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Cantonese or Putonghua? ---Language Choice in Zhuhai

Zhuhai, adjacent to Macau, is one of the special economic zones assigned by Deng Xiaoping in 1980. Its intimate relationship with Macau and the policy of opening up, therefore, have brought considerable economic prosperity to Zhuhai. As a result, people of different social backgrounds keep pouring in from the rural or less developed areas, in the hope that they can find a job in this economically promising city. According to the statistics disclosed by the Zhuhai government, by the end of year 2011, the city has a total population of about 1.57 million, of which 1.06 million (67.5%) are official residents, and the rest 0.51million people (33.5%) are categorized as temporary population (The Chinese Communist Party in Zhuhai's Committee, 2013). Putonghua, the nation's official and standard language, is gradually gaining its prestige in Zhuhai as most of the immigrants and people from outside are introducing the use of Putonghua into the region. Moreover, as Putonghua has been promoted as the medium of classroom instruction by the government, the trend manifests itself that Putonghua is catching up and has posed a threat to the indigenous language of Cantonese. However, with a large proportion of local residents (67.5%), most of whom speak Cantonese as their mother tongue, Cantonese still remains practical and common in daily conversations among people. Besides homes and work places, Cantonese is also spoken in a variety of social domains. Now that both Cantonese and Putonghua seem to exert a comparable impact upon the ways people speak, the question now lies in how people are going to manage and choose between these two languages. Will they try to strike a balance between them? Or will the issue of language shift arise as Putonghua continues to permeate people's daily lives? This paper will mainly focus on five case studies and discuss the possible factors that may determine the language choice of people in Zhuhai. The subjects of the cases are divided into two groups---the first one is the local group which includes three children who were born and raised in Zhuhai (all of their parents speak Cantonese); the second one is the immigrant group which examines two subjects (both of their parents speak Putonghua or other dialects) who were born outside of Guangdong province and moved to Zhuhai early in their childhood. Through comparisons and analyses conducted both within and across the two groups, this paper expects to find out the influential factors that play significant roles in people's language choice in Zhuhai.

To start with, what should be clear is that all the parents or grandparents of the three kids are local residents who speak Cantonese as their mother tongue. Moreover, to rule out the possibility that "gender" may complicate the situation, all the children are boys. To facilitate the process of analysis, we will focus on the case studies of the two boys called Yi and Yuan first, both of whom are six years old. Yi is a bilingual of Cantonese and Putonghua; overall, his competence is quite balanced on both sides. Different from Yi's, however, Yuan's

competence is characterized by the noticeable polarization of these two languages. He is extremely fluent in Putonghua, yet, he may be deemed as a receptive bilingual in that he can understand but is not able to speak Cantonese. Yuan can only utter a limited number of words in Cantonese, and his pronunciation is not as perfect as his Putonghua. Given the same social environment and similar family background, we may wonder what has attributed to this strikingly different language competence between the two subjects.

In Yi's case, he was not able to speak Putonghua until he picked it up gradually at the kindergarten, in which Putonghua is used exclusively as the medium of class instruction. All the children in the kindergarten are required to use Putonghua to communicate, and the use of Cantonese is discouraged to a great extent. However, at home, Yi only uses Cantonese in his conversations with his family, and his parents seldom talk to him in Putonghua. Yi's parents, especially his father, actually demonstrate a strong sense of pride in being a Cantonese. To Yi's father, the capability to speak Cantonese is undoubtedly a must for one to be qualified as a Cantonese in a real sense. Yi's father takes pride in his self-identity as a Cantonese, which then leads to his consequent approach of teaching Cantonese rather than Putonghua to his son prior to his elementary education. There are primarily two reasons that can best account for Cantonese people's pride and preference of their own language and culture.

Firstly, Guangdong's provincial capital Guangzhou, as a significant trading and commercial center in South China, is one of the major pillars of China's economy. Therefore, those much better-off Cantonese hold a superior attitude towards other Chinese people from outside the province (Ladegaard & Wang, 2008). This point of view can be seen in Yi's father and other Cantonese people, who refer to those Putonghua-speaking people (i.e. people come from outside of Guangdong) as “捞佬,” usually with some negative connotation and bias. Secondly, due to Cantonese's close relationship with Hong Kong, the language actually receives more prestige than other dialects in China (Ladgaard & Wang, 2008). Therefore, unlike speakers of other dialects, people in Zhuhai or Guangdong are exposed to Cantonese much more frequently because it is used in bus broadcasting and even the mass media. The prestige of Cantonese is relatively evident because it is the sole Chinese dialect whose use in these fields is supported by various institutions (Miao & Li, 2006). For example, a majority of Guangdong TV stations are run merely in Cantonese, and of all the provinces in China, Guangdong is the one which has the exclusive access to some Hong Kong TV channels. Therefore, with TV channels in Cantonese rather than Putonghua, Yi's father is then able to provide Yi with a linguistic environment where Cantonese is spoken for most of the time, despite the widespread promotion of Putonghua in Zhuhai.

