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Cultural Capital and Identity Transformation through the Language Practices of Anhui Migrants in Shanghai

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Abstract

This article examines how language practices shape the cultural capital and identity positioning of migrants from Anhui living in Shanghai. Drawing on in-depth interviews and participant observation, it explores how Mandarin, Shanghainese, and Anhui dialects acquire different values across institutional, occupational, familial, and social settings, and how migrants mobilize these linguistic resources in negotiating urban belonging. The analysis shows that language use is not a linear shift from a hometown dialect to Mandarin or Shanghainese. Rather, migrants engage in context-dependent code-switching: Anhui dialects sustain emotional ties and trust within families and fellow-provincial networks; Mandarin provides access to workplaces, schools, and public services; and Shanghainese functions as a form of local cultural and symbolic capital, even when migrants possess only partial competence. The article further demonstrates that linguistic boundaries are internally differentiated. Variations among northern, central, and southern Anhui dialects shape the costs and trajectories of acquiring Mandarin and adapting to the local linguistic environment. In public settings, attempts to incorporate Shanghainese expressions may generate recognition and economic opportunities, but may also invite ridicule or exclusion. These processes vary by class, gender, and generation: women often undertake more active linguistic adaptation in connection with family responsibilities, while second-generation migrants tend to orient toward the linguistic resources of the city. Language therefore operates simultaneously as a means of integration, a marker of distinction, and a resource for negotiating identity. The article contributes to migration and urban identity research by showing how linguistic capital is converted, constrained, and reproduced through everyday interaction.

I. INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE PRACTICES AND THE LINGUISTIC ENVIRONMENT OF SHANGHAI

The language use of Anhui migrants displays a pronounced sensitivity to social context. Rather than simply shifting from Anhui dialects to Mandarin or Shanghainese, they switch codes according to the demands of different settings, including family life, fellow-provincial networks, workplaces, community interactions, and children's education. Anhui dialects are used mainly within families and among people from the same hometown, where they sustain emotional ties and establish trust. Mandarin is the basic means of communication at work, in schools, and when accessing public services. Shanghainese, although not necessarily mastered fluently, functions

as a form of local cultural capital and shapes migrants' perceptions of urban belonging. Some interviewees insert Shanghainese words and expressions such as "阿拉" (we/us), "侬" (you), "蛮好" (pretty good), and "勿要紧" (it does not matter) into otherwise Mandarin speech. Such flexible language practices allow Anhui migrants to reposition themselves across different social fields, reduce interactional friction, and seek social recognition. Shanghainese itself has undergone a long process of development. The contemporary variety developed from the Songjiang dialect and has also been shaped by the city's historically inclusive linguistic environment. Following Shanghai's opening as a treaty port in 1843, migrants—who accounted for around 80 percent of the population—brought different dialects and foreign languages into contact. Approximately 85 percent of these migrants came from southern Jiangsu, particularly the Suzhou-Wuxi-Changzhou area, and northern Zhejiang, including Ningbo. Migration thus contributed to the linguistic diversity of the city.[1]

Since the reform and opening-up period, urbanization and globalization have generated a new wave of migration and a wider range of linguistic contact. Unlike earlier periods, Shanghai's registered-hukou population now accounts for a relatively larger share of the city's population. Recent migrants have mainly come from Mandarin-speaking areas, while also including speakers of dialects from across China. Their arrival has reshaped the city's sociolinguistic landscape. Mandarin, as the national lingua franca, is widely used throughout society; Shanghainese remains a prominent local variety; and dialects from other parts of the country have become increasingly audible in public life. These languages do not perform the same functions or enjoy the same social status. Anhui migrants in Shanghai encounter precisely this complex linguistic environment. The analysis therefore considers dialect regions and linguistic characteristics, the language repertoires of Anhui migrants, the characteristics of Shanghainese, the influence of language policies, communication in public settings, and language use among the second generation.

