The Popularization of Chinese Language in Multilingual Environment  
—Based on the Analysis of Examples from Malaysia

Li-Li XU¹,a,* Peng XU²,b

¹The Southern Base of Confucius Institute Headquarter, Xiamen University, 361102, Xiamen, P.R.China
²South China Sea Institute, Xiamen University, 361005, Xiamen, P.R.China

a lynch206@163.com, b xupeng731130@xmu.edu.cn

Keywords: Multilingual environment, Communication of Chinese language, Malaysia.

Abstract. Similar to other languages, Chinese has been affected by the multilingual environment where it communicates and therefore changed inevitably. Malaysia is a multiracial country. While all races keep their own ethnic characteristics and language habits, they affect and integrate with each other, forming Malaysia’s unique multilingual environment and multicultural atmosphere. This paper aims at studying Communication of Chinese language in this unique language environment and providing reference for research on Communication of Chinese language in multilingual environment.

Introduction

Affected and restricted by many factors like government policy, language characteristics and the awareness of inheriting ethnic cultures, language communication under multilingual and multicultural background is always unique. Due to the large number of Chinese and overseas Chinese, Chinese language has become an important ethnic language in Southeast Asia, but its communication is affected by multi-languages and multi-cultures of the country, which has given it uniqueness. In addition to Singapore, Malaysia has the world’s largest percentage of Chinese ethnic group and keeps a relatively complete system of Chinese education. Analysis of communication rules of Chinese language under the multiethnic and multicultural background of Malaysia is a special reference for exploring communication of Chinese language in multilingual environment.

General Situation of Malaysia’s Multilingual Environment

Malaysia is a multiracial country. According to statistics, of the 29.948 million people in Malaysia, Malay accounts for 67.4%, Chinese 24.6%, Indian 7.3% and other races 0.7%.[1] Residents of all races are affected much by their own traditional language habits and cultural characteristics, so Malaysia naturally becomes the gathering place for various languages. Languages in an identical area interact and integrate with each other, forming a unique multilingual and multicultural environment in Malaysia.

The main languages in Malaysia are: Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil. Malay is the national language and official language. English, as a second language, are widely used in various fields. Due to the influence of colonial history, the popularity of English has even exceeded that of the official language Malay. Besides, English is generally accepted by all races and social strata in psychological level. Chinese and Tamil are more widely used by specific populations. “In Malaysia, the distribution of language hierarchy is generally as follows: high-level language—English and Malay; intermediate-level language—Chinese and Tamil; low-level language—Chinese dialects and other minority languages.”[2] In Malaysia, one can experience the unique “code mixing” [3], that is, on various occasions, Malaysians can freely switch among several language systems and use vocabularies of different languages in one sentence. The switch is very natural and has no obstacle on...
communication. For example, “In a few minutes of conversation, Chinese in Malaysia can continually use several languages without pausing to think for trans-coding, which may be words, phrases or whole sentences. The surprising thing is their fast speed and high frequency of trans-coding.”[4]

The population proportion of Chinese ethnic group in Malaysia is very high, just ranking behind Singapore in the world. In the early independence of Malaysia, the proportion was up to 35%, and Chinese ethnic group has always been the second largest ethnic group closely followed Malay in Malaysia. The large number of population, unique nation concept and heritage awareness provide favorable conditions for the heritage and communication of Chinese language in Malaysia. However, the diversified political and cultural systems make its development face enormous challenges due to the popularity of dialects, policy restrictions, mainstream languages’ effect, staying away from environment of native language and other factors. The competition and interaction of these external forces have affected the communication of Chinese language in Malaysia.

Chinese Education Situation under Multilingual Environment in Malaysia

Currently, Malaysia is the only country that has a complete Chinese education system of primary school, secondary school and college besides China. According to the latest data by Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Malaysia, “At present, Malaysia has 1,290 Chinese primary schools, 60 Chinese independent high schools and 3 Chinese colleges (Southern College, Han Chiang College and New Era College). In addition, 153 national primary schools offer communication Chinese course; 78 national-type secondary schools set Chinese required course; 24 boarding secondary schools offer Chinese course for Malaysian students; 16 teachers colleges open training courses for Chinese teachers in primary and secondary schools; national universities like University of Malaya, University Putra Malaysia and National University of Malaysia also have Department of Chinese Language and Literature, and University of Malaya even sets Institute of China Studies. Over 200,000 people study Chinese in the country, including over 60,000 students in Chinese independent high schools. In recent years, not only descendent of overseas Chinese but also Malaysian and Indian children have begun to study in Chinese schools. Currently, there are over 5,000 Malaysian students studying in Chinese independent high schools and about 70,000 non-ethnic Chinese students studying in national-type schools (Chinese).”[5] Such a complete education system provides a solid foundation for communication and development of Chinese language in Malaysia.

