

# Multilingualism of Shanghai Indigenous Residents

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## Abstract

This assignment analyses and researches the multilingual characteristics of Shanghai's local residents because of the controversial definitions of multilingualism. Under national language policy of Mandarin promotion, Shanghai dialect is in danger and should be cared for. It is a qualitative research based on the data from literature. From historical perspective, three languages frequently used in Shanghai are discussed and it turns out their connection of coexistence rather than competition. It also reveals that Shanghai indigenous residents are multilingual among Mandarin, Chinese and English.

## Keywords

Multilingual, Indigenous, Shanghai, Standardization

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## 1. Introduction

Shanghai has been the economic center of China for over 150 years. It was semi-colonized as a lucrative treaty port in 1845 after the Opium War and attracted settlers from Britain and America, France and Germany as well as other European nations, before Japanese occupation in 1895 (Abbas, 2000). Since then, millions of immigrants from other provinces of China and overseas have settled in and brought their languages to Shanghai with hopes for a better future (Gamble, 2003). As a result, in addition to “Shanghainese” there are now many languages that are used in the city including Mandarin, Cantonese, Chinese minority languages like Manchu/Tibetan, and foreign languages such as English/French (Gao & Smyth, 2011), which together have established a hotbed of multilingualism in Shanghai. Shanghainese is used to present the regional language only in the paper. There are three popular languages, Mandarin, Shanghainese (Shanghai dialect) and English, among Shanghai residents. Man-

darin has been far more widely used than Shanghainese by Shanghai Indigenous residents. For fear of the demise of Shanghainese, the paper is written to call for more attention on the multilingualism of Shanghai indigenous, which is beneficial for the language diversity in the area of Shanghai.

### **Aims of the Assignment**

The second topic of discussing a multilingual region is developed in this assignment based on Shanghai with a linguistic picture and a pluralistic setting of how triple languages coexist. Shanghai is chosen as the study subject because I am familiar with the city where I was born and raised, and Shanghai has a plentiful linguistic diversity to explore. This assignment focuses on studying the speech community of indigenous Shanghai residents who are commonly able to use Shanghainese and have long-term interactions with family generations in Shanghai (Song, 2018). This reflects my own interests and experiences, but is also because people who migrate from both abroad and within China to Shanghai tend to present as a dynamic and fluid group, rather than being settled, and as a result are hard to study (Liao & Wong, 2015).

The paper is intended to explore features of Shanghai indigenous multilingualism from four perspectives. First, there is a discussion about the definitions of what is meant by language and multilingualism and the connections between these terms. Second, there is a description of multilingualism in Shanghai based on the database of the population of Shanghai residents and an overview of the linguistic landscape. Third, there is an analysis of multilingualism among the indigenous Shanghai population, mainly from a view of the current language state and education. Finally, this assignment chronologically explores the main language shift that has occurred in the city, which happened mainly due to Chinese national language policy.

## **2. Definitions of Multilingualism: Individual and Group Approaches**

Studying whether a community is multilingual needs a clarification of definitions in advance, but this is difficult because there is not a universal agreement on what multilingualism is. This is mainly because of differing perspectives regarding the nature and purpose of languages and different disciplinary and ideological backgrounds (Kemp, 2009).

On a simple level, the word multilingual can describe an individual or social group that uses more than two languages and can be a unit of study for both psychology and sociology (Baker, 2006). Alternatively, multilingualism is a common and complex phenomenon in disciplines such as linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and education. It is an interdisciplinary phenomenon that can be studied from both an individual and a societal perspective (Cenoz, 2013: p. 3), to which scholars of different fields give various definitions.

The definition of multilingualism then varies based on different research

backgrounds and study objectives towards individuals and society, which is regarded as one of the complexities of multilingualism (Beisbart, 2021). For example, Kemp (2009) purely defined that multilingualism is the use of three or more languages (p. 11), which is a widespread global phenomenon. Pennycook (2007) defines multilingualism as “the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than two languages in their day-to-day lives”. Pavlenko (2007) thinks theoretical models of multilingual development, competence, performance and processing have not been sufficiently elaborated and gives a more inclusive definition of multilingualism that is related to emotions, because languages can explain our emotional experience. Therefore, multilingualism is a more sophisticated and dynamic phenomenon than the narrow disciplinary framework of contemporary linguistic theory (May, 2014a: p. 8).

