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Original Paper

Attitudes towards Chinese-English Code-Mixing in Mainland: Why Some Code-Mixings Are Negatively Regarded

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Abstract

In mainland, previous studies have shown that Chinese-English code-mixing is gaining wide popularity while very limited researches focus on the public attitudes towards Chinese-English code-mixing. This paper therefore investigates the general perception of Chinese-English code-mixing in mainland, specifically whether code-mixing is viewed favorably or unfavorably. By conducting online questionnaires which mainly examine the English proficiency of the respondents, their code-mixing usages and their attitudes towards code-mixing in mainland, this paper aims to find out whether different types of code-mixings would lead to different attitudes of respondents, moreover, whether there would be a certain code-mixing type which is particularly liked or disliked. This paper illustrates the idea of Bhatia and Ritchie (2012)- "four factors determining language choice and mixing on the part of the bilingual". Furthermore, this paper contends to analyze the topic by considering the aspects of individual and the social level in terms of psychology, history, education and politics (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2012).

Keywords

Code-mixing, attitudes, mainland, language choice

1. Introduction

Code-mixing, as Hudson (1996) states, refers to the "mixture between two different codes in a sentence that symbolizes the uncertainty upon which code that should be used at best". In order to communicate for the best effect, speakers would normally mix the codes by inserting the elements of one language to another (Fanani & Ma'u, 2018). In mainland China, the practice of code-mixing between Chinese and

English has emerged as a popular language phenomenon that sociolinguists have increasingly focused on in recent years (Huang, 2001). “In addition, this current research was also inspired by the belief that an enriched understanding of such ‘mixing’ practices might also inform our understanding of the multilingual creativity which accompanies code-mixing and multilingual language play in contexts of language contact (Bolton, 2010).” With rising levels of English proficiency among the public in mainland China and the increased use of English in daily interactions, the prevalence of code-mixing between English and Chinese is on the rise, leading to a diversification in the methods employed for code-mixing. In 2019, a noteworthy discussion occurred on Weibo concerning Chinese female celebrity Jiang Yiyan and her distinctive writing style, dubbed “Jiang Yiyan Style”. Controversy arose as some netizens criticized her use of code-mixing, blending Chinese and English in her posts and published works. Many found fault with her gratuitous inclusion of English words such as “book”, “Australia”, and “money”, which they believed could easily be expressed in simple Chinese. This led to the perception of “Jiang Yiyan Style” as pretentious, with speakers being viewed as lacking proficiency in English due to their simplistic use of the language.

The debate surrounding “Jiang Yiyan Style” reflects broader attitudes towards Chinese-English code-mixing in mainland China. While some mixings are accepted and even embraced, others are met with disapproval and discouragement. As noted by Zhang (2012), there exist various code-mixing styles among both working professionals and students, each eliciting different reactions from listeners. Given the distinct emotional responses evoked by these mixings, it is essential to delve into this topic further by examining the diverse forms of Chinese-English code-mixing and the underlying ideologies they convey.

The study of attitudes towards Chinese-English code-mixing in Mainland China holds significant importance for several reasons. First and foremost, language is not merely a medium for communication but also a crucial marker of identity, culture, and societal norms. According to Grosjean (1982), the ways in which bilingual individuals mix languages can provide valuable insights into their cultural affiliations, social integration, and identity negotiation in a rapidly globalizing world. In the context of Mainland China, where the government's language policies strongly endorse the use of Standard Mandarin while promoting English as a crucial skill for international competitiveness, understanding public attitudes towards code-mixing reveals the broader sociolinguistic dynamics at play (Li, 2016). A survey conducted by China Youth Daily in 2019 indicated that 70% of young Chinese professionals frequently used English terms in their Mandarin conversations, highlighting the pragmatic functions of code-mixing in specific domains like technology, business, and international relations. However, this linguistic trend also faces resistance from purists who view it as a threat to cultural integrity and linguistic purity. Research by Yang (2017) found that older generations and those in rural areas exhibited more conservative attitudes towards code-mixing, associating it with cultural erosion and social elitism. By examining these varying perspectives, scholars can better understand the socio-cultural tensions and identity struggles that define contemporary Chinese society. Additionally,

this field of study offers implications for language education policies, as educators seek to balance the teaching of English and Chinese in a way that respects cultural heritage while embracing global linguistic trends (He & Zhang, 2010). Thus, the exploration of attitudes towards Chinese-English code-mixing is essential for comprehending the complex interplay between language, culture, and identity in modern China.

