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Multilingualism among the Travel Agencies in Manchester

Ziyuan Pan

Junjie Liang

Lauren Thomas

1 Research questions and methods

Research Question: Investigating Multilingualism in Businesses Based in Manchester.

After deciding on the area of investigation we were interested in we have chosen language choice, which is utilised in travel agencies as the research topic of our field project. The reason we believe this to be an interesting phenomenon is because there are only two main types of travel agencies, in Manchester City Centre from a language prospective. In particular the ones situated in Chinatown (Chinese Travel Agencies) and the ones located in and near to the city centre (Local Travel Agencies).

Methodology:

To obtain our results, we conducted interviews with the managers of the local travel agencies we visited, both in China town and in the city centre. (The interview questions are attached in the Appendix.) We approached the managers due to their superiority, we felt that if we approached regular members of staff, they may have refused to participate through the fear of a manager finding out. By going directly to the manager it meant that the environment of participation was more relaxed. In total, we managed to get 10 interviews from 10 different travel agents, 5 Chinese Travel Agencies: they were: Cititravel Manchester (新華旅行社), Wang Dynasty Travel Centre (王朝旅游), CNUK TRAVEL (中英国际旅行社), Far East Travel (远东国际旅行社) and Omega Flight store (欧美嘉旅游集团); and 5 Local travel agencies: they were: Flight centre, Travelshop, STA Travel, Trailfinders and Air Blue.

By obtaining our data through the methodology of interviews, it meant that it would be more natural and flexible to get the information we needed through a face-to-face and fluent conversation rather than just asking them to fill out questionnaires. By doing this we were able to get a clearer understanding of the data collected, thus allowing us to draw a more reliable conclusion for this project. We conducted the interviews in Chinese travel agencies in either Cantonese or Mandarin since two of our group members are bilingual speaker of English, Mandarin and Cantonese, in this way, both parties (ourselves and the manager) would find it more comfortable and it could cause less confusion too. This provided a better chance to get more relevant information through a narrative conversation instead of getting ticks and written answers, which you would by using questionnaires. We found that the managers and staff in the travel agencies are very friendly and talkative, therefore we can make the assumption this is due to the nature of their job, as it requires the skill of effective communication and requires an out-going personality which we believe is a very interesting but not surprising discovery. Since we are examining multilingualism, we are concerning about the different media types of communication. Basically, we expected the conclusion to be drawn through the information of four different areas: (1) current employment status; (2) future employment trends; (3) Media of communication with customers; (4) service range (general status of the agency).

2 Findings

- **Chinese Travel Agencies**

Cititravel Manchester is a travel agent providing services throughout Lancashire. They are experienced in providing late deals, package holidays, cheap holiday deals, honeymoon packages and city breaks. Figure 1 as shown below, illustrates an example of the advertisement of selling cheap flight tickets, hotel booking services, travel tours and the visa applications services offered by Cititravel Manchester (新華旅行社) in China town. The language choice at the travel agency would depend on factors such as: where the owner is from and their native language, as well as the location of the travel agency. This affects language choice in multilingualism setting due to the vast majority of languages that are spoken in Manchester. Cititravel Manchester is owned by a Hong Kong businessman, therefore most of the advertisements within the business is clearly printed in traditional Chinese, which is commonly recognised by the people from Hong Kong. The signage reveals the fact that the main group of customers of Cititravel Manchester are Hong Kong people who can clearly read and understand the language used. To discover more information, we needed to apply our primary methodology and interview the staff of Cititravel Manchester, about the language requirement when they were recruited for their job, and what language they choose to use when serving customers or communicating with other staff members. From the interview we learnt that interestingly, despite the fact that the advertisement poster is written in traditional Chinese language, they are also required to speak both Cantonese Chinese and English as a minimum. Some of them are also required to speak Mandarin Chinese, although not all. The staff also admit that the main customers are from Hong Kong and the main reason why English is required is because the branch is located in Manchester where English is spoken commonly. In addition, Mandarin Chinese is also spoken by a great amount of the people around the Chinatown area of Manchester, in order to deal with more customers, Mandarin Chinese is also required for staff recruitment in Cititravel Manchester. Staff in Cititravel admit they normally communicate with each other by speaking Cantonese Chinese but rarely English or Mandarin.



Figure 1: 新華旅行社(Cititravel Manchester)

The managers from the rest of the agencies provided similar answers for each question we asked. Figure 2 shows a flyer of “Bath&London” tour held by Wang Dynasty Travel Centre (王朝旅游) in Chinatown. Wang Dynasty Group is one of the largest Chinese travel agencies in the UK, and was established in 1990 in Manchester, with offices in Birmingham, London, Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen.

