

Mandarin, Suzhou Dialect and English: Multilingualism in Suzhou

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Abstract

This paper explains the situation of Mandarin, Suzhou dialect and English in Suzhou, the relation between language policy and language use, discusses the positive and negative consequences that multilingualism in Suzhou might have for the society, and focuses on the change of language use in Suzhou and provides suggestions for the maintenance of Suzhou dialect. The multilingualism in Suzhou is a new phenomenon of the 21st century, and has led to different personal attitudes towards language use and language choice. The right balance among the three, Suzhou dialect as the local language, Mandarin as the national language and English as the global language, is worth researching for long-term harmonious development.

Keywords: Mandarin, Suzhou dialect, English, multilingualism, Suzhou

1. Introduction

Sociolinguistics is relevant to the relationship between language and the different context in which it is used (Holmes, 2008). As a subject of exploring language variation and social differentiation, it draws on theory and practice from diverse fields. Within various subfields of sociolinguistics, multilingualism is an emerging phenomenon around the world. Take Asian as an example, Singapore has four official languages – English, Mandarin, Tamil and Malay; while many African countries reported that in officially English Nigeria 80 million people use 400 languages (Edwards, 2002). China is a vast dialectal complex including hundreds of local varieties, each of which can be viewed as a distinct object for research (Norman, 2003). Therefore, this study analyzes language choices and language use in Suzhou, my hometown in Jiangsu Province, Southeast China, where we interact, shape and switch under the impact of multilingualism.

The Suzhou Municipal City has been chosen to be the focus of this study for the following reasons. First, with a history of more than 2500 years and a tradition of splendid ancient civilization, the city is the heart of 'Wu Culture' during the Song Dynasty (Zhi, 1998). Under the impact of Wu Culture, it emerged numerous Wu dialects since ancient times. Suzhou dialect is considered to belong to well-defined dialect groups Wu and evolves its phonetic features from time to time. Therefore, the unique form of written and spoken Suzhou dialect is still in use in different situation. Second, Figure 1 below shows the location of Suzhou in the southwest of Jiangsu Province. It covers an area of 8848 square kilometers. According to the most recently released statistical data from Administrative Bureau of Suzhou, the population of Suzhou was 13 million in 2012, which becomes the second largest immigrant city in China. This is a challenging demographic, social and economic issue for the city; more importantly, the large floating population has also influenced the language use in Suzhou. In terms of economy, Suzhou has been consecutively ranked among the top 10 fastest developing cities in China. On one hand, Suzhou is attracting numerous international tourists due to its UNESCO World Heritage status. On the other hand, with the fast development of Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), those foreign enterprises have bought foreign immigrants whose national language is English, thus stimulating the need of English (Inkpen and Pien, 2006). Therefore, it is a combination of old and new, oriental heritage and western culture. Fourth, the multilingualism of Mandarin, Suzhou dialect and English in Suzhou has been selected as the topic of this paper because Suzhou is my hometown where I formerly studied and lived for more than twenty years, and witnessed rapid urban development and language situation change in Suzhou all these years. Therefore, I am familiar with the city and its language identity.



Figure 1. The Location of Suzhou in Jiangsu Province (A Part of Wu District in the Past)
(Source: <http://www.johomaps.com/as/china/chinamap1.html>)

This paper explores multilingualism in a geographic context in China. Focus is upon the Suzhou dialect, Mandarin and English languages in their political, social and economic contexts in general. Theoretically, we wonder what the language facts are in the past of Suzhou, what factors it is to prompt the change of language use in Suzhou, and what development trend the multilingualism in Suzhou will be.

In order to describe positive and negative consequences that multilingualism might have for a society, the central issues in this paper are as follows:

- (1) Explain the situation of Mandarin, Suzhou dialect and English in Suzhou, the relation between language policy and language use.
- (2) Discuss the positive and negative consequences that multilingualism in Suzhou might have for the society.
- (3) Focus on the change of language use in Suzhou and provide suggestions for the maintenance of Suzhou dialect.

2. Literature Review

The literature on multilingualism in a regional context in China will be reviewed with particular attention to the following two parts:

- (1) Review theoretical frameworks of language policy in general, and language policy from particular perspective in Suzhou.
- (2) Look at multilingualism in China with particular focus on Suzhou dialect and its proliferation of English.

