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Report

2010

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Multilingualism in Manchester's Chinatown

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Research question and methods

The area that we have chosen for this project is Manchester Chinatown, which is known as the second largest community in the United Kingdom and the third largest in Europe. Manchester Chinatown is situated in the heart of the city centre and the majority of the businesses are on George Street and Faulkner Street. Manchester's Chinatown not only consists of Chinese restaurants but Thai, Malaysian, Singaporean, Japanese, Nepalese and other Pan-Asian restaurants. It came to our attention that it would be interesting to study about the language contact and multilingualism of this area as it is exposed to different languages and cultures.

Throughout this project, we have tried to discover how English and Chinese dialects interact in the community and how these languages are affected when communicating with other businesses within Chinatown. The language varieties that we have focused on in this particular area are Hong Kong Chinese, PRC (People's Republic of China) Chinese, British-born Chinese and Malay Chinese (languagecontact.humanities.manchester.ac.uk).

One major issue that we believed was important within language use was language proficiency. In order to make judgments on language proficiency of each speaker, we have used the ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable) proficiency scale:

Level 1 - Elementary Proficiency

- can travel around and conduct themselves in a polite manner
- can engage in Q+ A on VERY basic level
- can only communicate the most basic of needs

Level 2 - Limited Working Proficiency

- limited work requirements
- handle most social situations

Level 3 - Professional Working Proficiency

- can fulfil most social and work requirements
- almost regular rate of speech

Level 4 - Full Professional Proficiency

- fluent and accurate

rare and unpatterns grammatical area

Level 5 - Native/Bilingual Proficiency

Equivalent to natives

The original plan for our survey was to carry this out into two sections and both of the sections conducted in Chinatown. The first part of the survey is the rapid anonymous survey. This survey is carried out anonymously, without telling the speaker about our intentions. The aim was to find out the language proficiency level of each speaker, using a set of questions that we have prepared. By carrying out this survey, it allows us to know the speakers' preferred language and also helps us to gain a better idea of language use in Chinatown, before carrying out the second part of the survey.

The second part of the survey is in interview form. Before asking the subjects any questions, we inform the speaker about who we are, the purpose of our survey and whether or not they are willing to take part in the survey. When the speaker agrees to participate in the survey, we ask them a few questions to gain general information about them. First, we ask how many and which languages they speak. Then we ask them to grade themselves on proficiency for each language on a scale of 1-5; 5 being most fluent and 0 being least communicative. After gathering information, sets of questions are asked to the participants for each language:

Language 1:

Would you use this language when talking to:

- a) English-born, English-speaking customers? Why?
- b) Chinese-born, Chinese-speaking customers. Why?
- c) Fellow employees? Why?
- d) Your boss? Why?
- e) English-born customers who speak this language? Why?
- f) People you think speak this language but are English-born? Why?
- g) Your family? Why?
- h) Another business in Chinatown? Why?
- i) Is this your preferred language? Why?
- j) Is this your most used language? Why?

Language 2:

Would you use this language when talking to:

- k) English-born, English-speaking customers? Why?
- l) Chinese-born, Chinese-speaking customers. Why?
- m) Fellow employees? Why?
- n) Your boss? Why?

- o) English-born customers who speak this language? Why?
- p) People you think speak this language but are English-born? Why?
- q) Your family? Why?
- r) Another business in Chinatown? Why?
- s) Is this your preferred language? Why?
- t) Is this your most used language? Why?

Language 3:

Would you use this language when talking to:

- u) English-born, English-speaking customers? Why?
- v) Chinese-born, Chinese-speaking customers. Why?
- w) Fellow employees? Why?
- x) Your boss? Why?
- y) English-born customers who speak this language? Why?
- z) People you think speak this language but are English-born? Why?
- aa) Your family? Why?
- bb) Another business in Chinatown? Why?
- cc) Is this your preferred language? Why?
- dd) Is this your most used language? Why?

Through the second part of this survey we intend to find out more about participants' attitudes towards language use and how they deal with different situations in that particular language. The second part of the survey also allows us to gain better idea of their language proficiency.

As far as our methodology is concerned, we made some amendments in the application of our planned research schedule, in particular on the first approach with the interviewees. We were supposed to ask them in the first place if they could cater for a party of twenty meals for twenty people, and make observations on this first piece of conversation, but we eventually thought it would be disappointing for them and that perhaps they would not want to answer our questionnaire afterwards. Besides, we reduced the exhaustiveness of our survey by submitting one questionnaire that included every language the interviewee could speak, instead of submitting one questionnaire per language. Thus, we felt that they would be less restricted in their answers and could expand some statements if they wanted to. This actually worked quite well because it let us interact more with the speakers and we observed how, for example, languages could vary depending on the people they were addressing, even within the family.