Putonghua, as the standard language of the nation, has undoubtedly been endowed with much privilege in Zhuhai or even Guangdong. The introduction of Putonghua as the lingua franca and medium of instruction have brought about remarkable changes to the

language use in Zhuhai; nevertheless, Cantonese is not overwhelmed by Putonghua, but it is sustained and maintained with support from some local institutions and TV broadcasts.

However, in Yuan's case, unlike Yi's family, his parents hold a completely different view towards Putonghua. For fear that Yuan may not be able to adapt to Putonghua as the medium of instruction in the kindergarten and primary school, Yuan's parents decided to teach him Putonghua at home, which started quite early. Consequently, when they later tried to speak Cantonese to Yuan, he has been so accustomed to Putonghua that he would respond merely in Putonghua rather than Cantonese. Yuan's parents think that Cantonese, as an indigenous language, is important for their child to be aware of his own identity as a Cantonese; yet, they consider Putonghua to be even more crucial in that it has a significant bearing on their child's performance in his elementary education. Therefore, they actually accept Yuan's use of Putonghua at home, rather than try to correct his language choice.

Yuan's parents are still emotionally partial to Cantonese; nevertheless, unlike Yi's father, their language attitude does not account for their actual practice in this case. They believe that Yuan's competence to speak good and fluent Putonghua is supposed to secure him a more satisfactory performance in schools. Therefore, except for some occasional sentences in Cantonese, Yuan's parents would talk to Yuan in Putonghua for most of the time, in the hope that this approach may facilitate Yuan's process of acquiring the national standard language. In addition, they also use TV cartoons that are produced in Putonghua as instruments to help arouse Yuan's interest in the language. Yuan's father says that Yuan's competence in Putonghua is definitely beneficial if Yuan seeks prosperity in the more developed areas like Shanghai or Beijing in China. Therefore, in terms of the concerns of Yuan's parents, Putonghua outweighs Cantonese due to the conceivable benefits brought by its overwhelming privilege and prestige in China as a whole.

From the two cases above, it seems that the language attitude of a child's family actually attributes much to their possible language choice. Nevertheless, as for the 3-year-old boy called Jiayi, this is definitely not the case. Jiayi's family, especially his grandfather, hold the same sentiment or intimacy towards Cantonese like Yi's father does. Jiayi's grandfather strongly believes that every Cantonese has the obligation to learn their own language in order to make their culture last. In other words, he attaches much importance to Cantonese as the qualification for one's identity. He sticks to Jiayi's acquisition of Cantonese as his first language, however, in this case, the one who actually determines Jiayi's language choice is the boy himself.

Rather than the language attitude of his parents or grandparents, the mass media, or to be specific, the TV broadcasts of cartoons in Putonghua have the most decisive impact on Jiayi's language behavior. Although a few cartoons in Cantonese are available on the TVB

channel of Hong Kong, they seem to be too complicated for a 3-year-old child to understand. As a result, Jiayi's grandparents resort to those in Putonghua. Indulged in the fantastic and vivid worlds displayed in cartoons, Jiayi has therefore been captivated by the language as well, namely, Putonghua. He tries to imitate every word uttered by the characters in those cartoons, and he reduplicates each utterance immediately after it is produced. Obviously, Putonghua appeals to him so badly due to its direct relationship with those fantastic cartoons. Then gradually, for Jiayi, Putonghua has actually become the more active language. He is able to utter some words perfectly in Cantonese, yet, for most of the time, Putonghua seems to dominate his language repertoire. More importantly, it seems that talking with Jiayi in Putonghua, instead of Cantonese, will elicit more responses from him. Apparently, Jiayi's language choice has fallen short of the expectation of his family; nonetheless, they have no choice but to talk to Jiayi in Putonghua in order to facilitate their interactions and communications, which in turn reinforces the practice of Putonghua within the family. Therefore, in Jiayi's case, his own language preference, rather than that of his family's, has been the primary concern for the language choice of their daily conversations.

Myers-Scotton (2006) has claimed that children, rather than their elders, can be the ones who actually determine the home languages. The statement can be applied to Jiayi's case, but in the meantime, we should not neglect the covert role of his family's attitude. A child's language choice is essentially a joint result from both the child's own language preference and their family's language attitude, but the concern would be how people are going to strike the balance between the two factors. For example, in Jiayi's case, if his grandfather had been insistent on the practice of Cantonese as their home language, no matter how Jiayi is keen on Putonghua, he would not have been able to use Putonghua for most of the time. Jiayi's grandfather actually accepts his practice under a basic premise---the learning of Putonghua should not intervene or impede too much of Jiayi's acquisition of Cantonese. Jiayi's grandfather has indeed criticized the approach of Yuan's parents to encourage Yuan's overuse of Putonghua, which then leads to his inability to speak fluent Cantonese. Now at this point, it reaffirms the idea that a child's language behavior is like a scale of the language attitudes from both sides, and what finally determines their language choice depends on at which side the scale inclines.

