

Being a ‘purist’ in trilingual Hong Kong: Code-switching among Cantonese, English and Putonghua*

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Chan, Ka Long Roy. 2018. Being a ‘purist’ in trilingual Hong Kong: Code-switching among Cantonese, English and Putonghua. *Linguistic Research* 35(1), 75-95. This study reports on the result of ethno-linguistic research which aims to investigate whether an emerging form of code-switching among three languages, namely Cantonese, English and Putonghua, exists in Hong Kong. This study follows the research method of Sung (2010) which the author recorded his experiences as a ‘purist’ in Hong Kong: during a three-day experiment - the author employed only Cantonese, English and Putonghua, respectively. Field notes and reflective diaries were used to record the incidents of communication breakdowns resulted from the use of pure-code instead of mixed codes. Because of the recent change in language policy in which Putonghua has placed more important roles in language teaching in Hong Kong, Putonghua has been added into the current study intentionally because Sung (2010) only included Cantonese and English, which largely ignored the fact the Putonghua has become an important part in the linguistic environment of Hong Kong. The difficulties of using only pure-Cantonese, pure-English and pure-Putonghua in Hong Kong will be discussed. Also, I suggest that there exists the code-switching among Cantonese, English and Putonghua in Hong Kong because of the increasing contact with China and the new policy of using Putonghua as the Medium of Instruction (PMI) in some primary schools. Moreover, the present study suggests that the use of pure-code in these languages may hinder communication in Hong Kong. Further studies are needed on code-switching among the three languages within the younger generation of Hongkongers, especially those who attend PMI schools. **(The Chinese University of Hong Kong)**

Keywords code-switching, mixed code, ethno-linguistics, Hong Kong English, multilingualism, replication study

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1. Introduction

As a former colony of the British Empire, Hong Kong is a bi-lingual city where English and Cantonese are used as official languages (Sung 2015). Because of the contact between the two languages, Cantonese-English code-mixing is a regular feature in Hong Kong “not only in everyday communication but also in all discourses” (Setter, Wong and Chen 2010: 98) and similar with the world trend that bilingual speakers are becoming more common (Daland and Oh 2014), bilingual speakers of English and Cantonese are everywhere in Hong Kong. However, because of the increasing contact with China after the handover in 1997, Putonghua (the native language of China) has gained its importance in Hong Kong and it has driven Hong Kong to a ‘trilingual’ situation (Cantonese, English and Putonghua) from the original ‘bilingual’ situation (Cantonese and English) (Wang and Kirkpatrick 2013). Also, due to the implementation of the ‘Bi-literate and Tri-lingual Policy’ (proficient in written Chinese and English and oral Cantonese, English and Putonghua) which replaced the traditional ‘bi-lingual education’ and the active promotion of Putonghua at schools by the Hong Kong Government in recent years (Lee and Leung 2012; Wang and Kirkpatrick 2015), some primary schools in Hong Kong have started to use Putonghua as the medium of instruction (PMI). In 2007, PMI was implemented through a ‘4-phase’ experimental plan in Hong Kong primary schools. According to the Hong Kong Education Bureau, using PMI in both primary and secondary schools is the long term goal in their plan (Gao, Leung and Trent 2010). With such change in the education policy, together with that fact that more than 80% of Hongkongers who are under 39 year-old are able to speak Putonghua (Bacon-shone, Bolton and Luke 2015), Hong Kong appears to be transforming into a trilingual city.

For this reason, code-switching has long been seen as a characteristic of Hongkongers (Chan 2003). However, previous code-switching research mainly focused on code-switching between Cantonese and English (e.g. Li 1996; Lin 1996; Li and Tse 2002; Chan 2003). In recent years, although Putonghua has been emerging in Hong Kong since the handover in 1997, there remains limited research on code-switching among Cantonese, English and Putonghua speakers. Sung (2010) conducted an ethnographic study to investigate whether using pure-code is feasible in Hong Kong and discussed the implications of code-mixing on sociolinguistics. In Sung’s study, he did an ethnolinguistic study on the code-switching behavior in

