



Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 14 (2026), pp. 273-292
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/n95zz482>



Between Burden and Bridge: Metaphorical Framing of Accent Among International Students in China

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ABSTRACT: *Learning a new language is central to both the academic and sociocultural adjustment of international students. Accent, in particular, represents a key site of emotional and identity negotiation. Drawing on conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and framing theory (Goffman, 1974), this study explores how international students in China conceptualize and experience their Mandarin accent. On the basis of metaphor-elicitation interviews with 25 international students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, the findings suggest the presence of two dominant and contrasting metaphorical frames; the 'Burden/Barrier' frame is associated with anxiety, frustration, and perceived social distance, whereas the 'Bridge/Tool' frame reflects meanings of access, identity, and agency. These metaphorical framings appear to shape how learners interpret their communicative experiences, negotiate identity, and position themselves socially. The results of this study suggest that accents may function as a cognitive filter through which aspects of the international students' experiences are interpreted. Implications for language pedagogy, student support services, and the promotion of linguistically inclusive academic environments are discussed.*

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor theory, framing theory, identity, international students, language learning, L2 accent.

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How to Cite (APA): Awaisuddin., Haitao, M., Saleem, A. (2026). Between burden and bridge: Metaphorical framing of accent among international students in China. *Journal of International Students*, 16(14), 273-292. <https://doi.org/10.32674/n95zz482>

INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad is a process of going through many experiences, as Ülgen (2026) expresses that “academic adjustment is widely understood as a multidimensional process involving language proficiency, engagement with disciplinary content, classroom participation, peer relations and psychological well-being” (p. 196). The international student experience is helpfully understood as involving overlapping challenges of language barriers, cultural shock, loneliness and homesickness, as well as navigating unfamiliar educational contexts and experiencing discrimination (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Recent research, such as that of Mahmood et al. (2026), further demonstrates that psychological adaptation is mediated through internal resources such as meaning-making and resilience, which enable students to interpret and cope with linguistic and cultural challenges in host environments. The process of adapting to a new academic and social environment is inherently multidimensional, involving both academic and sociocultural integration, where language barriers and cultural differences significantly shape students’ experiences and outcomes.

Academically, international students encounter several hurdles, including language barriers, differences in pedagogical approaches, and insufficient support from advisors and the university (Andrade, 2006; Martirosyan et al, 2022). The language barrier affects their comprehension and participation in class, as well as their ability to engage meaningfully in group projects and academic discussions (Andrade, 2006; Lee, 2010). Wen and Hu (2023) state that there are 500,000 international students in China, making China the best place to study in Asia. For these students, the competence of Mandarin is not only a prerequisite to academic success but also a decisive aspect of academic achievement and social and cultural assimilation (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). In this emerging demanding experience, a foreign accent can be a source of anxiety, identity crisis, and

perceived social stigmatization (Derwing and Munro, 2015). More broadly, recent qualitative work on international higher education has shown that academic and sociocultural integration are tightly intertwined and that language barriers continue to shape students' success and well-being across host contexts (Casas Trujillo & Dabney-Fekete, 2026). Leong (2015) sheds light on the experiences of international students in the U.S. and states that concerns about accent and language fluency often undermine their confidence in social interactions, contributing to a sense of isolation from American peers.

Although the phonetic and teaching components of the accent mechanism have been well studied in traditional research, little has been examined on the cognitive and emotional side of the way in which international students perceive, image and survive with their L2 accent. This gap is pronounced given that an accent is not just a bunch of sounds used in speech; it is a highly potent social identity marker and a common cause of discrimination (Lippi-Green, 2012). International students may find it difficult to live life with an accent, which may create their ability to process interactions with faculty, peers, and the local community, directly affecting their sense of belonging and well-being (Zhou et al., 2008). In this paper, the concepts of L2 Chinese accents among 25 international students are explored. It is based on the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and the framing theory of Goffman (1974), which indicates how learners use systematic metaphorical reasoning in arranging the complicated, emotionally charged experience of speaking with a foreign accent. The information shows that an L2 accent is a multifaceted cognitive process through which learners can bargain in terms of identity, agency, social affiliation and psychological well-being. The research question is as follows: How do conceptual metaphors structure international students' perception and experience of their Chinese accent, and what implications does this have for their identity negotiation and psychological adjustment? With the help of this answer, the present study adds a new cognitively based approach to the body of literature on international students' experience and second language acquisition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The experience of international students is inherently connected to the language acquisition process, which extends beyond grammatical competence to encompass social integration and identity reconstruction. Studies have shown that language proficiency is a major determinant of the academic performance and mental adaptation of students studying abroad (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). The issue is not only lexical or syntactic but also highly social; language serves as the primary channel for establishing relationships, seeking academic assistance, and fostering a sense of belonging to local society (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). Among the complexities of such terrain, control over a foreign accent is a highly powerful source of anxiety and identity negotiation. An accent is an obvious, visible, and audible sign of distinction, which tends to provoke stereotypical assessment and influence the perception of the listener toward the intelligence,