From the case analyses above, it seems that for the three local children, their own language attitudes, along with their families', have played a significant role in their language choice. Moreover, although the mother tongue of their family members is Cantonese, language shift is likely due to the promotion of Putonghua in Zhuhai. On one hand, Putonghua is a must for a child due to its role as the medium of instruction; on the other hand, as immigrants and temporary population from other provinces are pouring in, Putonghua inevitably becomes the lingua franca. Now that Putonghua seems to be a threat to Cantonese,

the language attitude of a child's family members, therefore, is decisive in terms of the preservation or maintenance of Cantonese as an indigenous language.

Then we may wonder what can be the noticeable or core factors that affect the language choice of the two subjects in the immigrant group. Have they picked up Cantonese successfully in the environment where Putonghua is so powerful? If so, what are the factors at work that have attributed to their acquisition of Cantonese? If not, then what may be the reasons? These two questions are to be answered by the following case studies of the two subjects.

Again, to rule out the possible interference of "gender", both of the two subjects are female, and both of them are now undergraduate students. One girl is called Ling, and the other called Jingyi. Ling has come to Zhuhai with her mother since she was only three years old, and her mother tongue is a kind of Hubei dialect. Putonghua, together with Ling's own dialect, constitutes her domestic language use. Jingyi lived in Hunan Province until nine years old when she immigrated to Zhuhai with her family, and she speaks Putonghua at home with her parents. With similar immigration backgrounds, nevertheless, they have distinctively different Cantonese capability. Ling is able to speak Cantonese almost perfectly, and she is as fluent as any native speaker. But Jingyi is a receptive Cantonese speaker, who can only understand Cantonese rather than speak it out fluently. When she actually does speak the language, quite often, she will stammer and produce strange intonations. So why are the two subjects so different in terms of their Cantonese capability?

In Ling's case, she had already picked up some Cantonese through those Cantonese-based channels before she went to the kindergarten. However, she was not able to speak Cantonese fluently due to the lack of interactions with native speakers. Therefore, after Ling entered the kindergarten, even though they were encouraged to communicate in Putonghua at that time, she still asked her classmates to teach her Cantonese, and that was how Ling picked up the language gradually. Since then, Ling would speak Cantonese to those Cantonese speakers, and Putonghua, by contrast, is spoken to those who cannot speak Cantonese. Overall, Ling considers herself to be a Cantonese rather than someone from Hubei. Besides her language competence, the fact that she has already been integrated into the Guangdong community also attributes much to her self-identity.

As for Jingyi, when she first went to primary school in Zhuhai at nine, all of her classmates spoke Cantonese. Even though she was not able to speak the language at that time, almost everyone talked to her in Cantonese after class. Then under this circumstance, it is apparent that Jingyi's tendency to pick up Cantonese was irresistible, and she did speak fluent Cantonese during that period when the language was used frequently in their conversations.

It seems that for the immigrant group, social network, or to be specific, the two subjects' peer network, is the primary factor that counts or plays a significant role in their acquisition of Cantonese. According to Myers-Scotton (2006), people can learn a new language through weak ties, which can "connect a speaker with speakers of another language" (p. 73). Now that none of the family members of the two subjects speaks Cantonese, to be confined in the strong ties with their parents would definitely impede their Cantonese acquisition. Therefore, through their interactions with various acquaintances or their classmates whose mother tongue is Cantonese, the two girls were then able to pick up the language quickly.

Then at this point, you may wonder what has led to the later deficiency in Jingyi's spoken Cantonese. Myers-Scotton's view is reasonable that weak ties are significant in one's acquisition of a new language, though it depends largely on the language choice of the other party. Her theory may only work in those situations where "the speaker of another language" talks with you in that language. Yet, if they resort to some lingua franca, the result may turn out to be different. This issue is rather evident in Jingyi's case when she later transferred to another primary school in Zhuhai. Completely different from her previous classmates, her new friends in this school spoke to her exclusively in Putonghua. It seems that Jingyi's identity as an immigrant attributed to her classmates' preconception that she was not able to speak Cantonese. Therefore, Putonghua, as the lingua franca, has become the more preferred language in the exchanges between locally born citizens and immigrants from outside Guangdong province. As a result, Jingyi's insufficient practice of Cantonese was to blame for her later deficiency in the language.

To conclude, in Zhuhai, the two factors of institutional support and the mass media of TV broadcasts have played extremely significant roles in the maintenance of both Cantonese and Putonghua in the region. However, as the medium of instruction in schools, Putonghua seems to be more powerful and privileged than the indigenous language of Cantonese. Moreover, as more immigrants from outside Guangdong province are pouring in, Putonghua has been even more widely used as the lingua franca. Therefore, Putonghua has then posed a threat to Cantonese by bringing about the potential language shift among Cantonese children who were locally born; unlike their parents, their language attitudes towards Putonghua are more positive and with less prejudice. Therefore, the ultimate language choice of those local children seems to be a joint result from the language attitudes of both themselves and their parents, but the latter is more responsible for the maintenance of Cantonese as an indigenous language. Then as for the immigrants, rather than language attitudes, social networks seem to play the most significant role in their acquisition of Cantonese. Moreover, the language choice of their peers is also decisive in how well they are able to pick up Cantonese.

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