In order to maintain and develop this advantage, Chinese associations in Malaysia also ally actively, endeavoring to protect and develop language education of the ethnic group by non-governmental force, among which, the United Chinese School Committees’ Association of Malaysia (UCSCAM), founded on August 22, 1954, is one of the leading groups. UCSCAM is made up of members from Associations of Chinese School Management Boards or School Committees of various states including Johor, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, Perak, Penang, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Sarawak and Sabah, and it has become a leading organization in protecting and developing Chinese language. All board of directors of Chinese school in each community in Malaysia are grass-roots organizations of UCSCAM; members of board of directors in Chinese schools in each state are basically members of that in Chinese independent high schools and Chinese primary schools of the state; Chinese communities throughout the country establish and manage schools through organizing board of directors.[6] For a long time, UCSCAM has played a significant and positive role in communication and popularization of Chinese language in Malaysia. Since the quality of teaching in Chinese schools is often among the best, and it has trained many quality talents for all walks of life, it has been the important education force outside of the national education system of Malaysia.

However, due to racial policy and national defense of official language, it is not easy to develop Chinese education in Malaysia. Especially in national education system, many policy restrictions are still imposed on the implementation of Chinese education. After independence in 1957, Malaysian government began to popularize primary education in the country. In today’s national education
system, primary schools are classified into three types according to different media of instruction, namely national primary school (using Malay as medium of instruction), national-type primary school (using Tamil as medium of instruction) and Chinese primary school (using Chinese as medium of instruction). The government also classifies secondary education into three types. The main students in national secondary school are Malaysian students. This kind of school uses Malay as medium of instruction, and enjoys government subsidies. Chinese and Indian students are the main students in national-type secondary school, where English or Malay is used as medium of instruction, and Chinese or Tamil is one of the subjects. This kind of school is semi-public and semi-private, and the subsidies partly come from government and partly from sustentation fund and fundraise. Independent school doesn’t enjoy government subsidies because of refusing restructuring as what government required and adhering to teaching in Chinese. Most of the students are Chinese, and they bear the expenditure on their own. The country treats the three kinds of schools differently, and education act excludes Chinese secondary school from mainstream national education, resulting in severe financial difficulty in the development of Chinese school. In addition, “Malaysian government hasn’t listed diploma of Unified Examination Certificate as qualification of entry into national university.” [7] The Government implements quota system (proportional system) in education, namely new student enrollment in university is not completely according to score but to proportion of race. Under this policy of discrimination in education, many excellent ethnic Chinese children can hardly study in national institution of higher education or apply for scholarship, and have no access to state-owned enterprise and government agency, which, to a certain extent, has affected the student’s initiative in learning Chinese and studying in China.

Development and Change of Chinese in Multilingual Environment of Malaysia

Compared with other languages used in Malaysia, Chinese, surviving and developing in the multilingual environment, is more complicated in use, because it is not only influenced by Malay, English and Tamil, but also affected by Chinese dialects of ethnic Chinese from different places of birth. For example, “Cantonese is more commonly used in Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh, while Hokkien is more popular in Johor Bahru, Penang and Klang.”[8] One single language is not often exclusively used by Malaysian Chinese because they are very familiar with the use of the languages mentioned above, which results in the variation of Malaysian mandarin in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and use of Chinese characters.

Variation of Vocabulary.