competence, and even social attractiveness of the speaker (Lippi-Green, 2012; Gluszek and Dovidio, 2010). To the international student, any verbal interaction will turn into a high stake's performance in which he or she displays his or her linguistic identity. According to recent literature on international students in China, this complex association between language learning and identity is characterized by the fact that students actively mediate a sense of self between a stranger and a legal actor in their academic and social worlds (Ma & Cheng, 2021; Gu & Teng, 2022). Complementing this perspective, Mahmood et al. (2026) show in the Chinese context that psychological adaptation is closely supported by social support, resilience, and meaning in life, positioning well-being as a central dimension of international student integration rather than a secondary outcome.

Traditionally, studies of L2 accents have been controlled by phonetic and pedagogical approaches, which involve the study of articulatory patterns, intelligibility levels, and methods of teaching approximation to a native standard (Derwing and Munro, 2015; Thomson, 2018). Although this is crucial work, it tends to marginalize the subjective, lived experience of the learner. Newer sociolinguistic and critical schools of thought have reconceptualized accent as not a phonetic goal but an important aspect of social identity and a source of power relations and discrimination (Piller, 2016; Lippi-Green, 2012). Scholars believe that the "native-speakerism" ideology, where the norms of native speakers are the only standard one should be achieved, exerts an unequal communicative load on L2 speakers and keeps language inequality intact (Holliday, 2006). For international students, this is an internal conflict that can be well explained by Dornyei's (2009) L2 motivational self system: a contrast exists between the "ideal L2 self", who speaks effortlessly, and the "feared L2 self", who is misinterpreted, dismissed or ostracized because of the accent. This psychological stress is a large, but poorly theorized, aspect of student adaptation and well-being (Sawir et al., 2012). Importantly, studies are increasingly demonstrating the immediate mental damage of linguistic stigma, in which accent-based harassment may result in a sense of fear, inferiority, and social isolation (Dovchin, 2020). Moreover, the level of comprehensibility as well as the accent of a speaker is directly related to how the speaker is judged by other people in terms of social aspects; hence, the accent is a fundamental issue of interpersonal relations.

To reach this inner-cognitive-emotional level of accents, this analysis resorts to conceptual metaphor theory (CMT). CMT, which was pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), argues that metaphor is not simply a decorative speech but a basic system of human thought. We obtain abstract complex things (such as time, love, or argument) by projecting them onto more concrete embodied areas of experience (such as space, journeys, or war). These mappings are organized and determine our way of reasoning and behavior. CMT has been successfully used in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) to learn how learners frame their conceptualizations of "language" in itself (e.g., as a KEY, a JOURNEY, a BATTLE) and to understand networked beliefs and attitudes, which determine motivation and strategy use (Littlemore, 2009). In fact, systematic reviews define the analysis of learner metaphors as a powerful source of information about their unspoken beliefs and emotional experiences (Barcelos, 2020). Nevertheless, this

application has been restricted to a large extent to lexicon and grammar. *Phonetics* and *accents* are also critical gaps in the theoretical and empirical research on CMT, as they are almost completely unexplored.

