

Attitudes of Chinese learners of German towards the German language – an empirical investigation

Over the last ten years, the number of people learning German in China has increased steadily. Chinese learners of German are very interested in learning the German language, which could be related to their attitudes towards it.

Language attitude is primarily understood as an evaluative reaction to a specific language in relation to its social value (cf. Garrett 2010, p. 20 f.). Over the last decade the Leibniz Institute for the German Language (Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache, IDS) has carried out several comparative surveys on language attitude. Its project “Language(s) in Germany” investigated Germans’ attitudes towards German, including its varieties, as well as to other languages spoken in Germany, such as minority languages, foreign languages and languages spoken by migrant groups (above all in 2008, 2016 and 2017/18; cf. Gärtig/Plewnia/Rothe 2010; Adler/Plewnia 2018, 2019). How do the attitudes of Chinese learners of German towards the German language compare? Could their stable interest in learning German be explained by their attitudes towards German? What factors influence the attitudes of Chinese learners of German towards German? Inspired by the above-mentioned surveys, a similar survey was designed and carried out with Chinese learners of German.

The necessary data were gathered in a comprehensive survey consisting of five parts with 59 items covering a broad spectrum of topics. Questions on language attitude can be divided into two main components: affective and cognitive attitudes. The affective component refers to feelings towards the language in question, from sympathy to dislike. The cognitive component, in contrast, covers thoughts and beliefs about the language in question particularly from a social perspective.

Three tools were used to measure affective and cognitive attitudes towards German: the General Language Evaluation Instrument (Allgemeine Sprachbewertungsinstrument, ASBI), the Attitudes Towards Languages scale (AToL) and the Competence-Warmth scale (cf. Adler/Plewnia 2018; Schoel et al. 2013). This third tool uses a Likert scale to evaluate the attitudes towards the speakers in relation to competence and warmth (cf. Fiske et al. 2002; Schoel et al. 2013). The questionnaire was designed to match the Germany survey carried out by the IDS in 2008 (cf. Gärtig/Plewnia/Rothe 2010), making it possible to compare the responses of Chinese learners of German and German native speakers on the same items.

A total of 510 completed questionnaires were submitted on an online platform by participants all over China. They were either learning German at the time of taking the survey or had previously learnt German. They included students at various universities or lower and upper secondary schools as well as professionals studying German at language institutions (like the Goethe-Institut).

In relation to their affective attitude, the Chinese learners of German generally had a positive attitude towards German. The majority (76.86%) liked or strongly liked German; only a few (2.2%) did not like German at all. These results attest the generally positive attitude of the participants towards German. This is not particularly surprising considering

that learners of a foreign language are already fairly motivated to learn the language, whether for practical or emotional reasons.

In comparison with the German native speakers' evaluation of German, the Chinese learners' evaluation is slightly lower. The German native speakers evidently expressed their liking for the language more strongly, resulting in more responses at the top end of the scale. The responses of the Chinese participants also revealed a difference in attitudes towards one's first language and a foreign language. Evidently Chinese was judged more positively than the foreign language in terms of affective attitude. This can be explained by "language loyalty": when learning a foreign language, speakers do not lose their loyalty to their first language but maintain it.

When asked how much they liked their first language, there were clear differences between the Chinese and German participants. The responses of the Chinese participants to this item were more positive than that of the German participants. This could be due to different characteristics in the two cultures. In Lewis' (2006, pp. 39–42) model, Germany is a typical example of a linear-active culture, meaning that Germans are cool and objective or distanced in their evaluations. In comparison, China is characterized by a reactive culture, with some elements of a multi-active culture. Chinese people are generally known for their sense of community and solidarity (cf. Böhn 2004), making them react more emotionally than the Germans.

In relation to cognitive attitude, the participants attributed a high value to German on the dimension of value, finding it beautiful and appealing. The responses relating to the dimension of structure clustered around the highest categories while in the dimension of sound, the means were much lower and the responses were clearly more scattered. Thus the participants found German to be grammatically logical on the one hand but to sound harsh on the other.

In relation to the descriptions of German in the dimensions of structure and sound, the Chinese learners of German and German native speakers essentially agreed. What stood out is that the Chinese participants assigned a much higher value to *logical* and the only lower value to *soft*. Looking at the responses in the data more closely revealed that almost half of the Germans chose a neutral response for *soft* while the Chinese chose a rather negative or even a very negative one. That means that they consider German to be a very harsh language. The differences were even stronger when it came to *logical*. The survey thus highlights the image of German for Chinese learners of German: systematic and harsh are its two most characteristic features.

As languages cannot be separated from their speakers, we assume that when evaluating German, the participants actually also included speakers of that language in relation to specific cultural knowledge and stereotypes as well as experience-based beliefs (cf. Plewnia/Rothe 2011, p. 243). Thus the Chinese participants ascribed greater prestige to German than to their own language in that they judged typical Germans to be more highly educated than members of their own group.

A further aim of this study was to ascertain whether people with different background characteristics had different attitudes towards German. The socio-demographic factors of interest here were age, gender and occupation. Three other factors which are closely connected with learning a foreign language were also investigated in this study, namely learning methods, stays abroad and self-assessment of one's own German language skills.

The results revealed that the demographic variables of age and occupation clearly corresponded to attitudes towards German while there was no significant correlation with gender. Several factors connected with learning a foreign language also had a strong effect on attitudes towards that language. On the whole the following groups tended to have rather positive attitudes towards German: a) younger learners, b) people learning German in a formal learning environment, c) people who come across the language in their jobs, d) people who had not yet spent a longer period of time abroad and e) people who assessed their own German language skills positively.

In conclusion, this study should partially compensate for the lack of research on attitudes towards German in China. Positive affective and cognitive attitudes towards German lead to greater numbers of Chinese expressing interest in German. Taking a closer look at certain factors influencing language attitudes revealed that Chinese learners of German with specific socio-demographic characteristics or factors relating to learning a foreign language evaluated German more positively than those without such characteristics. Secondly, when taken together with the IDS's 2008 survey, this study makes it possible to observe the attitudes of both native and non-native speakers towards German as well as the attitudes of both groups towards their own first language, which covers new ground for research into language attitudes.

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