From my conception, I agree with Cenoz (2013) that it is nonsense to separate individual multilingualism and societal multilingualism, because they are closely related to each other. An empirical case in the center of the Northern Amazon gives us an example. There is a large multilingual area, with each tribe managing its own language, but where almost every individual possesses three languages for the purposes of mixing social units as occurs for instance, in exogamic marriage (Sorensen Jr., 1967). Hence, a collection of individual universality constitutes the essential characteristics of multilingualism (Aronin & Laoire, 2004: p. 25).

Additionally, multilinguals have more than two languages, so it is hard to know whether their one language competency is lesser or greater than another, depending on their acquisition and frequency in each of their languages (Edwards, 2009). How to evaluate their language proficiency is problematic, because there is hardly an objective answer that can respond to questions like “how fluent is fluency?” (Aronin & Singleton, 2012: p. 2). According to differing individual levels and capacities of multilingualism, there might be differences in the experience of how to acquire or use languages at differing levels in terms of different contexts (Zuo & Mok, 2015; Hoffmann, 1985). Though language proficiency is one of the important indicators of multilingualism, for the reasons above it is not covered here.

### **Defining Multilingualism**

To be clear, in the context of this assignment, multilingualism refers to the phenomenon of plural language usage of indigenous Shanghai residents, which can be defined mainly as societal multilingualism which is linked with linguistic repertoire in a specific geographical area (Cenoz, 2013), regardless of individual language proficiency in each language. Hence, the definition of multilingualism in Shanghai depends on *the number of languages* indigenous residents acquire, which is based on how to recognize a language from another and whether a dialect is a language or not.

### 3. Definition of Language: Dialects versus Standardised Forms

The possession of language distinguishes humans from other animals to a significant degree, a code which has been called the “human essence” (Fromkin et al., 2018). Language is described as a system of communication of linguistic communication particular to a group, including spoken, written, and signed modes (Wardhaugh, 2015: p. 2). Additionally, dialects are also known as language varieties that basically represent divergent geographic origins. In fact, language variety is broader than dialect because it can be both regional and social. As a result, the norm dialect seems to be a regional sub-unit, whereas language is a superordinate designation (Fishman, 1970).

#### 3.1. Dialects

However, I suppose that dialects can change into languages due to particular purposes and historical developments. For example, the book *French from dialect to standard* (Lodge, 1993: p. 933) suggests that French was not a socially identifiable language before the 13th century until Louis XIV achieved undisputed dominance of the sociopolitical scene in France and French society established the identity of the dominant group. In this way, one can discover when a language variety is legitimate or able to represent the identity of the speech group, it is likely to be regarded as a language (Trudgill, 2000).

The legitimation of a language depends on various factors, of which is societal condition. Because French was codified in the minutest detail in the period described above and because of its privileged role in society, it was legitimised by its elaboration as the “ideology of the standard” (Lodge, 1993: p. 27). Though one of the behaviors towards language is standardization, note that vernaculars sometimes also accept parallel leveling (Auer, 2005: p. 6).

#### 3.2. Standard Forms

Standardization is a characteristic societal treatment of language (Fishman, 2019) and varieties change as speech communities change (Fishman, 1970). What is the standardization of languages? Crucial features that can change a norm from vernacular to standard include the following aspects: 1) selection of norm, 2) codification of form, 3) elaboration of function, and 4) acceptance by the community (Haugen, 1966: p. 933). Generally speaking, whether a code is language is due to at least four factors above. This also means that one code is legally considered a language and the other language varieties (vernaculars) in the state are called dialects (Lodge, 1993). However, this is a problematic hypothesis because no one can certainly predict whether the legality of a language will be changed or not someday like French. Therefore, the distinction of languages and dialects is controversial and ambiguous (Anderson, 2016).

But if we switch ourselves from the societal to the linguistic perspective, it will be much clearer to establish what language is. In an interview, Noam Chomsky

once gave his perspective of language as optimally enabling the brain to express thought, which is from the minimalist approach to linguistics (Chomsky, 2002). Additionally, researchers of the linguistic field generally regard language as a variety of other systems of communication, notation or calculation and languages are organizations of signals engineered to communicate (Lyons, 1981: p. 8).

### 3.3. Defining Language

Therefore, I approval of the linguistic definition of language ignoring the taxonomy of the enumeration of languages, to regard all varieties of communicative codes that whether they have literature, whether they have a long history or whether they are proved legally as languages, which means *dialects should deserve the equality* of being regarded as an independent language.

## 4. The Social Context of Shanghainese: Immigration and Indigenous

China has officially 55 ethnic minorities, while Han Chinese is the majority. Generally, minority ethnic groups have their own languages, such as Mongolians, Tibetans and Uighers respectively in Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang (Gao & Smyth, 2011). Besides at least eighty minority languages, there are also seven main regional languages of Han Chinese such as Yue language, Wu language and Northern language and more than 2000 language varieties (Li, 2006), of which Shanghainese belongs to the Wu language and Mandarin to the Northern language.