Hong Kong. He noted that using mixed-code is a characteristic of Hongkongers and suggested that mixed-code should be considered as a pedagogical tool for English language teaching in Hong Kong. Sung’s study has provided important insights in the field as he employed an ethno-linguistic method which provided first hand qualitative data directly from the author’s point of view. However, his study covered only English and Cantonese, which had largely ignored the fact that Putonghua has gathered enough momentum to have affected the linguistic environment in Hong Kong, especially with the influx of the students who received PMI study. Since there is a lack of research in the trilingual code-switching, this present study is a replication study produced by using the same creative method as Sung (2010) with a modification of adding Putonghua as one of the codes; instead of code-switching between Cantonese and English, code-switching among the three languages, which is argued to be an emerging form of code-switching in Hong Kong, will be investigated. This new form of code-switching mode will be examined through the lens of sociolinguistics, especially in the scope of language environment and the intra-ethnic use of English among Hongkongers.

2. Literature review

This review focuses exclusively on code-switching in Hong Kong. However, the term ‘code-switching’ has been defined in many different ways by different scholars and different terms have been employed to describe the same behavior (Wang and Kirkpatrick 2015). Therefore, in this part, I begin by defining how ‘code-switching’ is used in the present study, followed by the summary of previous research on the forms and function of code-switching. At last, since the present study focuses on the code-switching behavior in Hong Kong, sociolinguistics of Hong Kong and some previous code-switching research in Hong Kong will also be shown for a clearer understanding.

2.1 Code-switching: Terminology, forms and functions

The terms ‘code-switching’, ‘code-mixing’ and ‘code-alternation’ have been used and interpreted in various ways by different scholars (Li 1996; Li and Tse 2002;

Setter, Wong and Chen 2010: 95). For example, Chan (2003) defined code-switching as “the juxtaposition of lexical elements from two or more languages in a discourse... (which are mostly) examples of intra-sentential” (p.3). In the present study, I follow a broader use of the term ‘code-switching’ provided by Li (1999) to avoid any misunderstanding:

“Cantonese interspersed with English elements, especially single words, is generally referred to as mixed code, and the sociolinguistic phenomenon itself, code-mixing or (intra-sentential) code-switching. To avoid negative connotations associated with the term ‘code-mixing’, in this study, the more general term ‘code-switching’ will be used to cover switching at both inter- and intra-sentential levels.” (Li 1999: 7)

In this study, then, ‘code-switching’ refers to using mixed-code between languages (Cantonese, English and Putonghua) in both inter- and intra-sentential levels. Employing this definition is also helpful for the sake of simplicity and to cohere with previous studies focused on the Hong Kong context (Setter, Wong and Chen 2010).

Apart from the terminology, scholars have also investigated the different functions that code-switching served in any bilingual or trilingual communities and there is increasing evidence to show that code-switching serves important functions in bilingual communities (Romaine 2001). For example, Cogo (2007) stated that code-switching carries a pragmatic function which is “used by participants to make the communication work, to ensure understanding and efficiency in conversation” (p.181); Cogo (2007) listed three functions of code-switching, including i) to sound familiar with the speakers, ii) to acknowledge mutual understanding which ensures smooth communication and iii) to establish affiliation and membership of the same linguistic community. Klimpfinger (2007) studied the code-switching data in an English corpus and discovered that code-switching is used for signaling the specific culture and more importantly, to “communicate their bi-/multilingual identity and show group membership” (p.367). In Low and Lu’s (2006) study of code-switching in Hong Kong schools, after investigating the data from 160 students and teachers, they found that code-switching is indispensable to Hongkongers to communicate effectively and the code-switching behavior exists persistently among Hongkongers

could be an indicator of how Hongkongers view the languages and eventually, their identities.