To examine the social and psychological implications of these cognitive metaphors, this paper combines framing theory (Goffman, 1974). The framing theory in question considers how people employ interpretive schemas known as “frames” to frame situations in ways that bring into the limelight some aspects of reality and into the shadows others. A frame is a system for organizing experience and guiding action. In cases where a learner unconsciously frames his/her accent, using a metaphor such as a BARRIER indicates challenges and social rejection, which may result in anxiety and avoidance of communication. As an alternative, presenting it as a BRIDGE emphasizes connection and possibility, establishing an agentic and more resilient approach. CMT and framing theory are powerful and integrated lenses; i.e., CMT displays the profound and mainly unconscious cognitive framework of accent perception, and framing theory describes how these conceptual models actively code behavior, emotion, and identity negotiation in a social situation, a psychosocial approach that is well evidenced by modern research (Wetherell, 2021). In this paper, the theory is that accents serve as a “cognitive filter”, a figurative frame, through which international students essentially color their academic and social experiences in the host country.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, metaphor-elicitation methodology based on a social constructivist paradigm was used in this study, recognizing that international students' experiences of accents are shaped by both personal meaning-making and social interaction. The researchers fully consented to the institutional review board's review that the research was ethical and voluntary, and all the data were anonymized.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit twenty-five (25) international students at the university of the authors of the current study with a variety of linguistic backgrounds, levels of proficiency and lengths of stay. The last group of participants was aged between 18 years and 39 years and consisted of 12 males and 13 females. The native languages they spoke were 15 different language families, such as Indo-European (e.g., Urdu, Pashto, and Russian), Afro-Asiatic (Arabic), and Sino-Tibetan (Vietnamese L1 speakers). Their Mandarin proficiency, self-reported in Mandarin using the benchmark of HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi), was between those of HSK 3 (intermediate) and HSK 5 (advanced), and their years of residence in China were between six months and more than five years. This was chosen to obtain a broad range of experiences among international students in China. See Table 1 for a demographic summary.

Table 1: Demographic information (N=25)

Gender	Male	12	48%
	Female	13	52%
Age Group	18-29	18	72%
	30-39	7	28%
Proficiency (HSK)	3	10	40%
	4	10	40%
	5	5	20%
Time in China	< 1 year	3	12%
	1-3 years	15	60%
	> 3 years	7	28%

Data Collection

The information was gathered through in-depth semistructured interviews held in English, which served as a common lingua franca. To go beyond direct questioning and initiate metaphorical thinking, the interview protocol was designed to avoid direct questioning. It started with general questions on how they felt about their Chinese accent, and then it moved on to the core elicited questions, such as “If your Chinese accent were an object, what would it be and why?”, “If it were a sound or a physical feeling, what would it be?”, “If your accent were a person, who would it be?” “Describe the process of learning your accent as a journey”. The deepening of responses and exploration of the embodied and sensory aspects of the metaphors were guided by follow-up probes (e.g., What does it feel like to carry that object?). The interviews were approximately 30 to 40 minutes in length, audio-taped with permission, and transcribed word-for-word, which means that to analyze metaphorical language, we have a rich corpus of language and thus a rich corpus of metaphorical language.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages, combining metaphor identification with interpretive framing analysis. In the first stage, metaphorical expressions were identified using the metaphor identification procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) (Steen et al., 2010).

This involved

- (i) reading each transcript to establish overall meaning,
- (ii) identifying lexical units,
- (iii) determining their contextual meanings,
- (iv) comparing these with more basic meanings, and
- (v) marking items as metaphorical where contrast and cross-domain mapping were observed.

The identified metaphorical expressions were then grouped into broader conceptual metaphors (e.g., ACCENT IS A BURDEN, ACCENT IS A TOOL). In the second stage, these conceptual metaphors were interpreted as framing devices that organize perception and experience. This stage focused on how different frames emphasized particular aspects of accents (e.g., difficulty vs. utility), positioned learners (e.g., passive vs. agentive), and shaped emotional and behavioral orientations.

To enhance analytic rigor, coding was conducted iteratively, with repeated comparisons across transcripts. Ambiguous cases were revisited to ensure consistency in interpretation.

Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the process. Given that one of the researchers shares the positionality of being an international student in China, particular attention was given to how this insider perspective may have influenced both data interpretation and participant interaction. Analytical decisions were therefore continuously grounded in the data to minimize overidentification with participants' experiences.

RESULTS

A. Conceptual Metaphor Analysis

The participants' responses reveal four prevalent conceptual metaphors with submappings that carry different emotional and evaluative values.

Accent is an Object

The most common schema theorizes the accent as a material thing and can be divided into two contrasting assessment frames that essentially determine the learner's experience.

a) Accent is a Burden/Obstacle

Another large group of participants (P4, P8, P9, P10, P13, P14, P17, P21) referred to their accents through the metaphors of physical weight and blockage:

"A heavy object such as a backpack full of rocks" (P8, P13, P17)

"A pair of shoes that are the wrong size" (P10).

"A locked gate" (P9)

"A visible stain on a white shirt" (P14).