Language is an important pathway through which social stratification and identity boundaries are enacted. For migrants, it carries memories of their place of origin while also constituting a significant threshold to participation in urban social fields. Differences in linguistic competence affect opportunities in education, employment, and social interaction. Through judgments about linguistic legitimacy, these differences also shape individuals' social positioning and self-understanding. This article analyzes language across three dimensions—structure, interaction, and agency. Based on in-depth interviews with people from Anhui who have migrated to Shanghai and participant observation, it examines how language operates as symbolic capital in identity formation and how linguistic practices vary by generation, class, and gender. It asks how Anhui migrants use language to negotiate their social position and how identity takes shape through this process.

II. THE SOCIAL MECHANISMS OF LINGUISTIC IDENTITY FORMATION

Language is one of the most immediately recognizable external markers of identity. The pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary of a dialect can make an Anhui speaker identifiable as soon as they begin to speak. Language thus becomes a trigger for social classification. This phenomenon can be brought into dialogue with Erving Goffman's account of the interaction order. Goffman argues that the self is presented and recognized through interaction, with language forming an important element of frontstage performance. Yet an interactional perspective alone is insufficient: the social value of language is also embedded in relations of power. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital emphasizes that the linguistic field determines which forms of speech are considered legitimate. In the urban field, Mandarin enjoys a high degree of legitimacy, whereas local dialects occupy a weaker position in formal settings. Linguistic differences can therefore be converted into differences in symbolic power.

In a highly mobile urban context, language is among the first social signs to reveal differences in identity. Unlike institutional markers such as household registration or residence permits, language requires no documentation to perform a classificatory function in an instant of interaction. In repeated interviews, when respondents were asked when they most strongly became aware of being outsiders, language was almost invariably part of their answer.

Linguistic capital is dynamically converted across different social fields. Standard Mandarin

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enjoys high legitimacy in formal institutional settings, while Anhui dialects strengthen group identification and internal trust within fellow-provincial networks. The flexible use of linguistic strategies reflects migrants' practical knowledge of the urban social structure. They understand the hierarchy of languages in the city while also knowing how to mobilize resources from their places of origin in particular settings. Through this movement across fields, language becomes an important medium connecting institutional participation with emotional attachment.

The social mechanism through which language marks identity is essentially a process of symbolic boundary construction. Differences in pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary allow social actors to distinguish "us" from "them" rapidly in interaction. Not every accent is treated as a deviation from the standard; linguistic forms are more likely to be problematized when they occupy a disadvantaged position in the linguistic hierarchy. Language can thus operate as a micro-level mechanism of social stratification, enabling rapid identification in everyday encounters. Mandarin has greater legitimacy in formal fields, while local dialects occupy a relatively weaker symbolic position. Linguistic difference is thereby translated into social distinction.

In other fields, however, dialects can become resources for internal trust and group cohesion. Anhui migrants continually switch among multiple linguistic strategies, seeking a balance between the exposure of their origins and the adjustment of their self-presentation. Such practices demonstrate the everyday practical intelligence of mobile populations.

III. FROM LEARNING MANDARIN TO DIALECT-BASED DISTINCTION

Language is one of the first cultural barriers encountered by migrants entering urban life. For Anhui migrants in Shanghai, Mandarin is both a basic tool for communication across regions and an important medium for entering schools, workplaces, communities, and public-service systems. On the surface, learning Mandarin is an improvement in linguistic competence; in practice, it is also a process through which individuals adapt to urban rules, adjust their modes of interaction, and reposition their identities. Mandarin, however, does not eliminate regional differences. In concrete interactions, accents, dialects, and code-switching continue to signal speakers' regional origins. Language therefore remains an important symbolic boundary distinguishing "locals" from "outsiders".

