DIGLOSSIA AND MULTILINGUALISM – ISSUES IN LANGUAGE CONTACT AND LANGUAGE SHIFT IN THE CASE OF HONG KONG PRE AND POST-1997.

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Abstract

This paper looks at patterns of language use in Hong Kong around the time of the end of colonial rule by Britain in 1997 to identify some of the issues arising in that context from language contact and language shift. Two different models used in the study of multilingualism or bilingualism will be discussed – language use reflecting function or status (diglossia) and overlapping language forms reflecting linguistic constraints (code-switching). The changes in language use and form in Hong Kong are seen to be more dynamic than traditional models of diglossia or code-switching suggest, which may partly indicate the special history of language contact in Hong Kong, but also may indicate the need for more flexible models of multilingualism.

Keywords: *bilingualism, diglossia, code-switching, language policy, language contact*

1 Introduction

This paper provides a historical analysis of patterns of language use in Hong Kong before and after the end of colonial rule by Britain in 1997 to identify issues arising from language contact and language shift – the range of languages in contact,

the type and degree of language shift and code-switching and the attitudes that lie behind societal and individual patterns of multilingualism.

In the following section I will briefly outline the theoretical base of much of the research into language shift and code switching, looking at models of diglossia (Ferguson 1959) and code-switching (Poplack *et al*. 1989, Myers-Scotton 2002, 2006). In sections 3 and 4, I discuss how these models applied to English and Cantonese in Hong Kong, with the main focus on the period running up to and just after the political hand-over from English to Chinese control in 1997, which can be assumed to be a pivotal moment. I conclude in section 5 with a brief evaluation of the stability or dynamism inherent in language contact, as evident in Hong Kong.

2 Theoretical base: definitions and types of diglossia and code-switching

Theoretical analyses of multilingualism and bilingualism (hereafter referred to as bilingualism) at an individual or societal level raise many complex issues (Baetens Beardsmore 1986, de Houwer 1990, Romaine 1995, Grosjean 1997). Here I focus on two distinct features of bilingual performance that I argue are most relevant to the situation in Hong Kong: diglossia (discourse/functional separation), and code-mixing (switching words and phrases between two languages).

2.1 Diglossia

Diglossia was originally expressed (Ferguson 1959) as the distinction between the two forms of a language such as Arabic, German, French and Greek, separating the formal "outer" High form (eg Classical Arabic, Hochdeutsch, French) and the Low informal "inner" form (eg Egyptian Arabic, Schwyzertutsch, Haitian Creole).

Gumperz (1982) and Myers-Scotton (1993, 2006), amongst others, have since redefined the role of diglossic language use to reflect "identity, power and transaction" (Romaine 1995, p.166) where function, content or rhetoric roles explain the predominant uses of each language (Pennington 1998). De jure diglossia can be distinguished from de facto diglossia, where official legal policy may call for diglossia, (de jure), as in Quebec, Canada, but this may or may not lead to diglossia in practice (de facto). Ferguson (1959) also identified that diglossia can also change towards a "standard with dialects", with specific reference to Chinese, where Mandarin had been a vernacular spoken language, but was fast becoming "a true standard" (ibid, p. 436).

2.2 Code switching

Surface structure code-switching or mixing is the most commonly observed phenomenon of bilingual language performance, usually referring to lexical insertions (Romaine 1995, p. 55) of loanwords or lexical borrowings (Poplack *et al*. 1989, p.137, Myers-Scotton 2006). Typically mixing is distinguished from code switching in that full bilingual competence is required to some degree for code switching (Grosjean 1997, Wei 2007), and there are a number of different models positing how underlying grammatical constraints can make grammatical code-switching systematic and predictable (Wei, 2007). Myers-Scotton's 4-M model (2002, 2006), of the four types of morpheme constraining interlingual grammatical switching, is perhaps the best known of these. However "code mixing" is the more usual term for overlapping English and Cantonese use in social and personal domains in Hong Kong (Bolton 2002).