Analysing the population of Shanghai facilitates studying the diverse language repertoires that are affected by education level, family background, local culture, social identity and many other factors (Benor, 2010). The decennial census data (Shanghai Government 2017) revealed that there are 24.19 million registered residents in Shanghai, of whom 9.80 million (40%) are enrolled as floating population, while the rest have household registration as a local resident (Gao & Ren, 2019). According to the census data, in addition to Chinese, there are overseas residents in Shanghai from over 200 nations. Migrants from overseas and from different regions of China might bring their various first languages to Shanghai, which has resulted in a deeply heterogeneous linguistic environment in the city. This is the reason why it is impossible to study towards all Shanghai residents.

Back to my subject of indigenous shanghai residents, the report (Jiao, 2009) shows that the 75% participants who are local residents acquire Shanghainese as their first language. In addition, the survey data (Shen, 2017: p. 431) shows that only 1.16% are no-schooling citizens and 2010 census statistics points 1.88%. Shanghai residents learn two compulsory language subjects that are a foreign language (mainly English) and Mandarin Chinese (Zou et al., 2011: p. 134). In my view then, the majority indigenous resident group, which contains 60% of the whole Shanghai population, is broadly multilingual with three languages:

Shanghainese as a first language, Mandarin as the second language and English as the third language (Hu & Liu, 2020).

## 5. Three Languages: Competition or Coexistence

If there is more than one language used in a speech community, what is the outcome of language interaction? On one hand, it can be the competition, because it is estimated that nearly 90% of thousands of languages are going to disappear within the present generation in the world (Abrams & Strogatz, 2003). On the other hand, languages can also work and live together, which are linked to social status, historical effects, future development, the age range of a speech community, increments of interlinguistic similitude, education level, language preference and governmental policy (Mira et al., 2010). At the same time, Mira et al. (2011) also uses mathematical methodologies to prove that even the outcome of the competition between two languages is not ineluctably the death of one language. Next, I will expand on some of the above factors in terms of Mandarin, Shanghainese and English in Shanghai.

### 5.1. National Language: Mandarin

Mandarin began to take a dominant position in Shanghai covering the whole population after the new curriculum reform in 2001 (Qian & Walker, 2013). Mandarin originated from Northern Chinese that is presently lingua franca (standard language) in mainland China. Language policies in China have rotated between what Zhou and Sun (2004) call pluralistic and integrationist approaches, emphasizing accommodation and assimilation. Mandarin is for verbal communication while Chinese Hanzi is used mainly in literacy. As stated, Mandarin as the standard language is an approach to continue marginalizing indigenous and minority languages and to benefit opportunity, national unity, and harmonious society. An evolution of language policies to sustain an assimilation trend is now embedded by schooling (Beckett & Postiglione, 2012, pp. 3-5). In public schools, the education model is monolingual in that Mandarin is the only language used in communication. Almost all courses are taught in Mandarin except the discipline of foreign language, and there are also Mandarin lessons particularly for minority students (Dello-Iacovo, 2009).

Furthermore, the lexical similarity between Shanghainese and Mandarin is only 29% (Xue, 2016), which makes immigrants or new Shanghai residents struggle to understand Shanghainese. Due to the low similarity, we can predict the competition of these two languages is likely to be fiercer (Mira et al., 2011). However, the communication between local Shanghai residents and migrants is now facilitated principally by official Mandarin and because of the promotion of this language above others (Chang, 1987).

### 5.2. Regional Language: Shanghainese

Shanghainese is now generally regarded as a regional language or a dialect, even

though it was once the main language in the city before the 1970s (Chen et al., 2014). Shanghainese, also known as Hu language, originates from a branch of Wu language and developed to conduct its unique pronunciation and arts like Haipai Culture and Hu Drama (Xie, 2011). Though Shanghainese competency is linked with the identity of being “real” shanghai residents with pride (Chen et al., 2014: p. 31), Shanghainese is not commonly used in formal situations such as social media or business conferences. Its trace can only be found in a limited way in the community. For example, Shanghai public transports use three languages (Mandarin, Shanghainese, English) to communicate with passengers (Shao & Gao, 2019). In the 2000s, Shanghainese has been losing its dominant position since immigrants from other provinces of China flooded in Shanghai and Mandarin was widely accepted in the whole nation (Chen & Gussenhoven, 2015). By contrast to Mandarin, Shanghainese is not a subject of the national curriculum. From my own experience, the acquisition of Shanghainese is more likely to happen in an informal way and usually in the home, because I learnt how to pronounce and understand Shanghainese mainly in the process of communicating with my relatives, which can be regarded as first language acquisition. Additionally, the survey (Jiao, 2009: p. 30) also shows that nearly 44% of Shanghainese-speaking participants claim that they learn how to use Shanghainese at home.