2.1 Language and Language Policy

What is language? Language, a set of “very specific universal principles which are intrinsic properties of the human mind and part of our species”, perhaps is the current best answer given by Chomsky (Chomsky, 1986). However, when we consider multilingualism phenomenon, it is always in several particular languages with particular dialects and pronounced with particular accents (Downes, 1998). Thus, language, from this perspective, becomes more complex.

According to Spolsky’s model (2006, Figure 2), language policy is composed of three elements: language practice, language ideology, and language management activities. Language practice is how a group of people selected language, and accepted rules of language choice and variety within a speech community (Spolsky, 2011). Language ideology can not only influence national agendas about language policy, but also impact on personal attitudes regarding their choices of different languages (Yang, 2012). Moreover, language ideology is a prerequisite regarding the role of each language and reflects its usage order in a multilingual society (Zhou, 2011). In order to reveal the multilingual ideologies in Suzhou towards the Suzhou dialect, Mandarin and global language — English, the exploration of language policy is helpful. Based on Shohamy’s study, the most powerful mechanism that puts the ideology into practice is laws and regulations (2006). Therefore, the specific policy and language use in the context of Suzhou will be discussed.

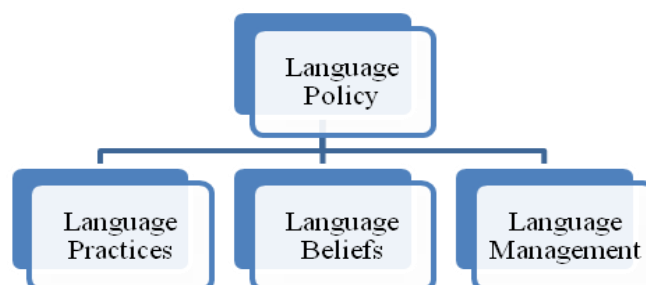


Figure 2. A Model of Language Policy

2.2 Mandarin Language Policy

Based on northern dialects and the normative grammar in modal modern-language works, Mandarin, commonly used by modern Han nationality, takes the pronunciation of Beijing speech as a standard. Mandarin is the most important communication tool of modern Han nationality, at the same time a statutory national common language (Huang Borong, 2008).

Language policy maintains the language use within a community, and enables powerful groups to facilitate national, political, social and economic agendas (Shohamy, 2012). In mainland China, Mandarin has been recognized as the standard language because of the political and cultural significance (Li and Thompson, 1989). After the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing became the national centre of politics, economy and culture, playing an important role in the process of the formation of Mandarin. At the beginning of the 20th century, the vernacular movement advocated people to write Chinese the way it is spoken, together with the national language movement, which enhanced the representativeness of Beijing speech colloquially. It serves to promote the standardization process of Mandarin as the national language (Chao, 1971; Duanmu, 2002).

The constitution of China stipulates that the state promotes the nationwide use of Mandarin, out of consideration for its importance. The promotion of Mandarin may further break down dialect barriers and favour social intercourse. In the context of more and more international communication, the further promotion of Mandarin will be helpful in reducing the difficulties of language communication. According to the policies on the promotion of Mandarin in future, the following points should be noted (Huang Borong, 2008): First, the teaching-in-Chinese schools at different levels use Mandarin as teaching language. Second, Mandarin should be used as working language in the official activities of institutions and enterprises.

In fact, the previous language policy focused mainly on the position and role of Mandarin, however, with the development of economy and culture in recent years, how to balance effectively the relation between Mandarin and dialects is facing language policy makers and the topic of this kind does not appear to be fully discussed.

2.3 Suzhou Dialect

China is a populous country with numerous local dialects (fangyan), which can be divided into seven types: northern dialect (Mandarin dialect), Wu dialect, Xiang dialect, Gan dialect, Min dialect, Hakka dialect and Cantonese (Zhou, 2000). Historically, Suzhou used to be the capital of Wu State three thousand years ago, and its dialect is typical of Wu region, difficult to be understood by the peoples speaking other dialects, and is also a literary language, in which there have been so many literatures written from the 14th century onward. In the ancient city of Suzhou, Suzhou *Tanci*, a traditional storytelling that combines singing, instrumental music and a mixture of narrative registers and dialogue was popular, but this art is disappearing gradually because the dialectal variation in Suzhou (Bender, 1998). In modern Suzhou dialect, the co-existence of old and new style still exists. The old style is what the older generation of Suzhou says, and sounds quite pure and proficient, while the new style refers to the variation of Suzhou dialect because of urbanization and migration. Facing this rapid change, Suzhou government has carried out a local biligual education policy with the aim of maintaining local dialect for cultural preservation and economic development.