3 Hong Kong - Diglossia and bilingualism interface

The interaction between diglossia and bilingualism in their various forms was traditionally encapsulated by Fishman (1967) as four-fold:

1. Both diglossia and bilingualism

2. Diglossia without bilingualism

3. No diglossia, no bilingualism

4. Bilingualism without diglossia

In line with this model, it would seem most appropriate to define Hong Kong before 1997 as diglossia without bilingualism.   Despite the primarily Chinese population and daily use of Cantonese, English was until 1974 the only official language for legal, judicial, government administration and education (according to the 1991 census, 95% were ethnic Chinese, and only 2.2% used English as their usual language – Poon 2004, p. 54).   The first and most prestigious schools were English-medium, and a Chinese-medium university was not opened until 1963 (Bolton 2002). Such separation accords with Ferguson's features of functional and prestigious divergence (Ferguson 1959). However, Hong Kong clearly does not conform closely to most other features of Ferguson's model of stable diglossia, and others have described Hong Kong as a case of "superposed bilingualism" (So 1989, p. 29).

3.1 Language policies before 1997

De jure diglossia came to an end in 1974 following the instating of Chinese as a co-official language, following social unrest and pressure from the Chinese Language Movement (Lin 1996). Official policies promoted Chinese from this time on: from the Government green paper of 1973 recommending that "Chinese become

the usual language of instruction in the lower forms of secondary schools, and that English should be studied as the second language" (Bolton 2002, p. 37), to the Joint Declaration of 1984, when "in addition to Chinese, English may be used…" (ibid).

However, de facto diglossia remained in place in political, educational and business environments: English versions of government documents were taken as the final correct version when disputed (Poon 2004); English-medium schools remained popular - the number of Chinese-medium schools went down to 12% in 1994 (Poon 2004); English or English with translation was used between 90 and 100% for business communications (So 1989). The numbers of English native speakers remained low, at 0.8% in 1986 (ibid, p. 32); 4-6% of university students claimed competence in English in 1973 (ibid) and 6.6% in 1983 (Bolton 2002).

3.2 Changing status of English

This continuing dominance of English has been identified by Luke and Richards (1982) as a shift in identity to English as an "auxiliary language", no longer representing colonial imposition but enabling international economic growth and opportunity, at a time when Hong Kong was growing in per capita GDP from US$410 in the 1960s to US$23,000 by 1996 (Bolton 2002). This dramatic economic growth has been taken (Bolton 2002; Pennington 1998) as the key to the equally dramatic rise in the numbers of people claiming knowledge of English from 6.6% in 1993 to around 33.7% by 1997 (Bolton 2002).

3.3 Individual attitudes to the vernacular

Attitudes to English or Cantonese were found to vary widely, reflecting diglossic functional divisions: Pierson (1994) found in a study of post-secondary students that they felt Cantonese was socially lower status or "rough", that English was necessary to do well after school, and that the students would take it even if not compulsory (Lai 2001). Acknowledgement of the utility of English for appropriate functions was, however, found to mask a strong social disapproval, lasting into the 1980s, of English for conversation between Chinese speakers amounting to an "implicit, widely-shared taboo" (Li, 2001, p. 5).

However, further studies identified the 1980s as a period of a shift away from antagonism towards English, identified in another study by Pierson *et al*. (1980) whose students felt using English would "make them feel less Chinese" (Pierson *et al.* 1980 cited Lai 2001, p. 114) to enthusiasm for English felt by those interviewed by Pennington and Yue (1994) who felt that "using English would not have negative effects on their ethnic identity" (ibid).

By the 1990s there was increasing evidence of a breakdown in the traditional diglossic model. A substantial increase in teachers' use of Cantonese was found only 10 years after his original study (Johnson 1991 cited Pennington 1998). Bacon-Shone and Bolton (1993) found signs of the breaking of the "taboo" against social English, evident in high rates of code-mixing: school 90%, public 83%, work 79%, friends 75.5%, home 45.5% (Pennington 1998).

3.4 Increasing bilingualism: linguistic evidence from Hong Kong "Mix" code.

3.4.1   Increasing use of "Mix"

Evidence from Bacon-Shone and Bolton (1993) shows increased use of English and mixed code outside traditional diglossic contexts. Mixing has generally been taken (Li 2001 and 2002, Pennington 1998, Chan 1998) to be primarily "lexico-syntactic" (Li 2001, p. 3). An early, influential study of mixing by Gibbons (1979) analysed what had hitherto been assumed to be a student-level "slang" (originally known as "U-gay-Wa" or "university talk"). Other studies found mixing increasingly used outside university settings, especially among educated Hong Kong Chinese (Li 2002).