3.1 Mandarin and Its Institutional Legitimacy

People encounter a wide range of languages in everyday life. Mandarin, as the national common language, is widely used throughout society, and language serves as an important mechanism of both social integration and identity distinction. Language policy is a typical instrument of institutional integration. Its central aim is to reduce the costs of social communication through linguistic standardization while improving communication and cultural cohesion within the political community. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the state has continuously promoted the standardization of Mandarin through a series of institutional arrangements. The State Council's 1956 Directive on the Promotion of Putonghua marked the beginning of the institutionalized promotion of Mandarin. The 1982 Constitution explicitly stipulated the promotion of Putonghua as the nationally common language. Since then, the State Language Commission has further embedded Mandarin in everyday life and public governance.[2]

This policy system reflects the logic of modern state governance in several ways. First, linguistic unification strengthens national identification and establishes an institutional basis for communication across regions. Second, the education system facilitates the intergenerational socialization of language, making Mandarin the default medium of public communication. Third, the media and administrative systems consolidate its legitimacy and authority in formal fields. As Huang Xing observes, the central function of Mandarin as the national common language is to enable communication in formal settings. Mandarin therefore occupies the position of a legitimate language within structures of power and institutional systems. Mastery of Mandarin signifies not only communicative competence but also a basic qualification for participation in modern social life.

This institutional linguistic structure has shaped Shanghai's sociolinguistic ecology. Shanghai became an important site for the implementation of Mandarin-promotion policies. In 1998, the State Language Commission convened a national

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observation and symposium on urban language and writing in Shanghai. The city's experience in conducting special inspections of language use was incorporated into an evaluation mechanism for urban language work and promoted as an important measure for the new period.[3] Relevant surveys indicate that the proportion of Shanghai residents able to converse in Mandarin is higher than the national average, particularly among urban residents. This suggests that Mandarin has become the dominant linguistic resource in the public sphere. At the same time, dialects remain widely used in private settings. Residents continue to show strong attachment to Shanghainese in families and familiar social networks. This dual linguistic structure illustrates a typical differentiation between social fields: Mandarin predominates in public and institutional settings, while dialects sustain group boundaries and local identification in private and emotional settings. State language policies have reshaped the division of linguistic functions, assigning different roles to language forms in different social spaces.[4]

Bourdieu's theory of the linguistic field helps explain this structure by treating language as symbolic capital and a mechanism of social distinction. Different linguistic forms have different values in particular social fields. Mandarin possesses the greatest symbolic capital in the field of state power, while Shanghainese performs functions of identity recognition and emotional cohesion in local social networks. For native Shanghainese, the ability to switch flexibly between Mandarin and Shanghainese represents a form of dual linguistic capital. This competence enhances their social adaptability and strengthens their sense of control over local identity. Using Mandarin when interacting with non-locals reflects institutional rationality, while maintaining Shanghainese in family and familiar networks helps preserve cultural boundaries. Language use is thus a practice of social classification through which individuals implicitly distinguish "us" from "them".

Within this linguistic ecology, the position of Anhui migrants has distinct structural characteristics. Supported by the institutional promotion of Mandarin, they generally face no major obstacles in basic communication and can enter the city's public systems, as can their children. Mandarin functions as an instrument of integration by lowering the threshold for institutional access. Yet linguistic barriers become apparent when migrants seek to enter deeper layers of local social networks. Shanghainese serves as an emotional bond and a symbolic marker. Those who cannot speak it, or who speak it only imperfectly, may find it difficult to enter the core circles of local society. In everyday interaction, local residents may use language as an informal "test" of identity, assessing whether another person belongs to their circle. This implicit linguistic screening constitutes a flexible but effective form of social distinction. Anhui migrants consequently experience a dual linguistic structure: Mandarin secures their participation in public life at the level of institutional integration, while the dialect barrier constrains their deeper incorporation into local structures of cultural identification. This produces an ambivalent sense of identity.

3.2 Structural Differences Generated by Dialect Boundaries

In addition to conducting in-depth interviews, this study recorded respondents' language switching across different interactional settings, including gatherings with fellow provincials, communication within families, and language use in formal situations. Interviews and observations made clear that Anhui speech does not constitute a uniform linguistic form. Its internal variation is considerable, and these differences can themselves become grounds for distinction among migrants. Linguistic divisions within the place of origin are reactivated in the urban context and become intricately associated with identity.