"A glass wall" (P21)

These metaphors are radically internalized. Participants do not simply describe their accent in terms of its abstract qualities: P17 mentions the physical effects of the accent in the form of the weight of the accent, “specifically in the back of my throat”; P10 talks of “dragging” painful shoes; P14 feels everyone “looks at the stain before they look at my face”. This represents the main metaphor DIFFICULTIES ARE BURDENS (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999), in which the abstract problems of mastering the accent are transferred to the physical feelings of heaviness, pain and blockage. Framing wise, the burden/obstacle frame places the learner in a victim position of his/her speech. Agency is diminished; the accent is something that happens to them, that they must “carry”, “drag”, or be “trapped” by. This frame strongly correlates with negative emotional states: frustration (P8, P10, P13, P17), nervousness (P4, P9, P14), and embarrassment (P14). This frame highlights communicative failure and social judgment while obscuring any potential positive functions of accents.

b) Accent is a Tool/Utility Object

In direct opposition, another group (P1, P3, P5, P6, P7, P11, P15, P16, P19, P22, P23, P24) frames accent as a useful, often lightweight object:

"A gateway to opportunities" (P1)

"A useful tool"/"Key that opens the door" (P3, P5, P6, P7, P22)

"A passport that shows your identity" (P11, P15)

"A highlighter" (P2)

"An old map" (P16)

"A signature" (P23)

This cluster maps onto the conceptual metaphor ACHIEVING A PURPOSE IS ACQUIRING/USING A TOOL (Kövecses, 2010). Here, the accent is instrumental, i.e., a means to an end. P11’s “passport” metaphor is particularly sophisticated: it’s “very light”, grants legitimate entry (“allows me to enter the conversation”), and serves an identity function (“reminds them I am a guest”). This is a subtle conception of accents as tools and as a marker of identity. The tool/utility frame puts the learner in the position of an agent. The locus of control is self-centered: they bring in the key, they show the map, and they present the passport. This frame is associated with positive emotional reactions: pride (P3, P5, P6, P15, P23), amusement/comfort (P11, P20), acceptance (P19), and familiarity (P16). The frame emphasizes functionality, access, and identity confirmation and blurs possible communicative obstacles.

Duality and Conflict

Notably, some participants (P2, P8) used metaphors whose valuations contradicted the same response. P2 described her accent as a “highlighter” (useful tool) and “rocking music very loud” (overwhelming burden). P8 talked of his being a “heavy backpack” and something “light”, which can “open the lock”. This condition of having conflicting frames in one person demonstrates the internal struggle that the L2 experience is. It represents the conflict between the “ideal L2 self” and the “feared L2 self” of the multilingual identity one desires and the social

criticism one is apprehensive of between the ideal L2 self and the feared L2 self, as defined by Piller (2016). The mind tries to make peace with these, by means of multidimensional and even contradictory metaphorical mappings.

Accent is a Person

The personification metaphors move the accent into an internal social agent, which shows how the social judgments and relations are internalized by the learner.

a) Accent Judges/Adversarial Critically

For those who feel anxious and frustrated (P4, P7, P9, P10, P13, P14, P17, P21), the accent is an ugly internalized other:

“Critical judge” (P4, P7, P10, P14)

“A prankster... I cannot trust him” (P9)

“A strict teacher” (P13)

“A chaperone... prevents me from getting too close” (P21)

“An unwanted shadow” (P12)

This figure of speech makes talking seem to be a theatrical act that is under surveillance all the time. The student is always on trial, but their accent is the prosecutor, judge, or jury. Of particular interest is P9 “prankster”, who is not only a critic but is outright sabotaging the other speaker in his intentions, which come to be betrayed and thus make him or her “look silly”. This is a great fear of losing a grip on meaning in communication. Such a frame conforms to the notion of foreign language anxiety proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), specifically the fear of negative assessment. Nevertheless, CMT shows the cognitive form of this anxiety: this anxiety is personified, internalized, and given agency. The accent turns into an evil social subject in the psyche.

b) Accent is a Supportive Friend/Guide

In contrast, many participants (P1, P2, P3, P6, P8, P11, P15, P16, P18, P20, P22, P23, P24) described their accents as benign or supportive:

“Supportive friend” (P1, P3, P6, P8, P11, P15, P16, P20, P22, P23)

“A mother that always explains things” (P2)

“The better version of me” (P5)

“A distinct guest” (P18)

“An honest business partner” (P19)

“A coworker” (P24)

This frame integrates the accent into a positive self-concept. Instead of being an opponent, it becomes a friend, teacher or even a perfect image of oneself (P5). The metaphor of “coworker”, as used by P24, is of special interest in the way that it is functionally neutral: “We do not have to like each other; we just have to work together”. This shows practical nonsentimental acceptance. Such a supportive personification is associated with what Norton (2013) defines as a psychological commitment to the L2 in connection to a positive empowered identity. The accent

does not exist in an external world but is a part of the social world of the learner or part of his or her aspiration world.

