to those studied.

From an ELF perspective, it is hoped that this research will raise awareness among both students and teachers that students need to get more exposure to diverse accents, including non-native English accents. For teachers to simply insist that students eliminate their L1 accents in English no longer addresses the various purposes of English learning. On the contrary, ELT today should envisage the reality of English functioning as a lingua franca, in particular when English is more often used among NNSs of English. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will help both students and teachers to be aware of the current linguistic landscape and reconsider certain language ideologies when learning and teaching this international language.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the Ministry of Education Project of Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Universities in P. R. China (Project No. 15JJD740007) and Shantou University Project of Social Sciences Research Fund (Project No. SR15008). I would like to thank all the participants of this study. I am also grateful to Professor Jennifer Jenkins and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and feedback on the earlier version of this article.

Notes

1. Although Wei and Su's paper was published in 2012, their data was collected around the year 2000.

2. Students may rank accents based on their exposure and knowledge. Students were not able to name other NS accents. As one respondent mentioned that she would prefer an accent that 'most people speak', it is not easy to decipher what she meant by this statement (see Fang, 2015 for a detailed discussion).

About the author

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