From the perspective of linguistic classification, the speech varieties of Anhui form a linguistic continuum extending from Mandarin varieties to the Wu-speaking transition zone. They span several Chinese dialect regions, producing a linguistic landscape characterized by overlapping layers and intersecting boundaries. Anhui speech is deeply influenced by northern Mandarin varieties, while in the south it forms complex contact zones with Wu Chinese. This pattern of linguistic convergence makes Anhui an important region for observing differentiation and transition within the Chinese language family. Within traditional Chinese dialectology, three major dialect systems are distributed across the province: Central Plains Mandarin, found mainly in northern Anhui; Jianghuai Mandarin, found mainly in central Anhui; and areas influenced by Wu Chinese, found in parts of southern

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Anhui. This linguistic structure is the cumulative result of historical migration and long-term geographical and transport connections.[5]

Northern Anhui represents the southern extension of Central Plains Mandarin. Areas such as Fuyang and Bozhou form a linguistic continuum with Henan and southwestern Shandong and largely belong to the Central Plains Mandarin system. Their phonological characteristics include clear retroflex consonants, with distinctions among zh, ch, and sh; relatively wide tonal movement; comparatively rapid speech; and the absence of a checked-tone system. The contrast between retroflex and dental sibilants is relatively stable, making these varieties sound closer to northern Mandarin. The four tones are relatively distinct, with marked pitch movement, producing an overall impression often described as "firm" and "direct". Historically, northern Anhui has long been within the cultural and political sphere of the Central Plains. Frequent population movement has maintained a high degree of structural similarity between local speech and Central Plains Mandarin. Against the background of Mandarin promotion, the linguistic distance between northern Anhui varieties and standard Mandarin is relatively small, and the cost of phonological adjustment is correspondingly lower.

Central Anhui belongs to a transitional area of Jianghuai Mandarin. Areas such as Hefei and Lu'an largely fall within this system. Jianghuai Mandarin has a distinctive transitional position in the classification of Chinese dialects. Compared with northern Mandarin, its phonological system is generally flatter and softer, while remaining distinct from Wu Chinese. Its characteristic features include the loss of the checked tone, although traces of it remain in intonation; relatively level tonal contours; less pronounced pitch movement than in Central Plains Mandarin; weakened contrasts among some initials; and a more measured rhythm of speech. Jianghuai Mandarin is regarded as an important branch within the Mandarin group. Its formation is closely related to population movements and grain-transport routes during the Ming and Qing periods. As an important transport corridor along the Yangtze River, central Anhui has long been a meeting point of northern and southern cultures, giving its linguistic structure a transitional character. Sociolinguistically, Jianghuai Mandarin is both close to standard Mandarin and marked by distinctive local features.

Southern Anhui forms a transition zone with Wu Chinese and retains certain archaic phonological features. Some areas, including Huangshan and Jixi, border Wu-speaking areas of Zhejiang and form a transitional zone between Mandarin and Wu Chinese; some local varieties are even classified as Wu. Their phonological systems display complex tonal structures, retained checked tones, and, in some areas, traces of the distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants. Their pronunciation is relatively soft, and their vowel systems are comparatively fine-grained. Some varieties preserve substantial features of Middle Chinese phonology. Wu varieties differ markedly from Mandarin, including in their retention of voiced stops and checked tones and their more complex tonal categories. As a result, southern Anhui varieties are phonetically more distant from Mandarin, and their speakers may face greater costs when adjusting their pronunciation.

From the perspective of linguistic geography, Anhui's dialect regions form a continuum in which linguistic structures change gradually across different areas. This continuum reflects a gradual axis linking Mandarin, Jianghuai, and Wu varieties. Geographic movement is accompanied by gradual changes in phonological systems, and this linguistic continuity embodies the long-term accumulation of historical migration and regional interaction. From the perspective of social structure, speakers of different linguistic varieties follow different paths of adaptation when moving across regions. Speakers of Central Plains Mandarin are relatively close to standard Mandarin and can adjust their pronunciation more easily. Jianghuai Mandarin occupies an intermediary position: it retains local features while allowing a relatively high degree of adjustment. Speakers from Wu-influenced areas need to make more substantial adjustments to tonal systems and phonemic structures.