Accent is a Journey

The process of learning and success, as reflected by the journey metaphor, organizes the time process of acquisition.

a) Accent Acquisition is a Difficult Climb

The most frequently used metaphor of journeys is the difficult climb (P1, P3, P4, P7, P8, P9, P10, P13, P14, P17, P21):

“Climbing a steep mountain” (repeated by many).

“Slow, like the peak of Mount Everest” (P4).

“The rocks are slippery... I often slip back down” (P10, P13, P17)

“The air is getting thin” (P21)

The metaphor has made acquisition seem as a kind of vertical battle against gravity where a native-like perfection is the remote, frequently elusive peak. It emphasizes hard work, gradual development, regression and wearying. The destination is challenging and immobile. This is what Dornyei (2009) referred to as “ought to L2 self”, a sense of obligatoriness perfectionism, which in turn can be demoralizing.

b) Accent Acquisition is a Horizontal Direction Or Exploration

A more affirmative range of journeys puts a premium on horizontality, exploration or other movements:

“Walking on a smooth, straight road” (P6, P16, P19, P22, P24)

“Riding a bicycle through a busy city” (P11).

“Like dancing” (P15)

“Wandering in a bazaar” (P18)

“Walking through a dense jungle” (P20).

“Navigating a ship” (P23)

The metaphors redefine acquisition as something other than a desperate ascent toward a set height. The destination of P11 is nothing more than connection and not perfection. P18 does not have a particular destination; he is just exploring. P15 stresses that it is not about the destination but about the movement. These frames attach importance to processes rather than products and communication rather than perfection and enjoyment without struggle. They are in accordance with humanistic perspectives on SLA, which focus on learner autonomy and entire development (Stevick, 1990).

Accent is a Container/Space

One of the image schemas of confinement versus connection is the CONTAINER schema, which belongs to Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

a) Accent is a Prison/Cage

Some of them (P9, P12, P14, P21) reported the feeling of being trapped:

"It traps you inside a room or a box" (P9, P12)

"A glass wall" (P21)

"A cage made of my own tongue" (P14)

This forms a sharp inside/outside dichotomy in which the learner is confined in the accent, gazing out upon a Chinese-speaking world upon which they are shut off. It is especially poignant that the P21 glass wall is not accessible but can be seen. I can see Chinese people and vice versa... but I cannot get to touch the culture. This shot includes a deep sense of social and cultural estrangement, which may follow the accent difference.

b) Accent is a bridge/window

In contrast, most of the participants perceived their accent as a unifier (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P11, P16, P18, P19, P20, P22, P23, P24):

"A bridge that helps you crossover" (is used very often)

"A window" (P2, P15, P20)

"A gateway" (P1)

This frame places the accent as an intermediary rather than an obstacle. It is a means of passing through languages, cultures, and identities. Notably, many of the participants who negatively discussed their accents in other categories (such as P7 and P8, who discussed burden/climbing) nonetheless called the accent a bridge. This finding indicates that learners who struggle with the process still have the ability to conceptualize the final role of the accent as connective. This correlates with the concept of English as a Lingua franca (Jenkins, 2000), but in this case, the accent is a good device of intercultural communication and not a weakness.

B. Framing Analysis

In addition to exploring metaphors, framing theory enables us to understand the way these metaphors create the reality in which learners exist, and these effects have real implications for agency, identity and mental health.

Agency Frames: Victim vs. Agent

Metaphors are a reflection of a basic dichotomy in the way that learners construct agency. The frame is built on the basis of the metaphors of Burden, Prison, and Critical Judge. The frame is associated with avoidance, frustration, and anxiety (P14: "I try to cover it... by speaking less"). In this frame:

- i. The accent is an external force acting upon the learner
- ii. The learner's role is passive: to endure, carry, or escape
- iii. Locus of control is external (Rotter, 1966)

The agent frame is built using the tool, bridge and supportive friend metaphor. This frame is associated with pride, comfort, and persistence. In this frame:

- i. The accent is an instrument that the learner uses

- ii. The learner's role is active: to employ, navigate, or collaborate with
- iii. Locus of control is internal.

This agency framing has direct implications for motivation. The L2 motivational self system by Dornyei (2009) stresses the significance of an ideal L2 self. This ideal self is upheld by the agent frame: an effective user of Chinese. Victim Frame is a defeat of it, forming what Dornyei refers to as a feared self: a struggling and judged self.