### 5.3. Exotic Language: English

After general reviews of two Chinese languages, English is a foreign language for Chinese people. With the fast path of internalization, English represents more than a language, which is neoliberalism, globalisation and human capital (Penneycook, 2007). According to the importance of English, English language teaching policies start to present in the Chinese curriculum for preparing domestic citizens ready for the worldwide labour market (Doiz et al., 2011). English is presently a compulsory subject in China and all elementary schools have suitably qualified teachers (Nunan, 2003). It is common for children to learn English at Grade 3 aged 9 in other provinces of China, but Shanghai, with the most advanced basic education system in China and the first city to accomplish the nine-year compulsory education system (Sellar & Lingard, 2013), requests children to learn a foreign language in their first year of primary school (Kyriacou & Zhu, 2008). Though the Shanghai Project as it is called aims at greatly encouraging bilingual education in the form of Chinese and English, it is still at the experimental stage of experimentation and English in class is limited (Xie, 2011).

For students, English is more likely to be exam-oriented, because national exams require students to sit for a Foreign Language as the compulsory subject. The students’ scores in these exams determine whether they will be admitted into higher education (Tan, 2012). Meanwhile, a strong belief among Shanghai parents that fluent English also represents the “upper-class” motivates them to



care about the English proficiency of their children. Parents spend expenditure on tuition of commercial supplementary schools to provide additional English support for their children (Wei, 2011). For adults, English is closely related to job embeddedness, because a high competency in English makes an individual more strengthened in the labour market (Gong et al., 2011). There are also professional schools for adults to learn English from every level (Boshier et al., 2006). Nowadays, code-switching between Chinese and English has increased in international businesses, where English has become the common language to interact with foreigners (Cao et al., 2018), which makes English more and more popular in the global port of Shanghai.

#### 5.4. The Frequency of Three Languages in Shanghai

There is no doubt that Mandarin is the majority language in Shanghai, because the frequency of Mandarin among Shanghai indigenous people reaches 97% (Jiao, 2009: p. 31). The competition between Mandarin and Shanghainese is fiercer than co-existence. As a result, there is an increasingly heated debate that Shanghainese is in danger and will be lost in the decades to come, because of massive migration and the stipulation of using Mandarin (Shao & Gao, 2019). Luckily, the Shanghai government took actions to protect its own regional Chinese variety such as “Shanghainese Heritage Project” (Shen, 2016) and there also spring out lots of private agencies to promote Shanghainese (Xia & Shen, 2019).

At the same time, English is more and more important mainly for the purposes of professionals and education, since Shanghai as a vital export and import hub for international commerce requires more global talents (Xie, 2011). Although the importance of English is obvious, English is not widely used in life except at work. A data survey found that English learnt by Shanghai respondents that had studied foreign languages is 91.74%, but that frequency of English among those who had studied English was given as 14.72% for often, 19.8% for sometimes and 65.48% for seldom (Wei & Feng, 2015). This shows that English education and its empirical practice are likely to be separated because the majority of respondents hardly use English. It is unapparent of the interaction or code-switching among English and other two languages because of the low frequency of English in daily life.

Shanghai residents have trilingual competencies, but they choose which language to use, with whom and in which situation actually based on their own purpose for perceived advantages in their daily lives (Reverberi et al., 2018). For example, the usage rate of Shanghainese was 57.7% when participants communicated with the grand generation, while the usage rate dropped to around 39% when talking with parents and siblings (Jiao, 2009: p. 32). Language choices are also relevant to identity in linguistic variability and social categories such as ethnicity, class, and gender (Labov, 1972). For example, Shanghainese is regarded as a tool to identify indigenous Shanghai residents, which is one of the barriers to social integration for new residents (Chen & Gussenhoven, 2015).



## 6. Language Shift in Shanghai: Colonisation and Centralisation

Language shift is the process whereby members of a community in which more than one language is spoken abandon their original vernacular language in favour of another (Kandler et al., 2010: p. 3855). Additionally, language shift is related to its ethnocultures in these major ways: indexically, symbolically and in a part/whole fashion (Dipert, 1996). That language which has customarily been relevant to a given ethnocultural is, at any time during which that connection is complete and full, best capable of denominating ancient artifacts and of establishing or sharing the cultural interests and values (Fishman, 1990). Here will briefly introduce the language shift between Shanghainese and Mandarin chronologically.

