

“I am very angry!”: A Taiwanese legislator’s deployment of linguistic and gestural resources in performing “new politics”

Linguistic variation in political talk can serve as semiotic resources in performing political identities or personae (e.g., Hall-Lew, Friskney & Scobbie 2017). Most of the previous research contrasted politicians with different political ideologies. Politicians who belong to the same political party also compete to obtain more power in their own party. It has not been well documented how politicians of the same political party utilize linguistic resources to differentiate themselves apart.

In recent Taiwanese politics, “new politics” is discursively constructed, in contrast to “old politics”. The former lies more emphasis on embracing non-biased and transparent politics, and the latter is usually notorious for partisanism, prioritizing the interests of a political party over people influenced by a particular policy. This study looks at the stylistic variation of one Taiwanese legislator Pin-Yu Lai (PYL), who was elected in 2020 as the youngest-ever national legislator (27 yrs old). PYL is known as a social activist and a cosplay artist, representing younger generations’ voices in the parliament. This study examines PYL’s linguistic style-shifting across two parliament debates, in contrast to another legislator Si-Yao Wu (SYW; 48 yrs old), who has been involved in politics for 16 years. Both are women politicians from the ruling party and represent residents in Greater Taipei. SYW was chosen as a contrast also because she participated in the same debates, interacting with the same officials, and having the same face-mask condition.

The data are from two debates on a controversy between local comic artists and a government agency. The debates were between legislators and government officials, taking the form of question-answer sequences. As a cosplay artist and a legislator, PYL is deeply involved in this controversy, for comic artists and fans wrote complaint letters to her. In contrast, SYW has no explicit connection to the comic community.

We look at linguistic variables including an alveolar-retroflex phonemic contrast (/s/-/ʂ/; operationalized as temporal-midpoint spectral CoG values), the rate of utterance-final particles (UFPs), and gestures. In the first debate, PYL takes a polite stance toward the government official and follows clear question-answer sequences. This stance is embodied by a combination of a clear alveolar-retroflex contrast, a low rate of UFPs, and fewer gestures directed to the official. In the second debate, after the official does not keep any promise, PYL shifts to a confrontational stance. She interrupts the official multiple times and does not give much conversational floor to the official. PYL shifts to an alveolar-retroflex merger (Table 1), and a higher rate of UFPs (Table 2), and more pointing and beat gestures. In contrast, there is no shift in these aspects in SYW’s two debates (Table 2).

We argue that PYL shifts between two political styles (“old politics” vs. “new politics”) via the changes in linguistic and gestural use, and that the embodiment of “new politics” is motivated by diverging away from a political persona that appears polite to officials. This study also responds to research on the relationship between politeness and clear articulation as well as less inter-speaker engagement.

References

Hall-Lew, Lauren, Ruth Friskney & James M. Scobbie. 2017. Accommodation or political identity: Scottish members of the UK Parliament. *Language Variation and Change* 29(3). 341–363.

Table 1. Summary of the best-fitting model predicting the spectral CoG (Hz) of alveolar/retroflex sibilant fricatives in PYL's speech

Fixed effects	Estimate	Std.Error	t value	p value
(intercept)	6256.9	611.2	10.23	<0.001 ***
Log-transformed sibilant duration	260.2	126.8	2.05	0.041 *
phoneme = sh	-1507.5	206	-7.31	<0.001 ***
sequence = second	n.s.			
reading = yes	-373.4	101.5	-3.67	<0.001 ***
phoneme = sh x sequence = second	958	271.2	3.53	<0.001 ***

Table 2. Logistic regression predicting the presence of UFPs in PYL's speech

Fixed effects	Estimate	Std.Error	z value	p value
(intercept)	-1.867	0.335	-5.57	<0.001 ***
sequence = second	0.95	0.339	2.8	0.005 **
utterance number	-0.007	0.002	-2.78	0.005 **

Table 3. Summary of the best model predicting the CoG of sibilant fricatives in SYW's speech

Fixed effects	Estimate	Std.Error	t value	p value
(intercept)	9618.8	664.9	14.46	<0.001 ***
Log-transformed sibilant duration	-370.7	136.3	-2.72	0.006 **
Rounded vowel = yes	-1347.2	310.9	-4.33	<0.001 ***
Phoneme = sh	-2209.3	221.5	-9.97	<0.001 ***
Rounded vowel = rounded x phoneme = sh	1401.4	362.3	3.86	<0.001 ***
sequence = second	n.s.			