In comparison to Cititravel Manchester, Wang Dynasty chooses to use simplified Chinese on flyers rather than the traditional Chinese that Cititravel uses as illustrated in Figure 1. This is because the main customers of Wang Dynasty are Chinese people from midland China where simplified Chinese is the official language that they speak and read. When analysing the writing on the flyer, we can clearly notice that the “Pick-up” section highlighted with the arrow below, is the only section written in English. One of the Wang Dynasty’s staff said during our interview “It will be less confusing to use local language to represent specific location, rather than translating them”. Such phenomenon reveals the fact in multilingualism and its language choices depend on the addressee, setting, content and topic of conversation. All the evidence showed that English is essentially required and they must know either Mandarin or Cantonese, but in a perfect case, both. The staff member we spoke to also stated that however there is rarely natives visiting the travel agency, unless the native customers are planning on buying flight tickets to visit China. Therefore, all the staff within the agency commonly use Mandarin or Cantonese Chinese to communicate with each other within the workplace.



Figure 2: Poster from Wang Dynasty Travel Centre (王朝旅游)

CNUK Travel Ltd is a supplier of quality UK, Europe and China short breaks and long holidays. Figure 3 below shows a sign of travel advisor in the agency and it's written in both simplified Chinese similar to the signs in Wang Dynasty and also in English.



Figure 3: sign in CNUK TRAVEL(中英国际旅行社)

Similarly, Figure 4 shows a sign of a flight reservation point at CNUK TRAVEL, and it's also written in both simplified Chinese and English. Although a Chinese businessman owns CNUK TRAVEL, and English, Mandarin and simplified Chinese are used more commonly than Cantonese and traditional Chinese. Another noticeable language feature which CNUK TRAVEL uses when advertising is, they put English translations to all the signs, flyers and posters, shown throughout the shop. In other words, CNUK TRAVEL focuses not only on customers who speak Mandarin but also those who speak English as their L1 (e.g: natives).



Figure 4: pic via CNUK TRAVEL(中英国际旅行社)

Figure 5 is different from Figure 3 and 4, this shows two different signs used in CNUK TRAVEL, the left is written in both simplified Chinese and English, but the right one is only written in English. The staff explained that the 'visa service' is designed to serve Chinese people who want to apply for visas to other countries whereas the 'CHINA VISA CENTRE' is designed to serve people who want to apply for visas to China only. Therefore, the specific language they choose to use depends on which language the customer speaks and the intentions of being in the travel agents. Similarly to both Cititravel and Wang Dynasty, English is essentially required for mutual communication and staff are required to know either Mandarin, Cantonese or both. Staff commonly use either English or Mandarin as means of communication with customers and within their workplace.

All of the Chinese travel agencies showed little interest in hiring local staff, not even in their future recruitment plans. One of the main reasons that the Chinese travel agencies prefer not to hire local staff made clear to us was because internal communication would be more difficult than solo Chinese staff. As Harzing et al (2011) stated, language is an important barrier that will slow down and increase the cost of decision making. This is a matter about internal communication. The manager from Wang Dynasty Travel Centre pointed out that their headquarter is in mainland China, they are in communication with headquarters everyday through telephone or email, it is incredibly difficult to hire local staff, who cannot master Chinese or Cantonese to a good enough level to exchange information, thus troubles can be caused to the companies as they will have to either change their way of communication into English in the hope that this is mutually understood. However, the manager continued on to state that not all of the staff in their headquarter can understand English very well, affecting communications still.



Figure 5: CNUK TRAVEL (中英国际旅行社)

Finally we went to Omega Flight store, the manager said the percentage of Chinese customers and non-Chinese are almost the same. They have a big group of local more diverse customers, even though their initial motivation of the business was to serve mainly Chinese people. We all agreed a reason for this might be due to their geographical location which is very close to the business hub of Manchester and the Piccadilly train station which is the heart of Manchester.

When we tried searching for the website, there is no website found for Citi Travel or Wang Dynasty Travel Centre. Only CNUK's website allows English-Chinese translation, which is shown in Figure 8. However, there is a worth-while factor which became obvious to us which was that the websites of Far East Travel Centre and Omega flight store are not purely English. In Figure 6 below, the Chinese texts says: " Hotline and booking service(China):400 63 7788", in this case, they are expecting customers to try to book through services in China, and therefore it can be expected that these specific customers should be able to understand Chinese, but not necessary English, and since it is a service line (only in China), it does not have to be translated into English again supporting the idea that the target audience of the advertisements online are for Chinese people.



Figure 6: Home page of Far East travel centre website

Another example is given in Figure 7, there is only one banner on the website listing the price of flight tickets to certain cities in China, and we assume the audience they are approaching are the people who are looking for air-tickets to China who also have a clear understanding of written Chinese.



Figure 7:
Omega
FlightStore
homepage.



Figure 8:
CNUK
TRAVEL
homepage

- **Local Travel Agencies**

The findings from local travel agencies are as expected different from Chinese travel agencies. The major differences lie in staff employment and in the media of advertising used throughout the agencies. The language used to advertise for the services which they can provide is English, as these travel agencies are based in and around the city centre it was to be expected that the primary language would be English, without the use of any other languages, as a form of basic communication, after interviewing the managers of the first local agency STA travel they informed us that they cater for the younger generation who are looking for secure package holidays to travel around popular areas of the world, often the young people are students and therefore all have a firm grasp of English, however when asked about the requirements for the job recruitment, they again specified it was not essential to have another language.