The using frequency of Mandarin and Suzhou dialect in Suzhou has been investigated and examined through sociolinguistic analysis (Wang Ping, 2003). Wang has pointed out that, in general, the using of Suzhou dialect is decreasing while that of Mandarin is increasing. Until the 1950s, the natives just talked in Suzhou dialect to the outsiders, and basically, all the students spoke Suzhou dialect no matter on what occasions. But now students almost all speak Mandarin in classroom. There are many reasons leading to such major changes, among those are two primary reasons: the language policy and the greatly accelerated speed of social development. At present, Suzhou is in a period of unprecedented development and workers have been pouring in Suzhou from all over the country. According to the statistics in 2012, the population of migrants in Suzhou outnumbered the local inhabitants. In today's Suzhou, you'd better use Mandarin in public occasion when talking to strangers in order to communicate smoothly.

2.4 English in Suzhou

Like elsewhere in the world, the English as a global lingua franca appears in Suzhou with a rapid pace. The expansion of English is mainly due to two reasons. First, influenced by the modernization and economic progress, the English education in Suzhou has been promoted even since kindergarten. Studies from a number of fields demonstrated the history of English education in China (Adamson, 2004; Jin, 1995; Yong, 1995), the changes in English pedagogy and English curricula (Hevia, 2003; McKay, 2008, Zheng, 2008), and English learning attitudes and motivation that influence English teaching and learning (Yihong, 2007; Yong & Campbell, 1995). These studies have been conducted to provide us an overall situation of English in China. Second, as a historical and cultural city, the development of international tourism will impact upon the teaching of English. Suzhou attracted a lot of foreign tourists every year, which has brought the fashion of learning English. Jaworski (2010) has argued that international tourism has impacted upon the teaching of global languages such as English (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010).

Along with the acceleration of globalization, the increasing impact of English in Suzhou is obvious. From the perspective of research, the relation between Mandarin and dialects, the relation between Mandarin and English, have been discussed, but more complex language phenomena concerning the relations between Mandarin, dialect and English, for example, in Suzhou, are less noticed.

3. Discussion: Multilingualism in Suzhou

After reviewing the language policy and language usage in multilingual context—Suzhou, the positive and negative effects will be discussed through political, social, economic and cultural situation in this section.

3.1 Positive Consequence of the Multilingualism in Suzhou

Cook (2002) emphasized the main function of language is to communicate effectively. More than ninety percent of Suzhou citizens have the bilingual capabilities of Mandarin and Suzhou dialect, and in public, Mandarin is still the vital tool for daily use. According to a large-scale survey carried out in Suzhou (Weiqi, 2010), it shows that Suzhou dialect is still preferred as the first language and family communication, in the meanwhile, Mandarin dominates in public situation (See Figure 3 for the language situation). Therefore, Suzhounese are aware of the practical value of Suzhou dialect and Mandarin, and shift between these two languages for the convenience of communication. The role and importance of Mandarin is chiefly responsible for the change from the monolingualism of Suzhou dialect half a century ago to the multilingualism in Suzhou nowadays. Over the past few years, the promotion of Mandarin has made remarkable effects, especially in educational fields.

Language	Number of People	Percentage
Mandarin	48	8.1%
Mandarin and Suzhou Dialect	529	89.8%
Mandarin and Other Dialect	1	0.2%

Figure 3. Language Situation of Suzhou Native Primary and Secondary Students (Weiqi, 2010)

English the world over can be seen as a creation of multilingualism today. It is identified as a foreign language with no official status in many countries, but is increasingly used for the purpose of wider communication (Jessner and Onysko, 2006). It should be pointed out that, for most well-educated Suzhounese, English is considered to be necessary due to increased mobility and globalization, and the ability to use English is a skill in increasing demand by employers. The job market in Suzhou provides more opportunities to English speakers, especially international business. In addition to the career advantages in international enterprise, the domestic market including tourism, social services and education also encourages multilingual users. In recent years, the enormous growth of foreign tourists has stimulated economic and social development, among this process, the multilanguage plays an essential role in giving visitors access to the heritages, modern lifestyles, and culture and traditions of Suzhou. Take Suzhou *Tanci*, a style of Chinese professional storytelling as an example (Figure 4), native tour guides usually switch to Suzhou Dialect or Mandarin to provide unique cultural experience to tourists. Many service staffs from hotels, restaurants and airlines are required to master English fluently in order to offer active support for visitors. In addition, mass media nowadays has a greater impact on the daily life in Suzhou. For instance, *Suzhou Daily* (local newspaper) follows the Mandarin style and syntax with special dialectal section and English section. There are also several television and radio broadcasts in Suzhou featuring English programs and dialectal programs, which has a profound impact on the widespread of languages because the media are such an integral part of our daily life. Edward (2008) emphasized that the media play an active role in the standardization of spoken and written language, and the process of multicultural globalization.