This essay examines the public attitudes towards five types of Chinese-English code-mixings in mainland China. Furthermore, it aims to investigate the hidden ideologies in terms of individual and social factors.

2. Previous Research

The study of CM correlates closely with the study of CS. Previous studies on code-mixing or code-switching have mainly focused on three aspects: structural (grammatical), sociolinguistic (pragmatic) and psycholinguistics (Amuzu, 2014). According to Poplack (1980), there are three types of code-switching: inter-sentential code-switching, intra-sentential code-switching and "Tag" switching. Code-mixing is characterized as intra-sentential code-switching. In terms of the structure of code-switching, Poplack (1980) proposes the "equivalence constraint" and "free morpheme constraint" which provides insightful structural analysis of code-switching. Besides, Myers-Scotton (1993) also puts forwards the "Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model" of structural constraints in intra-clausal or intra-sentential code-switching. By using a written corpus which consists of novels and short stories containing Spanish-English code-switching published in the United States between 1970–2000, the MLF model is contested to be the grammatical structure of code-switching to a large extent (Callahan, 2002). Grosjean (1982) introduced the language mode theory, positing that code-mixing is a natural choice for bilinguals depending on the context and the interlocutors involved. This theory underscores the fluidity with which bilingual individuals navigate between languages, suggesting that code-mixing is a pragmatic response to communicative needs rather than a sign of linguistic deficiency. In sociolinguistic area, the study of Gumperz (1982) suggests the social motivations behind code-switching, producing the first conversational typology of code-switching in the form of a distinction between "situational" and "metaphorical code-switching" (Stell & Yakpo, 2015). In the context of Mainland China, these theoretical frameworks help elucidate why certain instances of Chinese-English code-mixing are perceived negatively. For example, research by Li (2016) indicates that code-mixing is often stigmatized when it is seen as a marker of social elitism or Westernization, clashing with traditional cultural values. In psycholinguistics area, Auer (1998), through his conversation analysis approach, explored the functional and interactional significance of code-mixing in everyday communication. He argued that code-mixing serves various conversational purposes, such as signaling group identity, managing discourse, and facilitating social interactions. Furthermore, a survey by China Youth Daily (2019) revealed that 70% of young professionals frequently use English terms in daily conversations, yet this practice is sometimes criticized by older generations who view it

as a threat to linguistic purity (Yang, 2017). These studies collectively highlight that attitudes towards code-mixing are shaped by a complex interplay of sociocultural factors, including identity, power, and generational differences.

3. Methodology

The study investigates the Chinese-English CM phenomenon in mainland China focusing on whether some CMs are welcomed and some are not. In order to test and prove the preset assumptions that there would be a certain type of CM that is generally disliked, namely, the CM with simple and daily English words (not frequently used while could be expressed by Chinese), the quantitative study is selected. Through the quantitative study, online questionnaires are employed for data collection and analysis as they embody a relatively large number. The questionnaires target only for adults over 18 on account of their higher social interactions and more diversified conversations which are not limited to homogenous environment. Besides, adults over 18 possess more critical insights of both individual psychology and social background in general.

Regarding the questions setting, the questionnaire is designed aiming to uncover several problems:

What are the respondents' personal attitudes towards CM?

How do they view CM in mainland China (situational and social factors)?

How do they regard the five types of CM?

What are their English backgrounds and their frequency of using CM?

There are sixteen questions in the online questionnaire. Notably, they do not record people's attitudes towards code-mixing in mainland China, but also try to find out the reasons behind their attitudes by examining their identities as bilinguals, for instance.