Identity Frames: Deficiency vs. Legitimacy

The metaphors help put the identity of the learner in context with the target language community and their multilingual selves. Deficiency Frame is built by the use of Stain, Broken Instrument and Prankster metaphors. This adds to what Piller (2016) defines as monolingual bias and native-speakerism. It positions:

- i. The accent as a flaw, a deviation from the native standard
- ii. Learners' identity as linguistically deficient
- iii. The native speaker as the unchallenged arbiter of correctness

The legitimacy frame is constructed through Passport, Signature, and Spice metaphors. This questions the mainstream ideologies of language (Lippi-Green, 2012) and states what Garcia and Wei (2014) call the right to translate languages. It positions:

- i. The accent as a legitimate marker of multilingual identity
- ii. The learner as a legitimate speaker with a unique voice
- iii. Multilingualism as additive and not subtractive.

The metaphor used by P23 is especially effective in making claims to legitimacy: It is unique to me. It marks the language as 'mine.'... It demonstrates the fact that I own the language, although it may not be the same one. This is assertive: an extreme rebranding, deficit to distinction.

Ideological Frames in Metaphor Choice

Even the metaphors are ideologically nonneutral. Their internalization of much wider discourses in society about language and accents is common. Internalized Deficit Ideology manifests itself in metaphors such as broken microphones (P12), radios that are not quite tuned (several), and conflicting notes (several). These metaphors explain nonnative speech as fragmented, disharmonious or faulty versions of native speech. What Lippi-Green (2012) defines as standard language ideology, they implicitly accept the native standard as the only valid reference point.

Metaphors that oppose this deficit perspective should be called Resistant or Reconceptualized Ideology. The difference in P11 transformed into value added, its distinctive spice. The difference is celebrated in P15 with its drumbeat with another rhythm and P20 with its bright badge. The aggressive contrast of P10 between his rough stone and Chinese polished jade recognizes the difference without necessarily accepting the lack: it is another form of beauty, yet he still puts his version inferior.

The use of the so-called bridge metaphors (it was employed by 15 respondents) indicates a potentially effective counterideology: the accent as a

bridging concept and not as an obstacle. It may be the foundation of pedagogical activities that assist learners in repositioning their accents.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to elucidate the mental-emotional terrain that is not widely seen among international students who use Chinese with foreign accents. An analysis of metaphor-elicitation interviews, using conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) and framing theory, reveals that an L2 accent is not merely a phonetic feature but an extremely informative cognitive process that can be systematically understood in terms of opposing metaphorical frames. It is these frames that are coherently planned around schemas of objects, persons, journeys, and containers that essentially construct what learners consider to be agency, identity, journey and emotional well-being. This information gives us a stark dichotomy of the burden/barrier frame, which is anxiety and social obstruction, and the bridge/tool frame, which is pride and the justifiable multilingual identity. This rift is not random; it is an internalization of broader language ideologies and has significant consequences for students' overall academic and social experiences in China.

The analysis in which the prevalence of the four main metaphorical schemas applied by all the respondents was first identified is shown in Figure 1. The idea of an accent as a physical object was the most prevalent and was divided into two extremes of evaluation. The accent turned out to be a heavy load or an impediment to many participants: a heavy backpack with rocks in it, a gate that is locked, or a visible bruise on a white shirt. These metaphors are passionately personified; students have said that they felt the burden in their throats, that the discomfort was pulling and like ill-fitting shoes, or that they saw the stain as stigmatizing. This is directly remapped onto the main metaphor DIFFICULTIES ARE BURDENS, which is the metaphoric problem of mastering the accent transformed into the physical, material world. In terms of framing, a burden/obstacle frame puts the learner at the receiving end of his or her own speech, and the locus of control is external. An accent is a phenomenon that occurs to them, a weight that they need to carry, drag, or become stuck with. This frame was strongly associated with negative affective states such as frustration, nervousness and embarrassment and, frequently, communicative avoidance.

In contrast, other respondents described their accents as objects that were handy and sometimes lightweight: keys, passports, highlighters, or signatures, as shown in Table 2. This frame tool/utility, which maps onto ACHIEVING A PURPOSE IS ACQUIRING A TOOL, places the learner as an agent. The locus of control is internal; they possess the key, show the passport, and sign their name. This frame was associated with pride, comfort and acceptance. The concomitancy of the two frames in the responses of some individuals, including the use of an accent as a heavy backpack and a key, indicates the deep internal struggle at the core of the L2 experience and can be said to represent the conflict between the ideals and the feared L2 self.