The integration and borrowing of language in multilingual environment has an obvious influence on vocabulary. The author has heard some local words when working in Malaysia that are different from standard Chinese as follows:
Table 1. Different expressions of the same words in Mandarin Chinese and Malaysian Mandarin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words of Mandarin Chinese</th>
<th>Words of Malaysian Mandarin</th>
<th>Words of Mandarin Chinese</th>
<th>Words of Malaysian Mandarin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>菜市 (cài shì) (vegetable market)</td>
<td>巴刹 (bā shā) (pasar, Malay)</td>
<td>开灯 (kāi dēng) (turn on the light)</td>
<td>开火 (kāi huǒ) (dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>面包 (miàn bāo) (bread)</td>
<td>罗地 (luó dì) (rodi, Tamil)</td>
<td>多少 (duō shǎo) (how much)</td>
<td>几多 (jǐ duō) (dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>三明治 (sān míng zhì) (sandwich)</td>
<td>三文治 (sān wén zhì) (sandwich, English)</td>
<td>放高利贷者 (fàng gāo lì dài zhě) (loan shark)</td>
<td>大耳窿 (dà ěr lóng) (dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>百分之十 (bǎi fēn zhī shí) (ten percent)</td>
<td>一百二十 (yī bǎi èr shí) (10%, English)</td>
<td>赚钱 (zhuàn qián) (make money)</td>
<td>找钱 (zhǎo qián) (dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>烤肉 (kǎo ròu) (barbecue)</td>
<td>沙爹 (shā diē) (satay, Malay)</td>
<td>脏 (zāng) (dirty)</td>
<td>肮脏 (āng zāng) (dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>礼券 (lǐ quàn) (coupon)</td>
<td>固本 (gù běn) (coupon, English)</td>
<td>摩托车 (mó tuō chē) (motorcycle)</td>
<td>电单车 (diàn dān chē) (dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>达图 (dá tú) (dato)</td>
<td>拿督 (ná dù) (Datu, Malay)</td>
<td>这次 (zhè cì) (this time)</td>
<td>今次 (jīn cì) (dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>下班 (xíà bān) (off duty)</td>
<td>放工 (fàng gōng) (dialect)</td>
<td>工作 (gōng zuò) (work)</td>
<td>做工 (zuò gōng) (dialect)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variation of Pronunciation.

The pronunciation of Malaysian Mandarin has the following characteristics:

Pronunciation of “r”: in Malay, “r” is a trill pronounced by flipping the tongue, so Malaysian Chinese always flip the tongue spontaneously when pronouncing “r”, and when they try to correct the pronunciation when speaking Malaysian mandarin, they easily confuse “r” with “i” and “l”. For example, 热情 (rè qíng) is always pronounced as (lè qíng); 内容 (nèi róng) is always pronounced as (nèi yóng).

Pronunciation of “t” and “p”: in Malay, “t” and “p” are voiceless consonants, but they are pronounced as plosive without vocal cord vibration, so they sound similar to “d” and “b” in mandarin Chinese. Therefore, in Malaysian mandarin, speakers rarely pronounce aspirated sound. For example, 突然 (tū rán) is always pronounced as (dū rán), and 破了 (pò le) is always pronounced as (bò le).

Retroflexes (zh, ch, sh) are always pronounced as blade-alveolars (z, c, s).

There are no light tones, for example, 爸爸 (bà ba) is pronounced as (bà bà), and 车子 (chē zi) is pronounced as (chē zi).

There are mispronunciations influenced by dialects, for example, 咖啡 (kā fēi) is pronounced as (jiā fēi), 我吃了 (wǒ chī le) is pronounced as (wǒ chī liǎo), 星期 (xīngqī) is pronounced as (xīng qī).

There are no modified tones of “一” or “不” under any circumstances.

Variation of Syntax.

The largest influence that the multilingual environment of Malaysia exerts on Malaysian mandarin in terms of syntax is the position of adverbial in a sentence. English and Malay usually put adverbial at the end of a sentence, and Malaysian mandarin has the similar feature. For example, the adverbials in the following sentences are underlined:

Mandarin Chinese: 我要在吉隆坡买一栋房子。
English: I will buy a house in Kuala Lumpur.
Malay: Saya mau beli rumah di Kuala Lumpur.
**Malaysian Mandarin**: 我要买一栋房子在吉隆坡。

There are also variations in word order of common sentence pattern, for example: “多吃一点 (eat a little bit more)” is always expressed as “吃多一点”, with the adverbial “多 (more)” backed.

**Particularity of Use of Chinese Characters.**

Since the earliest immigrants of China left very early, they kept the tradition of learning and using Traditional Chinese characters. In the 1940s-1950s, Chinese mainland had limited connection with outside world and Taiwan was the first choice for foreigners and overseas Chinese to learn Chinese, which further made Traditional Chinese characters become the main Chinese characters for overseas in a certain period of time. Since the 1980s, people gradually began to know Simplified Chinese characters. In recent years, Confucius Institutes are all around the world and has made an outstanding contribution to popularizing standard Mandarin and normalizing the use of Simplified Chinese internationally, thus Simplified Chinese character has been gradually known and accepted. These historically objective reasons caused the simultaneous use of both Traditional Chinese characters and Simplified Chinese characters for a long time in Malaysian mandarin.