2.2 Sociolinguistics of Hong Kong and previous code-switching studies

English has developed a special status in Hong Kong due to the unique colonial background of Hong Kong (Cummings and Wolf 2011). Even though the Chinese Government regained sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997, English is still used in different public domains, for example, business sectors, higher education and courts (Bolton 2000; Evans and Green 2003). However, since the majority of the Hong Kong population uses Cantonese as their first language (L1), English is not used in daily conversation. Although English holds the power in language, Cantonese is the “language of solidarity” among Hongkongers (Tay 1991: 327) since Cantonese is used as the major language in a daily context (Luke and Richard 1982; Lee and Leung 2012). The contacts between the two languages were likely to be the trigger of the code-switching behavior of Hongkongers (Luke 1998) and also the birth of the a new variety of English called Hong Kong English, which have been widely researched since the 1980s (Sung 2015) in fields like phonetics and phonology (Hung 2000, 2012; Hansen Edwards 2015, 2016a; Chan 2016).

Since the 1970s, various studies explored the code-switching behavior of Hongkongers in both written and spoken contexts (Li 2000). Spoken data were first documented and analyzed by Gibbons (1979, 1983, 1987), in which he made efforts to examine the code-switching behavior of university students in Hong Kong; he discovered that the use of mixed-code was not only limited to university students but to the general educated Chinese. Johnson (1983) and Lin (1996) also investigated the mixed codes used by secondary school teachers in Hong Kong. For written data, Yau (1993), Li (1994) and Lee (1998, as quoted in Li 1999) discussed the use of mixed-code in different discourses including science articles, newspaper and magazines, which showed that the use of mixed-code was not limited to spoken data but also appeared in formal written forms. Pennington (1998) described code-switching as a natural progress in a bilingual place from diglossia to bilingualism. Later, Li and Tse (2002) conducted research that illustrated “the vitality

of code-switching” among Hongkongers (Setter, Wong and Chen 2010: 97). In the experiment, 12 university students were recruited to be a ‘purist’ (a person who does not use mixed-code) of Cantonese for a day in Hong Kong. During the experiment, they were asked to wear a recorder and to write field notes whenever they discovered any examples of English words that they wanted to use. The students were asked to compose a 2-page reflective piece at the end of each day and to attend an interview two days after the experiment. The result reflected that most of the students “found it difficult not to be able to use English expressions...with friends and peers” and they were all embarrassed and felt “inconvenienced by the artificial Cantonese-only rule of speaking” (Li and Tse 2002: 183).

Nearly a decade after Li and Tse’s (2002) experiment, Sung (2010) performed a simplified replication study following the methodology of Li and Tse. In his work, he conducted an ethno-linguistic study in which he used field-notes and a reflective diary to record his own language activities over two days. Rather than inviting participants from a university like Li and Tse did, Sung chose himself as the only participant in his replication study, transforming his work into a form of an ‘ethno-linguistic’ study. Based on his multiple positions in Hong Kong (a linguistic researcher who was born and raised in Hong Kong and an English teacher in a primary school), he tried to discover the difficulties in being a ‘purist’ in Hong Kong as an English teacher as well as to investigate the feasibility of using mixed-code in ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom settings based on his own experience. Sung’s (2010) findings were concurrent with those of Li and Tse that using pure-code is “unrealistic and impractical for Hongkongers ...given the wide-spread use of mixed-code in everyday communication” (p.418). His study also provided insights for integrating mixed-code in ESL teaching as this could yield much feasibility and effectiveness.

Although there have been numerous studies on code-switching in Hong Kong, all of them were related to Cantonese-English code-switching. Surveys in 2012 showed that over 70% of primary schools are using or are attempting to use PMI as the teaching medium (Wong 2014). Hence, with the trend of using PMI in primary schools (Tam 2012), more Hongkongers, especially the younger generations who were born after year 2000 and who attended PMI schools, are now able to communicate in Putonghua compared to those who were born before 1997 (Bacon-shone, Bolton and Luke 2015). In fact, since 1998, the Standing Committee

on Language Educated and Research (SCOLAR), a government-policy advising group, has been actively promoting the use of Putonghua in local schools and spending much less to preserve the use of Cantonese (Lee and Leung 2012). Also, Bacon-shone and Bolton (2012) identified Putonghua as an important workplace language in Hong Kong and being competent in Putonghua may help enhance the effectiveness in workplace communication. The increasing use of Putonghua suggests that code-switching between the three languages—Cantonese, English and Putonghua—is a likely occurrence. Therefore, this present study, a replication study of Sung (2010), aims at expanding Sung’s findings and answering the questions: (1) Are there any difficulties in being a ‘purist’ of pure Cantonese, pure English and pure Putonghua in Hong Kong? (2) If so, what are the difficulties and even, does code-switching among the three languages exist in Hong Kong?