Description of our findings

Through analysis of our findings from the interviews, a clear trend emerges in regard to the most commonly used and popular languages spoken in Chinatown. Initially upon rating each speaker's proficiency in English as shown:

4/5, 5/5, 2/5, 4/5, 2/5, 5/5, 4/5, 2/5, 2/5, 3/5 = 34. 34 divided by 10 = 3.4/5

And secondly by asking them to rate their own proficiency:

4/5, 5/5, 4/5, 4/5, 5/5, 5/5, 4/5, 1/5, 2/5, 5/5 = 38. 38 divided by 10 = 3.8/5

Through this data we found that the average speaker proficiency in English was 3.4/5 in our estimations and 3.8/5 in the speaker's own. This middle average is due to a noticeable difference in the proficiency of many speakers. From our interviews we established many possible reasons for this, including education, place of education, time spent in the U.K and time spent in education in the U.K. Through closer analysis of the data, we decided that the most prevalent fact in this difference was due to speaking to managers or floor staff, with managers tending to have much greater proficiency and floor staff being less educated or having spent less time in the country. Despite the lack of proficiency of certain staff members in the English language, 80% of the interviewees said they would speak English to English-born, English-speaking customers.

An interesting fact was how the interviewees said they would respond to an English customer who attempted to speak in a Chinese language.

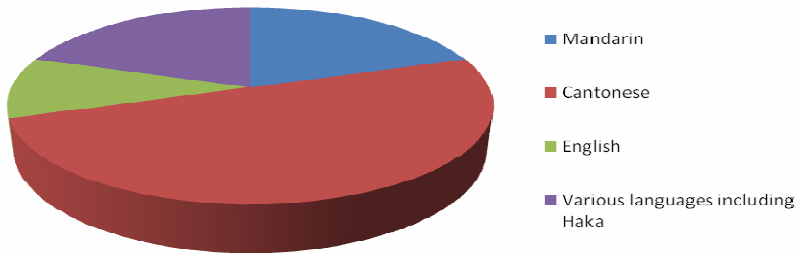
V, V, -, M, T, C, V, V, E, -40% = V, 60% = other

Usually, the interviewees said they would speak whatever they were spoken to, however, some would speak in Chinese languages as they felt the customers would enjoy the authenticity initially, before reverting to English. The blank data reflects the interviewees' inability to understand the question so we were unable to provide data for this. Interestingly, one of the interviewees noted that attempts by English native speakers would commonly be in the Mandarin language.

Between businesses in Chinatown, language use appeared to be prevalently in Chinese languages as the data shows:

C, C, C, V, E, M, M, C, C, V 50% = C, 20% = M, 20% = V, 10% = E

Languages spoken to other businesses in Chinatown



This backs up our assessment in English proficiency as most business transactions are not conducted in English, with the majority trading in Cantonese. This also ties in with results gained from asking speakers to rate themselves in Mandarin and Cantonese:

4/5, 5/5, 5/5, 5/5, 5/5, 5/5 29 divided by 6 = average proficiency of 4.84/5 in Mandarin

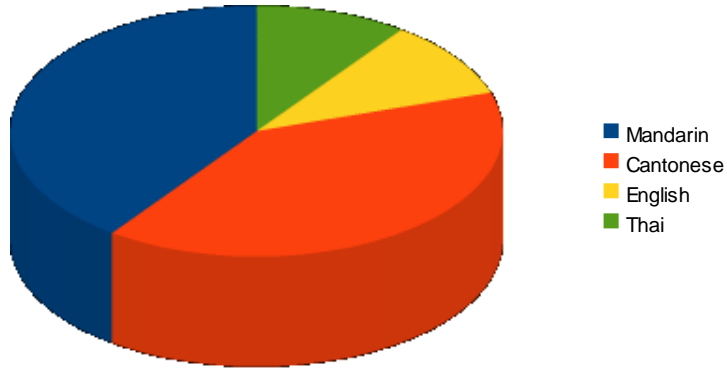
5/5, 5/5, 2/5, 5/5, 4/5, 3/5, 5/5, 5/5 34 divided by 8 = average proficiency of 4.25/5 in Cantonese

The fact that many speakers thought themselves to be more proficient in their mother tongue than both their own and our rating of their ability in English is indicative of a greater proficiency overall in mother tongue languages, which is unsurprising.

We expected the values shown from our data collective regarding which language was spoken to fellow employees to continue to follow this trend in favour of Chinese languages, and were proved correct:

C, V, C, M, T, M, M, C, C, M = 40% Mandarin, 40% Cantonese and 20% other.

Languages spoken to fellow employees



This result was backed up by the results from the language our interviewees used at home with their families, being equally Cantonese and Mandarin:

C, H, C, M, T, V, M, M, C, C = 40% Cantonese, 30% Mandarin, 20% other and 10% varied

With this in mind, it is clear that the ability of speakers in each language is dependent on an external factor, such as time spent in each country, or role in the Chinese community. To examine this, we asked each interviewee when they came to the country and if they studied in England or in their country of origin.

English proficiency vs. time spent in the U.K:

English Proficiency	4	5	2	4	2	5	4	2	2	3
Time spent in the UK	10+	10+	2	5	3	10+	10	2	5	10

As would be expected, those who have spent more time in England are more proficient in the language, however, this trend is not without exceptions as we see two speakers who have both been in the country for five years, one of which had a proficiency of 2, and one who had proficiency of 4. A possible reason for this is that the interviewee with the higher proficiency was a waiter, therefore having more day to day contact with customers than the other interviewee, who was a manager and may have less contact with English customers.