Differences among linguistic varieties are also a sociological issue because they affect the efficiency with which linguistic capital can be converted during social mobility. The distance between a local linguistic structure and Mandarin objectively influences Anhui migrants' expressive capacities and interactional strategies in urban institutional settings. These differences, rooted in phonological structures, are

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assigned different symbolic meanings within systems of social evaluation. Northern Mandarin varieties may be regarded as more standard because of their structural proximity to Mandarin, while Wu varieties carry symbolic associations with tradition and refinement in cultural narratives because of their complexity and long history. The fact that Anhui spans multiple linguistic regions makes it impossible to reduce Anhui speech to a single form. The linguistic varieties of different areas provide a diverse foundation for subsequent identity practices. During cross-regional migration, these internal differences may shape how Anhui migrants understand their own linguistic resources and encourage them to adopt differentiated strategies in different urban fields. The internal hierarchy and transitional characteristics of Anhui's linguistic landscape are historical outcomes of Chinese dialect development and constitute an important structural condition for the distribution of linguistic capital and identity construction under migration.

IV. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH PUBLIC LANGUAGE PRACTICES

If learning Mandarin reflects migrants' linguistic adaptation to urban systems of communication, and dialect-based distinction reveals identity boundaries in everyday interaction, public language practices further show how individuals actively construct and adjust their identities in specific situations. In public spaces such as workplaces, schools, communities, markets, and government-service counters, language is not merely a tool for conveying information; it is also a way of expressing social position. For Anhui migrants in Shanghai, choosing Mandarin, retaining their hometown accents, or attempting to understand and use Shanghainese—even to a limited extent—is closely related to the pursuit of social recognition. By switching among different linguistic forms, individuals respond to expectations of "standard" expression in urban public interactions while continually reshaping their sense of belonging through fellow-provincial relations, interactions with local residents, and intergenerational communication within families. Public language practices therefore provide an important entry point for examining identity construction among Anhui migrants in Shanghai and reveal the dynamic relationship between linguistic competence, social interaction, and urban identification.

When communicating with local residents, Anhui migrants often insert Shanghainese vocabulary into Mandarin sentence structures. These practices can be grouped into four types. First, pronoun substitution, such as replacing the Mandarin "你" (you) with the Shanghainese "侬", or using "唔" for "我" (I). Second, noun substitution, such as using local dialect words including "度宁" (adult). Third, adjective substitution, in which local adjectives replace Mandarin expressions. Fourth, the spontaneous use of short expressions in Shanghainese, such as "撒宁" and "特古份". Substitution at the level of personal pronouns is particularly significant. Pronouns are important linguistic tools for constructing subject positions and relational boundaries. When Anhui migrants use local terms such as "侬" and "唔", they are in effect attempting to adjust interactional distance and express closeness and identification through linguistic form. This is a strategic adjustment with considerable symbolic significance. Local residents' evaluations of such expressions are divided. Some regard them as comical or awkward, interpreting them as poor imitation; others see them as an initial sign of a willingness to integrate. From the perspective of identity construction, this lexical substitution is a strategy of compromise. The use of selected local expressions in formal settings reveals that speakers have not yet fully mastered Shanghainese, while also signaling their willingness to approach local culture.

Public language practices can bring frustration, but they may also generate rewards. These rewards take two main forms. The first is economic. In the service sector, linguistic competence directly affects employment opportunities and income. Lu Ming argues that migrants from different dialect regions face structural constraints in occupations requiring intensive verbal interaction, particularly in areas where the linguistic differences are substantial.[6] For Anhui migrants seeking to enter fields such as banking or high-end retail, understanding and speaking Shanghainese may become an important requirement. Linguistic competence can thus be converted into economic capital, although the efficiency of this conversion depends on the demands of the particular field. The second form is cultural.