The questionnaire demonstrates five types of code-mixings for respondents to do multiple choices:

Type1: Chinese with technical English words (could hardly be expressed in Chinese)

Type2: Chinese with simple and daily English words which are frequently used and could be accurately expressed in Chinese (e.g., thank you/get/class/chocolate/make sense)

Type3: Chinese with simple and daily English words which are not frequently used and could be accurately expressed in Chinese (e.g., red wine/think/participant/ dormitory)

Type4: Chinese with frequently used English words which could not be expressed in Chinese well (e.g., visa/presentation/lecture/portfolio/due)

Type5: Chinese with Chinglish (Chinese English) words (e.g., "hold"住/what are you 弄啥咧）

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size of the questionnaire survey is relatively small, which may not fully represent the overall situation in mainland China. Second, the respondents are primarily aged between 18 and 35, which may not reflect the attitudes of different age groups. Finally, the online questionnaire format may lead to some respondents providing less rigorous or accurate answers.

4. Data Analysis and Results

Overall, there are 109 answer sheets for the online questionnaire which are proved to be valid for further discussion. From the results, there are several aspects that need to be compared and analyzed: the relationship between respondents' self-identification as bilinguals and their attitudes towards CM; the acceptance levels of the five types of CM among respondents as both listeners and speakers; the impact of social background on attitudes towards CM, including the overall societal context and specific social circles (e.g., friends, colleagues, parents).

Table 1 is the comparison between two questions: 1. Do you regard yourself as a bilingual? 2. How do you treat Chinese-English CM? The comparison of these two questions exposes the inner correlation between language identity and their attitudes. About 38% of the respondents who regard themselves as bilinguals show their very positive attitudes towards CM as favorable and acceptable while only about 15% of the non-bilingual respondents hold the same attitude. However, the table also reveals the fact that whether for respondents who do think themselves as bilinguals or non-bilinguals, they have relatively same level of acceptance towards CM. For bilinguals, the figure is about 88% and for non-bilinguals, 78%, the former one being slightly bigger.

Therefore, it can be concluded from the Table1 that there is a very high percentage of acceptance towards CM in mainland while for respondents who regard themselves as bilinguals, their attitudes towards CM prove to be more positive.

Table 1. Analyses of two Questions Centering on Identity and Attitude

Identity	bilingual (Yes)	bilingual (No)
Attitudes		
Favorable and Acceptable	16(38.10%)	10(14.93%)
Favorable, Partially Acceptable	14(33.33%)	24(35.82%)
Not Favorable but Acceptable	7(16.67%)	18(26.87%)
Not Favorable, Not Acceptable	0(0.00%)	4(5.97%)
No Feelings	5(11.90%)	11(16.42%)
Total	42	67

Table 2. Analysis of Five Types of CM

Role	hearer	speaker
Acceptance of Different Types		
Type1	67(63.20%)	58(61.70%)
Type2	65(61.32%)	53(56.38%)
Type3	29(27.36%)	17(18.08%)
Type4	61(57.54%)	51(54.25%)

Type5	42(39.62%)	33(35.11%)
Total	106	94

Table 2 concerns with the main research topic of this essay-whether there is a certain code-mixing type that is typically liked or disliked. The acceptance of the respondents towards CM is investigated from two perspectives, namely, when they act as a hearer and a speaker. It can be seen from the chart that being a hearer or a speaker brings minute differences in the figures. To explain, it does not influence their attitudes towards these five types of CM.

The most surprising finding in this chart is that among these five types, Type3 has the least acceptance rate with only 27.36% and 28.08% while Type1,2 and 4 turn out to be the most popular ones, followed by Type5. Since Type3 which conforms to “Jiang Yiyan Style” is exactly the CM with simple and daily English words (frequently used and congruent in Chinese), the result in fact confirms the previous hypothesis that there is a CM type which is generally disliked.

Table 3. Analysis of CM Social Background. Do You Think the Society Is Favorable for CM?

Society	Favorable	Not Favorable	No Feelings
	52(47.71%)	22(20.18%)	35(32.11%)

Table 4. Analysis of CM Social Background. Do you think your Friends/Colleagues/Parents are Favorable for CMs?