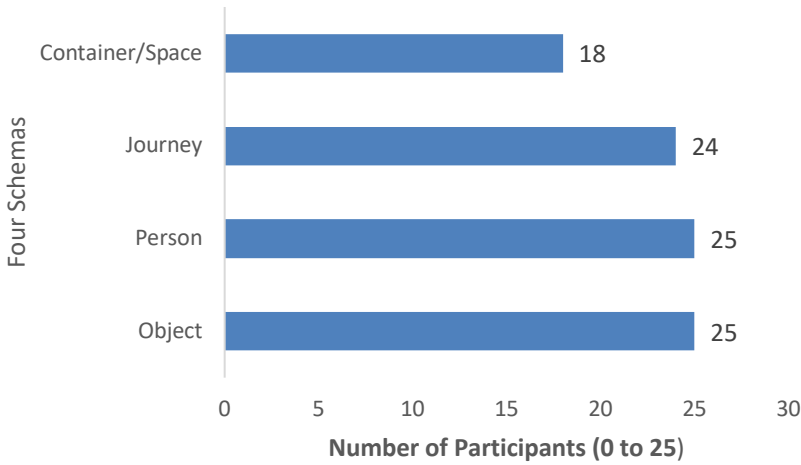


Figure 1: Prevalence of primary conceptual metaphor schemas (N=25)

Table 2: Dominant conceptual metaphor frames with examples

<i>Schema</i>	<i>Negative/Obstructive Frame</i>	<i>Example Quote (Participant)</i>	<i>Positive/Enabling Frame</i>	<i>Example Quote (Participant)</i>
Object	Burden/Obstacle	"A heavy backpack full of rocks... makes me tired." (P13)	Tool/Passport	"A passport. It shows my identity and lets me into conversations." (P11)
Person	Critical Judge/Adversary	"A prankster. I cannot trust him; he makes me look silly." (P9)	Supportive Friend/Guide	"A supportive friend who reminds me where I come from." (P6)
Journey	Difficult Climb	"Climbing a steep mountain. I slip back down a lot." (P10)	Smooth Path/Exploration	"Wandering in a bazaar. No destination, just exploring." (P18)

Contain er	Prison/Wall	"A glass wall. I can see people but cannot touch the culture." (P21)	Bridge/Windo w	"A bridge that helps me crossover to another place." (Multiple)
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This struggle spills over into the social context by personification metaphors, where the accent is a social actor given internalism. To those who felt anxious, the accent was a critical judge, a strict teacher, a prankster or a chaperone. This framing makes speaking a performance of continuous, usually suspicious, surveillance, which is directly congruent and personifying of foreign-language anxiety dynamics. On the other hand, the supportive personification frame incorporated the accent in a positive self-concept as a supportive friend, a mother, and even the better version of me. This is a psychological investment in the language that can be associated with a strong sense of identity, in which the accent is not an enemy but is part of the social world of the learner. This experience was further organized on a temporal basis by the journey schema. The prevailing acquisitive metaphor, such as that of a steep, slippery mountain with a lost summit, of the acquisition as a vertical conflict with a gravitational pull to a fixed perfectionist aim of native-like-ness, an ought-to self, can be discouraging. Other reframe journey frames, including walking along a smooth road, riding a bicycle, or wandering in a bazaar, reframe the process. They are focused on horizontality, exploration, and the importance of connection rather than perfection, which are in keeping with humanistic methodologies that focus more on the autonomy of the learner and general growth.

The greatest heartrending in the container schema was the theme of alienation and integration. The metaphors of a prison, box or glass wall make it seem like a strong dichotomy of inside/outside where the learner is in the confines of his accent where he can be viewed by the Chinese-speaking world but cannot truly reach it or be a part of it. This puts the accent into the perspective of an unbreakable barrier to cultural belonging. In contrast, in terms of strength, most respondents, even when they employed negative metaphors in other places, uniformly described their accents as bridges or windows. This frame makes the accent seem like an intermediary and a bridge, making cross-cultural movement and access easier rather than difficult. The commonality of the metaphor of bridge connotes a strong, instinctive, conceptualization of language as a means of connection, despite struggle.

The contrast between these two general frames, the burden/barrier frame and the bridge/tool frame, and their implications for the learner are outlined in Figure 2. This conceptual map illustrates how underlying metaphors can trickle down into a particular cognitive stance on agency and identity, which in turn produces specific emotional and behavioral consequences. The main two-headed arrow symbolizes the process of internal negotiation, which is the key attribute of the linguistic experience of international students.