3.4.2   Changing definitions of "Mix" and use of "Chinglish"

Pennington (1998) follows Luke's model (1998) of "mixing" as either expedient (to fill a lexical gap) or orientational (to signal social identity). She cites as evidence of this second type the use of self-selected English first names by Cantonese adolescents, or of the Cantonese names for roads and buildings, as a way of indicating "insider" status (Pennington 1998). In addition, "mix" could often be apparently incomprehensible to English-only speakers (Li 2002), but was preferred even by non-Chinese speakers (ibid), suggesting increasing orientational use. Li (2002) discusses the greater semantic richness available within "mix" where the same word in each language can be used distinctively to convey semantically divergent views of something, such as *shopping* versus *browsing* (ibid). He focuses on four potential motivations for codeswitching, including the principle of economy, where English can offer a quicker lexical option (e.g. *check in*, versus the 6-syllable Cantonese equivalent), and punning with homophonous Cantonese characters (ibid), especially

common in marketing and media – such as *high*= "haai" (*trouble*), *how*= "hou" (*newspaper*) and *fun*= "fan" (many meanings, including *many*, *a mark, to share*).

D. Li and others also cite meanings attaching to specific letters of the English alphabet, such as Q, meaning *cute*, or high quality (Li 2002), and D, co-opted into the writing system to represent the plural marker and comparative marker "di" (Whelpton 1999). This evidence drives Li to argue that these can now be seen as "integral" to Cantonese. A further study by Li and Tse (2002) tested students for their ability to avoid code switching into English from Cantonese, which was found to be extremely difficult, reinforcing a more integrated understanding of switching within the students' overall grammatical competence.

In addition to the use of "mix" or bilingual speech, there is growing support for a case of influence by Cantonese on local English even when English is spoken monolingually, evident particularly in phonology and vocabulary. Increasing numbers of studies call for official recognition of "Chinglish" as a new dialect of English (Bolton and Kwok 1992, Bolton 2002, Schneider 2003), following Kachru's view (1992) of a "pluricentric" model of world "Englishes".

3.5 Language Shift

To conclude, the evidence of increasing use of "mix", as well as signs of language shift between English and Cantonese, emphasises the fluid nature of language usage in Hong Kong even before the hand-over of power in 1997, moving away from diglossia without bilingualism to bilingualism combined with diglossia. Indeed the widespread cross-functional use of English before 1997 suggests a dynamic identity going well beyond Luke and Richards' (1992) model of an

"auxiliary language", and impacting on language shift more dramatically than the diglossic/bilingual distinctions usually suggest.

4 Hong Kong after 1997

4.1 Official biliterate trilingualism

The official policy for language use in Hong Kong after 1997 had been laid out in an Education Commission report in 1996 of "biliterate trilingualism", where multilingual education was the corner stone to producing citizens with equal facility in oral Cantonese, Putonghua and English, and written Putonghua/Cantonese and English. This policy was reinforced by the newly appointed Chief Executive in his inaugural speech in October 1997 after hand-over. The lack of any implementation plan, however, meant that de facto diglossia, particularly in education, could still be discerned (Poon 2004).

4.2 Unofficial maintenance of English

The divergence of official policy from language use in reality, as seen in the 1980s, continued even after 1997. Evidence of this was found in education, for example, where the "Guidance" of September 1997 intended that 100% of schools should compulsorily become Chinese-medium – in the event opposition from parents and principals led to only 70% of schools becoming Chinese-medium in 1998, a compromise reiterated in 2003 (Poon 2004).

In addition to English-medium schools remaining the most in demand, the centrally funded Native English Teacher scheme funded native speakers to every state secondary school after 1998 (ibid, p.61); business also supported English-language

initiatives such as the Workplace English Campaign, which was launched as a joint business-governmental initiative in 2000 (ibid: p.62).

Another major factor affecting the continued dynamism of English has been the rise of the Internet, chat-rooms, instant messaging and other computer-mediated communication (CMC), for which English is the most used (Crystal 2001), although a growing number of websites are bilingual and CMC exhibits much code-switching (Bolton 2002, Lee 2007).

These factors ensure an ever-growing number of English speakers - up to 43% by 2001 (Bolton 2002), and it seems that in the, albeit short, time-frame since 1997, the future prospects of English remain strong. As Schneider (2003) concluded, far from the hand-over of 1997 resulting in "strong and adverse consequences" for English, it is clear that the coloniser's language is "indispensable and inalienable" in Hong Kong (ibid, p.260).