In contrast to this when we asked AirBlue and Flight centre, they specified that as an agency they tend to hire bilingual staff from around the world since there will be no difficulties for their residence in the UK, by doing this, they are enabling the prospect of appealing to a wider variety of customers as people tend to prefer speaking their natural language, opposed to improvising with the use of English. However, both agencies expressed that it is much more troublesome to hire staff from Asian countries, although when given the option of hiring staff they often showed interest in hiring people of an Asian background. The Asian communities associate strongly with these travel agencies, therefore hiring bilingual staff as Air Blue and Flight Centre have is very advantageous. If such recruitment was successful, they would be delighted since they believe that the multilingual staff would bring benefits to their sales. The media of their advertisement (brochures, flyers and website) are all in English which again is to be expected as it is the lingua franca in this country, whilst also taught to non-native speakers .

Continuing on with our interview with the manager of Flight centre, they emphasized to us that a few customer went to them without the knowledge of English, although the proficiency level of each customer is different meaning that some communication in English is still possible. Thus, they think it is not necessary to add additional languages to advertise their business, and some of them even are not keen to consider this part in the future. All the internal communication (between staff in the stores and those in their headquarters) are all in English, as the manager said, "This is in England and the official language is English". One of the criteria of hiring staff is the requirement on English, of course , however being able to speak English for some is considered a default qualification as people are brought up learning the structures throughout work and school.

3 Discussion and conclusion

The findings have shown that a community like China Town which is situated in the middle of Manchester which has a high concentration of one main ethnicity and the travel agencies mainly accommodate Chinese people, compared to the ones which are located in a more mixed ethnic region such as Piccadilly or Deansgate, which accommodate to a wider range of ethnicities. After doing the analysis on the interview responses, it is understandable to conclude that hiring multilingual staff does have an impact on the relationships with customers, but this choice is optional based on the size of the company and the resource of manpower, for example if the company is a small family run business in the middle of China town, it is extremely likely that they will only communicate to both staff and their customers in either traditional Chinese, Mandarin or Cantonese based on where they are from. This means some of the companies have already established their reputation among the community, thus they are not likely to have plans on providing extra services on language choices within their agencies, and the constraints on employment for foreigners makes this service more difficult to achieve too. There is a big difference on the way in which Chinese travel agencies are linguistically maintained, compared to local travel agencies. The main reason is the customer audience, they are approaching are very different. All in all, multilingual communication makes it easier and better to meet the demands of various kinds of social institutions.

As we have the idea from Reinier's (2002), she recognizes that due to globalization, businesses in London now have to consider the issues of multilingualism in order to compete with other businesses. In the UK, English monolingualism is well established with it being the dominant and indispensable language, however while English is needed, businesses have found that it is not always enough and that the lack of knowledge of languages will lead to communication failures. Our findings from the local agencies do not seem to be following this trend, one of the reasons we believe this might be is because Manchester, is not as busy and internationally diverse as London for example, as well as the nature of this industry as the managers have detailed that the supply and demand in this business is quite straight forward, there seldom is a misunderstanding or problem due to miscommunication through the use of language itself. Thus, what we have found out tends not to be surprising.

After generating all the information we have collected, multilingualism and language choice do have an impact on the travel agency industry. This shows the hidden role of language and the market as multilingualism develops chances for businesses and it enriches our understanding of the complex interaction between linguistics and economic processes.

In our field project, due to the limited resource of the travel agencies (both Chinese ones and local ones) in Manchester, we cannot assume this is what is happening for the majority of the industries. However, we have found a few interesting points based on language usage in this business area which has not been particularly studied in much detail prior to our investigation. For a further and deeper research in this, more data should be gathered throughout United Kingdom, not just in Manchester but in more diverse areas such as London, to provide a more quantitative cross section of results which can be compared and analysed in a similar way to what we have stated above.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Set A (Chinese travel agencies):

- (1) Where are you from?
- (2) What is your native language?
- (3) Where is the other staff from?
- (4) Who are the main group of customers?
- (5) Is there any specific language requirement/preference when you recruit staff?
- (6) Is the language ability considered more important than other qualifications when recruiting staff?
- (7) In which language do you use for job advertisement?
- (8) In what language do you advertise for your business?
- (9) In what language do you use to communicate with your colleagues/co-workers?
- (10) In what language do you communicate with customers?
- (11) What language do you prefer? English or native language?
- (12) If there are any non-Chinese people visiting the shop, what kind of travel service they are looking for?
- (13) Do you tend to recruit any staff who is British/westerners?

Set B (Local travel agencies):

- (1) Where are you from?
- (2) What is your native language?
- (3) Where is the other staff from?
- (4) Who are the main group of customers?
- (5) Is there any specific language requirement/ preference when you recruit staff?
- (6) Is the language ability considered more important than other qualifications when recruiting staff?
- (7) In which language do you use for job advertisement?
- (8) In what language do you advertise your business?
- (9) In what language do you use to communicate with colleagues/co-workers?
- (10) In what language do you communicate with customers?
- (11) What language do you prefer? English or native language?