3. Methods

This study follows the research design of Sung (2010), in which he spent two successive days in Hong Kong being a ‘purist’. He stressed that “code-switch was not allowed in the two days” so he spent one day using English only and the next day using Cantonese only (Sung 2010: 412). Field-notes were taken whenever he discovered that he failed to express himself without code-mixing, for instance, in his Cantonese-only day, he found it hard to express himself without code-switching as he recalled, ‘I just could not think of the Cantonese equivalents and simply described what I wanted to say in Cantonese’ (Sung 2010: 414). Reflective diaries were also written each day to document his feelings and reactions in details.

In the present study, data were collected from field-notes and a reflective dairy from a three-day experiment. During three successive days I spoke exclusively English on Day-1 (9th April, 2016), Cantonese on Day-2 (10th April, 2016) and Putonghua on Day-3 (11th April, 2016) (Section 4 outlines the schedule of each day). In my field-notes I documented incidents that I encountered during the three days related to the purpose of this study and focused on moments when I wanted to code-switch. Also, the interactions between my friends and I were documented in my reflective dairy. I analyzed all the written data and I selected some significant incidents to put in the findings. I am a local Hongkonger who was born and raised

in Hong Kong. My L1 is Cantonese. I started to learn English at 3 years of age in a local kindergarten and a local primary school and I attended an EMI (English as the medium of Instruction) secondary school. I studied English as my major in my undergraduate studies and I am now a Ph.D. student in Applied English Linguistics. I had one Putonghua lesson per week (35-minute per lesson) when I was studying in junior secondary school for 3 years. Since I have had a constant contact with Putonghua speakers due to the fact that some of my classmates and colleagues were from Mainland, I speak Putonghua from time to time and I have no significant problems in listening to Putonghua and I can distinguish whether the speakers are native in Putonghua in general due to my own exposure to Putonghua. Although I have not taken any Putonghua proficiency tests, my oral Putonghua is described by my mainland classmates as ‘understandable but with a strong accent and an inaccurate use of tones’. Moreover, I usually code-switch English words into Putonghua to compensate for my insufficient Putonghua lexicon.

4. Findings

In this part, the records of the three-day experiments will be outlined in detail. Special and significant incidents were quoted and illustrated with personal interpretations. Also, I provide brief timetables of my days to facilitate an understanding of the activities informing the dataset.

4.1 Day-1 (9th April, 2016)

Table 1. Schedule of Day-1

Schedule (9 th April - Saturday) - English Only		
1200-1300	Lunch with family members	Local Chinese Restaurant
1330-1730	Private IELTS Tutorial with friends	Friends' House
1800-2200	Dinner with Secondary School Friends	Tsim Sha Tsui

I spoke only English on Day-1 from 12:00 noon to 10:00 p.m. I had a family gathering with grandparents in a local Chinese restaurant (I chose a restaurant that we had not visited before to avoid meeting familiar staff).¹ The first problem was

¹ It is a place for people to have dim-sum and Chinese tea. I chose a restaurant that we had not

the lack of English menus. I had difficulties ordering from the menu as I had to translate the names of the dishes into English which did not carry any sense. For example, ‘羅漢齋麵’ literally means Monks’ Veggie Noodle (which is vegetarian noodles). Also, the conversation between the waiter and me was fragmented. Although the waiter self-claimed to be English-speaking, the conversation between us was not successful:

(1) Dialogues with the waiter in the Chinese Restaurant

I: I want to have a *Monks’ Veggie Noodle*.

Waiter: Noodle? Okay, which noodle?

I: The one which is vegetarian, with only vegetable.

Waiter: Vegetable? You need vegetable and noodle?

I: No, I want the noodle with vegetable.

Waiter: (take the menu with pictures) which one?