4.3 Rise of Putonghua

There does not yet appear to be much research available in English on language contact for Putonghua in Hong Kong, and perhaps a decade or so is too short to detect any shift. There is evidence of some promotion of Putonghua even before 1997 - the first Civil High Court case was heard in Putonghua in December 1995 (Bolton 2002); after hand-over, the language was made compulsory in the school curriculum in 1998 (Poon 2004), and a Putonghua channel set up on Radio Hong Kong (Wilkinson and Lu 2001). The government's education action plan of 2003 specifically endorsed plans "to use Putongua to teach the Chinese language instead of Cantonese" (Poon 2004, p.63), although I have not found data on the number of

schools taking this forward. Students' attitudes reflected a growing perception of the importance of Putonghua - 25% deemed it important (Poon 2004) and 50% supported the official trilingual policy (Lai 2001).

These changes can be seen in the increasing number of Putonghua speakers, from 1.1% who used it as their usual language, and 25.3% as another language (Bolton 2002) up to approximately 30% with "a working knowledge" by 2004 (Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce 2004).

4.4 Relationship between Putonghua and Cantonese

Potential overlap between Chinese identity and Hong Kong identity is reflected in differing attitudes to Putonghua and Cantonese (Bolton 2002). Lai (2001) found that high-school students of all social classes had positive attitudes to Putonghua as the language for "national-wide communication and a sense of "Chinese-ness" wider than purely Hong Kong, but it was seen as lower in status than English or Cantonese. Moreover, no student was found to support the notion of purely Cantonese/Putonghua bilingualism (ibid), and a majority of students felt that mixed code made them "feel more like a Hong Konger" (ibid).

Chief Executive Tung used Cantonese for his inaugural speech, after the hand-over in 1997, suggesting tolerance for the local language, rather than an official tendency to impose Putonghua as a diglossic High form of "Chinese". Educationally, Putonghua was seen as a "relatively minor" subject on the curriculum (Whelpton 1999). Lexis and syntax had shown signs of co-influence before 1997, such as increasing use of the Putonghua "bei" comparative rather than the Cantonese "gwo" structure (ibid).

Another important shift in language pattern may come from differences in the written form. Mainland China has been keen to develop the Simplified Standard (SS) written form, whereas Cantonese has retained the traditional full character script. It would seem that if SS is being used officially as part of the official biliterate trilingualism, that would argue for an increasing influence of Putonghua in line with Taiwan, Singapore and other non mainland Chinese-speaking areas, potentially at Cantonese expense.

Li (2004) predicts creative language shift away from standard Putonghua, however, when "top down standardisation" meets substratum influence from regional languages and the cultural effect of "westernised" prestige varieties spoken in Hong Kong and more significantly Taiwan (ibid), identifying already that the "southern accents" and certain grammatical changes (dropping of the diminutive "er" and weak stress) of Hong Kong and Taiwan have come to be preferred in Mainland China (ibid).

4.5 Future directions for Hong Kong

Pierson predicted a triglossic future for Hong Kong of Putonghua (for politics, administration), English (for technology, commerce and finance) and Cantonese (for the language of family and intimacy) (Pierson 1988 cited Bolton and Kwok 1992). The current use and status accorded to English and Cantonese seem to indicate that there is "little sign that Putonghua will replace English as the language of power in the near future" (Lai 2001, p. 130), or that any shift away from Cantonese towards Putonghua can "only be brought about by strong sentiment in its favour" in Hong Kong itself (Whelpton 1999, p. 45).

5 Conclusion

It would seem from the example of Hong Kong that prescriptive measures alone cannot enforce language shift. Diglossia can remain stable even when de facto, rather than de jure. Indeed, the biggest change in Hong Kong, since the mid-1970s, has been a creative combination of diglossia with a rapid increase in cross-functional bilingualism, with which the official prescription of biliterate trilingualism post-1997 has yet to converge (Lai and Byram 2003). This seems to have derived from individual attitudes recognising the utility of either language, which can act powerfully to bring about language shift within a generation when so motivated.

Hong Kong is an interesting example of a High language becoming seen as accessible, indeed necessary, in Low situations (such as internet chatrooms and advertising), which may well be a path towards the kind of new dialect argued by Schneider (2003). Such changes have an important effect in diminishing the usual attritional effects of language contact where bilingualism is usually seen as one generation away from language loss.

These findings indicate that a more dynamic model for language shift may be required, re-evaluating the usual diglossic/bilingual distinctions. Further research comparing Hong Kong to other Asian Chinese/English language contact environments (such as Singapore or India) may indicate whether these tendencies of language shift, for the different Chinese languages as well as English, will themselves stabilise or continue to change.

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