In 1843, Shanghai was forced by the colonialists to open up as a treaty port, after the Opium War, which assisted Shanghai to grow economically to some degree. In this period, Shanghainese was spoken by the Shanghai upper-class while media and films produced by local movie industries were Shanghainese-spoken. As a result, Shanghainese also came to represent an aura of superiority and an insignia of pride (Cao et al., 2018: p. 224). Because of the economic development policy in the 1970s, plenty of immigrants flooded into Shanghai and outnumbered the indigenous Shanghainese. Though those immigrants brought their languages to Shanghai, the phonology of Shanghainese was not affected and Shanghainese was regarded as the first language. Moreover, Chinese immigrants' children were encouraged to learn Shanghainese, because mastering it could help those people to be accepted by the local community and was a way to gain respect (Qian, 2003; Farrer, 2008).

Before the millennium, Shanghainese took the dominant position among other languages in Shanghai. However, the language shift from Shanghainese to Mandarin occurred just within the last two decades. Influenced by national policies such as Mandarin Promotion in 2005, young Shanghai residents have gradually become generally trilingual among Mandarin Shanghainese and English through schooling, whereas the old generation continued to use Shanghainese and did not have a desire to switch (Cao et al., 2018).

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the promotion of Mandarin was paralleled by the establishment of Chinese Hanzi as the modern written Chinese to tackle urgent problems of illiteracy and a lack of popular education (Spolsky, 2014). Though the national policy claims that Mandarin is designated as the standard language while the minority languages and language varieties are encouraged to be used freely (Valdés, 1995), the fact is that use of other languages except Mandarin is decreasing (Spolsky, 2021; Dwyer, 2016; Shen, 2016; Roche & Tsomu, 2018). This includes Shanghainese.

The Proficiency data (Jiao, 2009: p. 31) shows that the speech group who only acquire Shanghainese is 63%, and the community who master both Shanghainese and Mandarin accounts for 74%, which points that Mandarin presently is

the main language for Shanghai indigenous citizens. It is estimated that nearly 97% of Shanghai residents can speak Mandarin, but participants' frequency (% of time) of Shanghainese in their daily life was only 27%, and their average of using Shanghainese to speak to another Shanghai speaker was only 47% (Yan et al., 2020: p. 715). The Shanghai Social Academy reports that more than 40 % of children in schools cannot speak Shanghainese well (Shao & Gao, 2019). The survey (Kim et al., 2019) including 187 subjects who were native Chinese speakers and were born and raised in Shanghai, reveals that all participants notably could speak fluent Mandarin but they could hardly speak Shanghainese as well as Mandarin. These data give strong evidence that Shanghainese is decreasing. Though it is remarkable and frightening how fast language shifts happened, fortunately, local government and Shanghai residents both notice the truth that Shanghainese is in danger and conducted some projects to develop Shanghainese maintenance (Shen, 2016; Li, 2015).

Through a glance at nearly two-hundred-years of history, the language shift in Shanghai has been shown to be closely related to the language policies of the national government. Shanghainese was once a language that immigrants and local residents both used and learnt. Learning Shanghainese can be spontaneous according to personal life needs. However under the influence of national policy, the conversion between the two languages will still be tilted in accordance with the language planning of the government. Now only older Shanghai citizens use it and many children have incomplete Shanghainese proficiency, while Mandarin has become the dominant language due to national language planning. If the proportion of Shanghainese speaking people in the city will keep decreasing as previous data suggest, I am worried that the next generation might be unable to appreciate the Haipai culture and Hu opera that are both performed and appreciated in Shanghainese (Wu, 2004).

## 7. Conclusion

In brief, this assignment analyses and researches the multilingual characteristics of Shanghai local residents and is launched from my own subjective perspective because of the controversial definitions of multilingualism. It reveals that Shanghai indigenous residents are multilinguals among Mandarin, Chinese and English. The frequency of Mandarin ranks at the top and then is Shanghainese, while the language shift between these two languages is mainly affected by the national language policy. Meanwhile, though promoting Mandarin is vital for China where it has always been multilingual (Ma, 2007), I think saving the language varieties including Shanghainese weighs the same value for many Chinese. The protection of language diversity is a way to respect and inherit the unique regional cultures of each speech community. With the path of increasing globalization, multilingualism is an unstoppable tendency in the world, which often leads English to dominate (May, 2014b), so how to switch English education from exam-direct to practice-oriented and realize true bilingual education might

be the next key point for the state of English in China.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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