Figure 4. Suzhou *Tanci*

3.2 Negative Consequence of the Multilingualism in Suzhou

In Wang's (2003) study, Suzhou dialect has achieved its dominant position until the 1950s. At that time, a majority of the immigrants from the north Yangtze Delta engaged in Suzhou's manual labor or service industry due to historical reasons. But native people still insisted in speaking mother tongue (Suzhou dialect) to them although they could not understand sometimes. According to my father's recall, teachers at that time hardly used Mandarin in classroom, and

even Chinese teachers spoke little Mandarin, if spoke, with a dialectal accent. All citizens used Suzhou dialect during their daily life, and Mandarin could be heard only from broadcasts or films.

However, it is quite another story now, and in fact, students almost all speak Mandarin in classroom. With the process of globalization, the status of Suzhou dialect has reduced to a condition of minority language (Jiang & Ji, 2008). Through the analysis of language use and attitudes of speakers in economically developed and traditional Suzhou, Mandarin has acquired its dominant role while English has become a “high language”. The promotion of Mandarin and proliferation of English does not come without adverse effects.

First and foremost, it renders a host of indigenous language obsolete. The balance between the promotion of Mandarin and the maintenance of Suzhou dialect is an important task for language planners. Under condition of the successful popularization of Mandarin, even Suzhou dialect with a significant influence has been threatened, so an issue should be taken into account seriously: in what position should dialects be? The fact is that Suzhou dialect use has declined considerably among the younger generation, and its power has been challenged. Speaker’s choice of language constructs their group identity, in places where there is speech community there will often be same social norms too, about legislation, politics and unity. Although the promotion of Mandarin nationwide has laid its foundations in the interests of national unity, being multilingual might strike the balance of regional order, especially under the present flow of migrants from other provinces and foreign visitors.

Furthermore, compared with English and Mandarin as higher status, Suzhou dialect user has been referred to “lower” social class; the discrimination based upon their language use will be probably associated with people’s occupation, education and social relationship.

Finally, the expansion of Mandarin and Chinese has eroded the local cultural heritage and cultural identity. For instance, *Kunqu* and *Pingtan*, two traditional operas among the oldest and most influential arts in Suzhou have been afflicted with embarrassing situation. Especially young people, do not appreciate the traditional art, and even some native people, can hardly enjoy it because the linguistic variation. Many operas and other folk arts use dialect as a communication tool, so the extinction of those dialects will influence the maintenance of traditional arts in the future.

4. Conclusion

Speaking multiple languages enables communications with a larger number of people, and also develops the society into cosmopolitan city. The global spread of English has brought economic development, cultural assimilation and English education. Especially in recent years, the growth of regional interest in Suzhou was affected mostly by tourism industry and international business, which has resulted in the prevalence of multilingualism as a multicultural symbol in Suzhou Municipal city. However, in the meantime, the loss of local language has widespread repercussions on society as a whole. Bourdieu (1991) argued that saving market is helpful to save its language. In the developing Suzhou, the tourism market has been growing with a fast speed, and the Suzhou local government has implemented specific language policies to enhance the role of Suzhou dialect. It was suggested that teaching material aiming at maintaining Suzhou dialect for children should be compiled together with the introduction of local history and tradition, as language and culture are constantly related. Some linguists also pointed out that if it was possible to adjust the policy of Mandarin promotion from kindergartens to primary school in order to leave spaces for native children’s mother tongue—Suzhou dialect (Wang Ping, 2003).

In short, the multilingualism in Suzhou is a new phenomenon of the 21st century, and has led to different personal attitudes towards language use and language choice. The right balance among the three, Suzhou dialect as the local language, Mandarin as the national language and English as the global language, is worth researching for long-term harmonious development.

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