Discussion and analysis of our findings:

The first thing to note from our findings was the general optimism of speakers regarding their ability in English. This could be due to the fact that while their English works on a functional level, within the environment of working in a restaurant, its application in a wider context is limited. For example, the interviewee in business 5 gave himself 5/5 for English, yet was one of the few people who were unable to answer a question because they could not understand it. While it may be observed that this could be due to dialectal difficulties, given the strong accent of one of the interviewers, we ensured that the more RP-speakers were given the role of interviewing, to ensure the best possible chance for understanding between the interviewer and interviewee. A similar point to note about a number of interviewees, particularly at businesses 3 and 5, was that the lack of understanding of the question may have led to some inaccurate results. However, most of the interviewees were able to comprehend the questions asked and give full, expansive answers that were very informative. The interviewee in business 6 was glad to help and, a few minutes after our interview, he came on the street to ask us the number of restaurants that we still had to ask, and suggested to come with us in a neighbouring restaurant where he knew the manager (business 7) to make our approach easier. Although he was the manager, the interviewee in business 8 rated himself only 1/5 in English, and seemed not to have much contact with the customers; besides we first talked to a member of staff, who spoke good English and sent us his manager only after we told him about our research, which means that he probably had more contact with the customers. The last interviewee (business 10) spoke English with a strong accent, whereas we had spoken earlier to one of the waitresses, who had little accent but did not want to answer our questionnaire.

However, the restaurants we went in did not all accept straight away. As mentioned in the first part of our report, we were supposed to carry out our survey in ten restaurants in Chinatown, but we actually went in fourteen restaurants as we had four refusals. The reasons they gave for not answering us were various. The floor staff in two different restaurants told us that they could not speak to us - even if they were not busy - and that we had to come back later to speak with their manager; then the owner of the restaurant Buffet City on Portland Street told us he could not answer our questionnaire because his restaurant was not part of Chinatown, which shows that Chinatown remains geographically restricted despite a lot of restaurants in its surroundings.

Concerning the occupational profile of the speakers, we observed that the ones who spoke English the best were either less than 40 years old, or had studied at university, like the 7th interviewee, who studied in the UK. Out of the ten speakers, many were less than 40 years old, and as we can read in this article, "British born and based Chinese people have the highest level of educational achievement of all ethnic groups in the UK and the community as a whole enjoys one of the highest income levels.

The economic security provided by catering is being bolstered as the younger generation make inroads into business and the professions." (China-Britain.org)

Given the ability of the interviewees to speak at least a minimal standard of English, it was interesting to note the complete lack of occasion for using English. The majority of speakers would only use English when speaking with English customers and some speakers even commented that they would use contextually relevant Cantonese or Mandarin to communicate with English customers at a basic level (greetings and pleasantries). Most of the interviewees told us that they would wait for the customers to speak first before speaking English, Cantonese or Mandarin. Overall perceived proficiency in Mandarin and Cantonese was higher than English, which is unsurprising given the status of English as a second or third language for most residents and/or employees of Chinatown.

As a rule, most speakers also preferred to communicate in their mother tongue and would generally use this more. English seems to be a language of necessity in Chinatown, almost acting as a fallback language when proficiency in other languages is not high enough. This is evident from our data as all speakers preferred language was their highest scoring in proficiency. Nevertheless, the little usage of English compared to other languages did not seem to affect the type of clientele entering those restaurants, as the customers who entered businesses 8 and 9 after our interview were speaking English when we left.

Upon entering the businesses and making our aims known, we noticed at certain locations the manager was immediately sent to us, whether he was the most proficient English speaker or not. In the majority of cases, we spoke to the manager however the more interesting cases occurred when we were directed to speak to the floor staff by the manager. In one case, the manager sent over a waiter clearly less proficient in English than himself, either because he believed this was our goal, or another possibility was that he was too busy.

As a rule, when entering the restaurants, it was evident that the manager was the most proficient English speaker in comparison to the floor staff we interviewed, who seemed less confident and had far more functional English.

At the end of every interview, we asked the speaker (if we felt them capable) a little bit about themselves and about the linguistic situation in Chinatown. Results were incredibly conflicting and varied, with two speakers mentioning the dialect Hakka with regard to its prominence and influx into the area.

In business 2, the interviewee mentioned she only had a basic grasp of Mandarin which we found to be against our expectations, however this was supported by findings in business 4, where the interviewee mentioned that since 2005 he had noticed an increase in Mandarin use, however most people preferred Cantonese and spoke it more frequently.

In contradiction to this, the interviewee from business 2 later mentioned that she believed there was more Mandarin speakers in Chinatown and that she had noticed more students attempting to speak Mandarin.

In business 1, the interviewee commented that she had noticed a recent influx of Fijians into the area, however, we found no real evidence to support this.

While the data we collected was interesting, we discovered a lot of contradictions and most of the speakers' opinions on languages in Chinatown seemed to vary quite significantly. Our technique of interviewing helped us gain a fairly detailed picture of ten individuals working in Chinatown, but was perhaps not best geared to give a overall insight into the language use in the area.

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