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When Anhui migrants receive affirmation and praise from local residents for learning Shanghainese, they gain symbolic recognition, which strengthens their sense of belonging. Linguistic imitation may gradually become habitual: speech shifts from deliberate practice to spontaneous expression, and the migrant moves from being an outsider imitating local speech to becoming a participant in the field. A stable identity is more likely to emerge when economic and cultural rewards reinforce one another in a positive cycle.

Taken together, the process can be understood as follows: language practices enter public settings; linguistic performances are socially evaluated; these evaluations are converted into economic and cultural rewards or penalties; and the resulting reward structure shapes migrants' sense of identity. Through ongoing interaction, identification may become more stable or may weaken. Linguistic competence in public settings is therefore an important medium of identity construction. The degree of standardization of a speaker's language affects its legitimacy in occupational fields, while competence in the local dialect affects the depth of their incorporation into local cultural structures. For Anhui migrants, language is both an instrument of integration and a boundary of distinction. It may become a resource for upward mobility or a marker through which exclusion is enacted. Public language practices are thus a key pathway for understanding the construction of urban identity.

4.1 Linguistic Perceptions amid Class Differentiation

Class is not defined solely by income. It refers to an individual's position within the social structure and the combined configuration of economic, cultural, and social capital that they possess. Existing research on class differences and linguistic perception has developed mainly along three lines: sociolinguistics, language attitudes, and theories of linguistic capital. Basil Bernstein argued that social-class differences shape distinct linguistic codes through processes of family socialization.[7] William Labov further demonstrated a systematic relationship between linguistic variation and social stratification, showing that linguistic differences can make social status audible.[8] From the perspective of linguistic capital and the linguistic field, Bourdieu argued that legitimate language acquires a dominant position through the support of educational and institutional power, leaving different classes unequally positioned in their access to linguistic resources and in the evaluation of their speech. Research on language attitudes shows that people infer speakers' competence and social status from their ways of speaking. Linguistic perception is therefore a process of social classification. Studies in the Chinese context have also found an association between Mandarin proficiency and occupational status, indicating that language affects opportunities for social mobility and the ways individuals are perceived and evaluated.[9] Bourdieu further argues that different configurations of capital produce different forms of habitus, which are expressed in individuals' styles of conduct and linguistic practices. Language reflects class differences while also participating in the reproduction of class relations. Class differentiation is particularly pronounced within migrant populations. Differences in occupation and social-network resources mean that migrants from the same province may become significantly differentiated after settling in Shanghai. Drawing on Li Qiang's distinction between "labor migrants" and the "emerging urban middle class", the participants in this study can be broadly divided into two groups: those mainly engaged in manual labor or low-level service work, and those who have moved upward within the market economy into management positions or jobs in the public sector. These groups differ significantly in their awareness of linguistic norms, language strategies, and modes of identity construction.

4.2 Gender-Specific Strategies of Adaptation

Although previous studies have rarely treated women's language-adaptation strategies as a unified topic, sociolinguistics and migration studies provide a substantial theoretical foundation for examining them. Drawing on the relationship between language and gender, Robin Lakoff argues that women's speech tends to be more standardized and cautious.[10] Peter Trudgill and William Labov further show that women tend to move toward overtly prestigious forms in processes of linguistic variation, a tendency closely related to social evaluation, class position, and identity competition.[11] Susan Gal's research on language shift in bilingual communities suggests that women are often quicker to adopt linguistic forms that bring higher social returns.[12] More recent studies of migrant and refugee women have further emphasized that language learning and adaptation involve not

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only communicative competence but also processes of identity construction and social integration. Women's linguistic adaptation is therefore an action strategy embedded in social structures and gender relations. As Bourdieu points out, linguistic competence constitutes linguistic capital that can be converted into symbolic and social capital in particular fields. In-depth interviews with women from different generations and educational backgrounds in this study suggest that, compared with men, women are more likely to actively adjust their language practices and strategically learn Mandarin and Shanghainese. This tendency is generally associated with gender-role expectations, maternal responsibilities, mechanisms of family reproduction, and the cultural discipline of the city.