Attitude	Favorable	Not Favorable	No Feelings
	19(17.43%)	41(37.61%)	49(44.95%)

As Table 3 and Table 4 shows, the social background of CM in mainland China tends to be negative to some extent in terms of social attitude and social pragmatic communication. Less than 50% of the respondents believe the society is favorable for CM and less than 20% of the respondents think CM is favorable in actual conversations with friends/colleagues/parents.

5. Results and Discussions

According to Bhatia and Ritchie (2012), there are four factors determining language choice and mixing on the part of bilinguals: (1) the social roles and relationships of the participants; (2) situational factors: discourse topic and language allocation; (3) message-intrinsic considerations, and (4) language attitudes including social dominance and security. In mainland China, the majority of the citizens are native Chinese speakers, making the society a monolingual one to some extent. Although English has been applied as a compulsory course in fundamental education in mainland China, a large portion of mainlanders do not regard them as bilinguals even though they have a good command of English

(Table 2). Intrinsically, individuals would regard themselves as monolingual Chinese speakers and reach the agreement that they choose Chinese as the language choice to communicate for the best efficiency. To explain, Chinese is one of "many potent symbols that individuals can strategically use when testing or maintaining boundaries between groups" (Meyerhoff, 2011).

However, what could not be ignored is the fact that in mainland China, there are more and more Chinese and English interactions especially in conversations of young people. According to Zhang (2012), for the young generation in mainland China, 'mixing' has become part of their everyday communication practices as they "build multicultural identities, transform the traditional social relationships and practice their social responsibilities". As 106 out of 109 respondents of my online questionnaire age from 18 to 35 years old, they have shown a very high acceptance towards CM (Table 1). Nevertheless, the situational factors which influence speakers' choice of CM do not contribute to the favor and support of Type3 (Table 2). In daily conversations, the simple English words which are not frequently used and congruent in Chinese could be perfectly expressed in Chinese. Therefore, speakers do not have to rely on Type3 to discuss topics or to make audiences understand-Chinese is enough for expression. The Message-intrinsic factors as well do not contribute to the public recognition of Type3. Since Type3 could be accurately expressed in Chinese, there is a few pragmatic considerations involving "quotations, reiterations and message qualifications" (Bhatia & Richie, 2012) for Type3 CM. In this case, mainlanders are seldom exposed to the Type3 CM and have a low acceptance towards it (Table 2).

In terms of social factors, the results of the online questionnaire exemplify the relatively negative social background of code-mixing in mainland China. Even though

the country greatly promotes English and frequently employs Chinese-English CM in its governmental organizations' microblogs in order to approach the style of youth, there is a strict rule of using CM, especially for formal written publication (Zhang, 2015). In 2010, GAPP (the General Administration of Press and Publication) of People's Republic of China (PRC) announced that "no random mixing of words or acronyms from English or other foreign languages is allowed in Chinese publications in mainland China". It is established due to the "abusive use" of language such as random Chinese-English CM which has "seriously damaged" the purity of Chinese and "destroyed the harmonious and healthy linguistic and cultural environment" (GAPP 2010). Despite the prevalence of English, Chinese is guaranteed by the government to be the dominant language in mainland China as to strengthen the ideological unity and political governance. Chinese language shares the innate group memory and group identity. It is the bond of more than 1.4 billion Chinese citizens who share the same and traditional Chinese identity. Therefore, with regard to code-mixing, the English words mixed have little possibilities to replace the most fundamental daily Chinese words in conversations. As Type3 code-mixing reveals, the replacement of fundamental Chinese words by congruent English words is not favored to a large extent. To explain, although there is a tendency that more and more English words are merging into the Chinese sentences and lead to the diversification of Chinese-English code-mixing,

the essential meaning of a sentence, specifically the basic words of a sentence are thought to be expressed by Chinese rather than English. The attitudes towards Type3 CM reflect that the mainlanders treasure and value their Chinese identity embedded in Chinese language.

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