The Shanghai Book, known as The Shanghai Book (CNPIEC) now, the Commercial Press, Zhonghua Book Company and World Journal Book Store were the four Chinese publishing houses in Malaysia and all began operation in the 1950s. About 40% books sold in these bookstores are printed with Traditional Chinese characters in vertical typesetting.

In public, the implementation of Simplified Chinese characters is carried out simultaneously. The Malaysian government has changed to use Simplified Chinese characters in Ministry of Education, Department of Public Information, Ministry of Tourism and other departments since the 1980s and Chinese textbooks of Chinese primary and secondary school also use Simplified Chinese with pinyin to show pronunciation simultaneously. The brochures issued by Ministry of Tourism use Simplified Chinese characters as well, except for Hong Kong and Taiwan.

**Chinese Service Applied in Malaysia’s Multilingual Environment**

In Chinese Communication and Multilingual World, Xu Daming mentioned that “the communication measure of Chinese, on one hand, is widely carrying out Chinese education, and on the other hand, is providing application service of Chinese”. While objectively Malaysia’s unique condition exactly provides Chinese communication with certain convenient conditions in the field of language application and service.

Malaysia’s Chinese ethnic group is profoundly nostalgic and holds a strong sense of identity towards home country, so they have been sparing no effort to maintain and inherit Chinese language and culture. Holding strong economic strength in Malaysia, they also strive for improving status of Chinese and Chinese ethnic group under the leadership of UCSCAM and UCSTAM, making Chinese maintain its own advantages in Malaysia’s multilingual environment.

Currently Chinese’s application in Malaysia society covers:
- The working language of several government departments;
- Language used in colleges and primary and middle schools;
- Language used in television, radio, film and art show;
- Language used in newspaper, magazine, advertisement, internet and other media;
- Language used in transportation and service industries;
- Language used in community and social activities;
- Neighborhood communication;
It can be seen that Chinese is widely and fully used in Malaysia society.

May 5, 2013 is the election day of Malaysian government. In order to get more political support, the ruling prime minister Najib also sent greetings to Malaysian citizens in Chinese on the occasion of the Chinese New Year in 2013. In Malaysian major media’s New Year advertisement and theaters’ advertisement before release, this short video of greetings is sent to every corner. All these political, economic and emotional factors together make the local Chinese communication bath in a golden period. While Chinese media and bookstores also make full use of this opportunity to continuously make innovation and breakthroughs in content and form. Keeping pace with the times, they also use Internet technology to set up websites, which provide sound information services for local people to understand and use Chinese.

With the rapid development of China’s economy and society, the demand of economy and trade between China and Malaysia gradually increased. Therefore, ripple effect formed for the demand of Chinese learning, not only in Chinese ethnic group, but also other ethnic groups. And now, the number of Malay and Indian students in Chinese schools shows a growing trend. While, in some of the local Chinese language training centers, such as Malaysia Global Chinese Learning Center, the number of in-service students that is not of Chinese origin studying Chinese in leisure time also increased significantly. Based on market conditions, stores of international luxury brand (such as PRADA and Bvlgari) in Malaysia also set up specialized Chinese training courses for marketing for their salesmen in 2013. All of these greatly boost the communication and promotion of Chinese.

Conclusion
Communication of Chinese language in multilingual environment is bound to be influenced by other languages and Chinese will naturally integrate with other languages in vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax and pragmatics, etc. Various Chinese dialects in Chinese ethnic group will also have a great impact on the Chinese communication in host country. Reflected in changes in the communication of Chinese language, all of these should be also noted and studied for international promotion of Chinese.

With the struggle and efforts of Chinese and overseas Chinese, Malaysia becomes the country in which overseas Chinese communication is successful, and it has a relatively complete Chinese education system. Because of the unique multilingual environment and characteristics of a pluralistic society of Malaysia, Chinese communication in Malaysia shows a certain uniqueness, that is, developing opportunities caused by strong sense of protection of Chinese and economic incentives triggered by China’s rise, and enormous challenges due to dialect’s popularity, policy restrictions, mainstream languages’ effect and staying away from the environment of native language. Summing up the experience of Chinese communication in this country is an important reference for studying overseas Chinese communication and international promotion of Chinese.

With the rise of more and more driving forces, increase of learners and constant improvement of communication means, the Communication of Chinese language in Southeast Asia and even in the whole world will draw more attention. What’s more, the promotion and popularization of Chinese in Chinese society and even other ethnic groups will inevitably promote resource exchange and industrial cooperation among Chinese, native language and lingua franca, and Chinese language will show its positive historical significance.

References