The dialogue above (Example 1) demonstrates that the waiter may not be equipped with a good level of proficiency in spoken English or even if the waiter does achieve a certain level of English standard, direct translation of the names of Chinese dishes may create problems; therefore, at the end, we needed to use the menu to ease the communication. There were other names of food which also caused communication breakdowns, for instance, ‘流沙奶皇包’ (means Running-sand Custard Bun literally, which is Bun with melted Custard) and ‘炒蘿白糕’ (means Fried Carrot Cake literally, which is Fried Radish Pastes).

In the afternoon, I was invited to give a private IELTS (International English Language Testing System) tutorial lesson for my friend and his mother. English was used throughout the 4-hour lesson. Since they are university graduates, the communication between us was smooth. For example, they did not encounter any problems when I used metalinguistic terms to refer to specific grammar rules.

After the IELTS lesson, I had dinner with my secondary school friends in a bar located in Tsim Sha Tsui, a business area in Hong Kong. In contrast to the Chinese restaurant, I was provided with an English menu and thus encountered no difficulties in ordering food in English (there were both native English-speaking staff and local staff). However, what I found uneasy was the dialogue with my friends. We had a

visited before to avoid meeting familiar staff.

difficult time when we mentioned our secondary school lives. We found it challenging referring to the Cantonese nicknames of us (for instance, 喊包²) and teachers (for example, 馬經陳³). Difficulties were also discovered when we tried to refer to in-jokes:

- (2) Dialogues with Secondary School Friends
 I: Do you guys remember the twister that we created for Carrie?
 Friend A: ‘Not A, not B.’
 I: ‘C is the answer!’
 Friend B: That does not sound right.

This in-joke was created because of the Cantonese name of Carrie (施致真⁴). However, in English, the pun did not translate accurately. After the gathering, a friend told me that I sounded ‘pretentious’ as I spoke English only.

4.2 Day-2 (10th April, 2016)

Table 2. Schedule of Day-2

Schedule (10 th April - Sunday) - Cantonese Only		
1200-1400	Lunch with Former Colleagues	Lan Kwai Fong
1420-1800	Shopping and Afternoon-tea	IFC (Central)
1830-2200	Dinner and Movie with University friends	Taikoo

On Day 2 I spoke only Cantonese (see Table 2 for a schedule of the day). I started the day with a lunch gathering. I encountered a problem when I referred to the name of the restaurant, *Insomnia*⁵, because the restaurant did not have a Cantonese name. The menu was in English only. I had difficulties in communicating with the waitresses who were English-speaking. The discussion between my colleagues and me were running smooth; however, I encountered problems occasionally when I spoke about technical terms that we used in the workplace, for

2 This translates literally as ‘crying bread’ from Cantonese, which refers to people who always cry.

3 This translates literally as ‘horse-racing paper Chan’ from Cantonese. We use it to refer to a teacher who likes horse-racing.

4 This name has the same meaning as ‘C is real’ in English as all the three Chinese characters have their homophonic counterparts in Cantonese with different meanings.

5 It is located in Lan Kwai Fong, a bar area in Central.

example, *roster*, *teaching-plan* and *Powerpoint*. Moreover, I discovered that we code-mixed unintentionally in our utterances:

(3) Dialogues with ex-colleagues

Friend C: 我地以前*print*好多野...

(We used to print a lot of documents...)

Friend D: 經理 *prefer* 阿 *Bella* 做 *TA* (Teaching Assistant)...

(The manager preferred Bella as her TA...)

Later, we went to Central, a business area in Hong Kong, for shopping and afternoon-tea. I discovered that many shops, again, did not have Cantonese names, for example, *Zara*, *CitySuper* and *Kiehl's*. In the *Apple Store* (it did not have a Cantonese name too), I found it hard to refer to products like *Macbook* and *iPhone* as the Cantonese equivalents of them were rarely used in Hong Kong. We had afternoon-tea in a restaurant named *French Window*. A Cantonese menu was not provided and the waiters were native English speakers. I encountered problems when I ordered food and drinks as most of them did not have Cantonese equivalents, for example, the names of tea (*Anastasia*, *Prince Vladimir* and *Be Cool*).