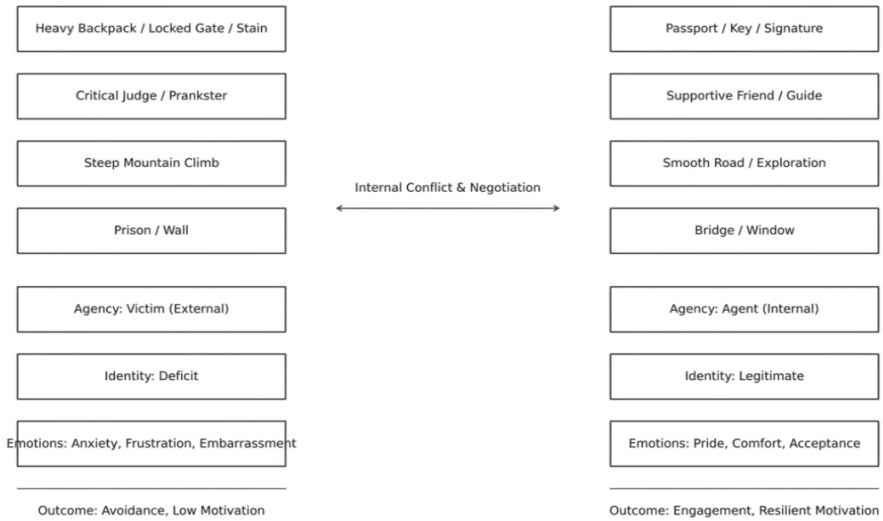


Figure 2: Conceptual map of dominant accent frames and their implications

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, such results strongly favor the model of accents as a cognitive filter. Learners use metaphors that are not just descriptive but also constitutive frames that actively mediate their perceptions to directly affect motivation, anxiety and behavioral results such as the willingness to communicate. This work is a significant extension of CMT into the area of L2 phonetics, demonstrating that the perception of accents is full of metaphor and structure, as spheres of vocabulary and grammar. Moreover, it intersects cognitive and social approaches to SLA, demonstrating that macrosocial ideologies (e.g., native-speakerism) are internalized as microcognitive metaphors (e.g., a broken microphone) and thus frame social relations and identity construction.

Its practical implications, especially for international higher education, are very large. In the case of language pedagogy, this study proposes teaching language in a way that is conscious of metaphors. Specific instigations can be used to diagnose psychological hurdles within a brief time span. Students can then be assisted by instructors in making conscious reframing so that they can take off the burden as a bridge or a stain as a badge. This mental-emotional exercise should be added to conventional articulatory training. With respect to international student support offices, the findings support the necessity of focusing on accent-related anxiety, specifically during orientation and wellness programs, as a frequent and important stressor. The stigmatization of foreign-accented speech can be mitigated by facilitating structured intercultural conversations between international and local students to achieve metalinguistic awareness. Finally, universities must promote a campus culture that perceives linguistic diversity in the frame of a passport or signature as a resource and indicator of singularity as

opposed to deficit framing. Refraining from the cognitive filters of students will allow educators and support services to directly positively influence their psychological well-being and social integration, and make international students more resilient and empowered through a multilingual identity.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how international students in China conceptualize their Mandarin accent through metaphorical framing. The findings suggest a central tension between a burden/barrier frame, associated with anxiety and perceived limitation, and a bridge/tool frame, associated with agency, identity, and connection. These contrasting framings appear to shape how learners interpret their communicative experiences and negotiate their position within the host linguistic environment.

Rather than viewing accents solely as a phonetic feature, the results of this study suggest that it may function as a cognitive and social resource through which learners make sense of their experiences. Moreover, the coexistence of conflicting metaphors among individual participants highlights the dynamic and negotiated nature of multilingual identity.

While the findings are based on a qualitative sample and should be interpreted with appropriate caution, they offer insights into the cognitive and emotional dimensions of accents that are often overlooked in traditional research. Encouraging more reflective and inclusive understandings of accents may help international students develop more agentive, positive relationships with their multilingual identities.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The sample size (25) is a limitation for generalization, and all the participants were in China. This research is a one-time point study; longitudinal research is needed to trace the development of metaphors. Further studies may include the study of metaphor variations in L1 backgrounds, the correlation of metaphors with acoustic speech and interventions to metaphor-refraining in colleges.

Acknowledgment

In preparing this manuscript, we did not use artificial intelligence (AI) tools.

FUNDING

This study was funded by the National Social Science Fund of China under the Grant No. 19BYY007.

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