Women's initiative in linguistic adaptation can give them a form of symbolic authority within the family, making them the designers and enforcers of family language norms. Such active adaptation may also intensify their gendered burdens, as language learning becomes an invisible form of emotional labor and a demand on their time. At a broader level, women use linguistic capital to enhance the family's social image and facilitate its incorporation into urban society. This process is both a response to the city's linguistic culture and a strategic use of it. Women's adaptation strategies reveal their agency within structural inequality as they seek to maximize benefits while operating within existing rules. These strategies are complex social practices in which maternal ethics, class mobility, the accumulation of symbolic capital, and the reconfiguration of gender roles intersect. Language is simultaneously an identity marker and a tool of social mobility, a source of pressure and a strategic resource. Through sustained investment in language, women help their families secure a more stable position in urban society and reshape their own identities, moving from being outsiders marked by an accent to becoming actors able to navigate multiple cultural fields.

4.3 Changes in the Language Practices of the Second Generation

In migration studies, "second-generation migrants" refers to people who are born in the place of destination or who migrate there with their parents at an early age and complete most of their primary socialization there. Compared with the first generation, they are more deeply incorporated into the destination society through language acquisition and the formation of social networks. Their cultural memories of their parents' place of origin are more indirect and fragmented. The second generation therefore provides an important perspective from which to examine cultural transmission, linguistic transformation, and identity reconstruction.

The relationship between language and identity is a central issue in international migration research. In the United States, extensive debate has developed around assimilation theory and segmented assimilation theory.[13] Historically, assimilationist education policies directed at Native American children and the long-term institutional racial discrimination experienced by African Americans illustrate coercive pathways of linguistic assimilation and identity reconstruction. Many Asian immigrant families have actively strengthened English-language education to accelerate their children's integration into mainstream society, sometimes resulting in the rapid loss of their heritage languages. In Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, although Chinese migrants may enjoy economic advantages, their position within national political structures is complex. Their children may maintain their mother tongue within the family and Chinese communities, while using the dominant national language in public settings. The division of linguistic spaces can generate uncertainty about identity. The phenomenon sometimes described in American sociological discussions as "banana" identity—people who are ethnically Chinese but whose cultural identification tends toward the American mainstream—symbolizes the possible separation between linguistic assimilation and cultural identification.[14]

Research in China has focused largely on the institutional exclusion of migrant workers' children from urban education systems and the psychological pressures associated with the shift from rural or local languages to standardized urban language. Zhao Cuilan observes that "the children of migrant workers move from the emotionally grounded linguistic environment of familiar social relations into the rationalized and institutionalized urban linguistic system; their linguistic transition is a process of restructuring their identity."[15] Against this theoretical background, examining the language practices of the second generation of Anhui migrants

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in Shanghai makes it possible to observe the intergenerational transmission of Anhui dialects in the city and to analyze the development of Anhui speech in cross-regional migration. The language choices of this group reflect strategies for balancing urban identification with identification with their place of origin.

V. CONCLUSION

The contributions of this analysis can be summarized in four respects. First, it situates language within structures of social stratification and power, treating language as a form of capital whose value is determined by institutional structures. Second, it understands linguistic capital as a means of conversion in identity construction: Mandarin, Shanghainese, and Anhui dialects have different exchange values in different fields. Third, it highlights the effects of generational and gender differences. The "1.5 generation" may experience dilemmas arising from linguistic humiliation; second-generation migrants tend to orient themselves toward the city's linguistic capital; women interviewees place greater emphasis on linguistic propriety and social respectability, while men tend to emphasize practical utility. Fourth, the model of identity as a recurring process emphasizes the dynamism of language practices and the coexistence of multiple identities.

Language is a concrete manifestation of micro-level power relations in everyday life. Through different combinations of Mandarin, dialects, and local linguistic forms, Anhui migrant families continually adjust their identity positions between their place of origin and the city. In this cyclical process, identity is continuously generated and reproduced through the interaction between structural pressures and individual practices. Language constitutes an established structural framework, while speech is a central process through which identity is reproduced. The language practices of Anhui migrants vividly illustrate this complex process.

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