In the evening, I watched a movie with my university friends and had dinner in a Thai Restaurant. The menu was bi-lingual and the waiters were locals so I ordered food successfully. However, when we discussed the movie plot and the characters, I found it hard to translate from English to Cantonese, as the movie was in English. Also, when we mentioned our university lives, we code-mixed frequently, for example, *dorm* (student dormitory), *lecture*, *professor* and *grant loan*.⁶ We found it difficult to translate from English to Cantonese for these words as their Cantonese equivalents have never existed in our lives. Similar with the situation at my lunch, I found some code-mixing utterances, for example:

(4) Dialogues with university friends

Friend E: 以前*Paul*佢*give lecture*嘅時候...

(When Paul gave a lecture...)

Friend F: *Amy Wong* *d present* 都幾*informal*.

(Amy Wong's presentation were quite informal)

6 It refers to the Student Grant and Loan Scheme offered by the Hong Kong Government.

After dinner, my friends told me that I sounded ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘mainland’ as I tried to translate every English word into Cantonese. They found it odd and thought that it hindered communication.

4.3 Day-3 (11th April, 2016)

Table 3. Schedule of Day-3

Schedule (11 th April - Monday) - Putonghua Only		
1000-1100	Breakfast with cousins	Home
1200-1300	Tutorial Class (English)	CUHK
1300-1400	Lunch with schoolmates (Mainland)	CUHK
1400-1700	Work with schoolmates (Local and Mainland)	CUHK
1700-1830	Dinner with Classmate (Local)	CUHK
1830-2130	Lecture (English)	CUHK

I spoke only Putonghua on the final day of this study. When I was at home having breakfast with my two cousins (five and seven years-old) who attended PMI primary schools, they could communicate fluently with me in Putonghua. Although they were initially confused about why I spoke Putonghua with them, they gave me prompt and accurate responses in seemingly fluent Putonghua. However, my Indonesian housemaid, Daisy, and my grandparents found it uncomfortable that I spoke Putonghua and they could only understand several words from me as we usually speak in Cantonese (with grandparents) and English (with housemaid) at home as they have little exposure to Putonghua. During the conversation with my cousins, although their fluency in Putonghua is high (ever higher than myself), they would use mixed-codes when they encountered words that they are not familiar with. Also, they would code-switch when they talked to different people:

(5) Diaogues with my cousins and housemaid

Cousin A: Zhè yī gè 腸仔 lěng le.⁷

(This sausage is cold.)

I: Nà jiào gōng rén zài zhǔ yī zhǔ ba.

(Then ask the housemaid to make it hot again.)

7 The use of Chinese characters indicates the use of Cantonese while the use of Pinyin (e.g. Zhè yī gè) indicates the use of Putonghua.

- Cousin A: Daisy, cook the 腸仔 for me!
(Daisy, cook [heat] the sausage for me!)
- Cousin B: Daisy, 我又要腸仔!
(Daisy, I want to have sausage too!)
- Daisy: 得啦得啦, I will make it for you two.
(Okay, I will make it for you two.)

The code-switching of Cantonese-Putonghua and Cantonese-English was documented during the breakfast. The Cantonese for sausage ‘腸仔’ is different from the Putonghua term ‘*xiāng cháng*’ and therefore my cousin used mixed-code to ease their communication.

After breakfast, I went to The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) to meet my students for a tutorial class of an undergraduate course. Since my department normally requires both lecturers and teaching assistants (TAs) to speak in English in courses offered by the English Department, I had to conduct the lecture in English.

After the tutorial session, I had lunch with other TAs who came from Mainland China. Although we were quite used to speaking in Putonghua with each other and they were not surprised by my Putonghua-only behavior, I had a hard time when I discovered that there were no Putonghua equivalents for terms like *lecture*, *office* and *e-mail*, which were commonly used in a university context. Also, it was difficult to translate the names of some of the professors (as many of them do not have a Chinese name) and even some of the places in the university like the *E-zone* (an area in the English department) and the *Lab* (a Computer Lab). The other TAs found it strange that I did not code-switch as I am normally the one who uses mixed-code the most in order to compensate for the lack of Putonghua lexicon.

We went back to our TA office after lunch and continued our work in the afternoon. We encountered the same problems when we tried to have a discussion on sociolinguistics. I failed to translate terminology as all the terms in my mind were English terms since the universities I attended use English as the major medium of instruction, especially in the English departments. Terms like *Sociolinguistics*, *Linguistics Landscape*, *World Englishes* and *Code-switching* were too difficult to translate from English to Putonghua as these words are not part of my lexicon.

In the evening, I had dinner with a classmate who is a Hongkonger before we

attended a lecture. He found it weird for us to speak in Putonghua because both of us are Hongkongers. Also, he told me that because our Putonghua accents were apparently ‘too Hong Kong’, the mainland students sitting next to us found it strange and kept looking at us too. Although my friend refused to use Putonghua to communicate with me, he used mixed code unintentionally with all the three languages when he answered me:

(6) Dialogues with classmate before lecture

I: Wǒ zhè gè xué qī bú yòng kǎo shì.

(I do not have any examinations for this semester.)

Friend G: Bú shì ba? 咁你咪high爆?

(No Way! You must be really excited, right?)

In his reply to my statement, he unintentionally code-switched among the three languages. Later when I asked him why he used ‘bú shì ba?’ to express ‘No way!’ instead of using the normal Cantonese expression ‘唔係呀嘛?’, he explained that that phrase is a Putonghua slang that originated from the Internet. Hongkongers adopted the terms to express the feeling of being surprised. Furthermore, the term ‘high爆’ is a English-Cantonese mixed code meaning ‘being so high’.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that in my experiences code-switching among Cantonese, English and Putonghua exists to a certain extent even though Cantonese-English or English-Putonghua are likely to be the dominant form. Also, the findings echo Sung (2010) in that that I encountered difficulties in using pure-Cantonese or pure-English in Hong Kong. Similarly, the use of pure-Putonghua may also hinder the communication in Hong Kong. In this part, two of the significant discussions on the linguistics environment and the intra-ethnic language use will be shown.

5.1 The use of pure-code in various linguistic environments

The study demonstrates that location is a key factor of whether pure-code is

used, or not. On Day-1, it was hard to communicate in English in highly localized places, like a Chinese restaurant. This echoes with what Sung (2010) suggested “(using English only) may not be effective...especially in highly localized place” (p.413). However, the situation changed when I had dinner in Tsim Sha Tsui. I could communicate in English with the waiters easily. On Day-2, pure-Cantonese was not effective in highly westernized places like Lan Kwai Fong as the staff was English-speaking. Surprisingly, on Day-3, pure-Putonghua was effective in the university context as there are numerous mainland students in all universities in Hong Kong, for example, in the University of Hong Kong (HKU), 64.2% of the international students, including both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, are from mainland (University of Hong Kong 2015). Therefore, it seems that in all universities contexts, along with English and Cantonese, Putonghua is also an effective language of communication.

Moreover, the names of shops, shopping malls and products are barriers to using pure-code. Many shopping malls and international shops do not have Cantonese names, and even if they have one, it would sound unnatural in Cantonese (Sung 2010). Another hindrance of using pure-code is the English names that Hongkongers have. Many Hongkongers have alternative English names that are used ‘most of the time’ and some of them even have their English names printed on their identity cards (Bacon-shone, Bolton and Luke, 2015: 29). In the three-day experiment, and especially on Day-2 and Day-3 when I could only use pure-Cantonese and pure-Putonghua, I found it difficult to address some of my friends, my housemaid and even my professors as most of the time I addressed them with their English names (and some of them do not have a Chinese name).

5.2 Intra-ethnic language use and code-switching

The results show that using pure-English, pure-Cantonese and pure-Putonghua is uncommon. On Day-1, the gathering was full of awkwardness because of the use of pure-English. In-jokes and nicknames could not be translated (or they lost their meanings after translation). Moreover, my friend commented that I was ‘pretentious’; it corresponds with the interpretation of Sung’s (2010) linguistic choices as “snobbish and arrogant” (p.413). The results from Day-1 also parallel to Li (2000)

who stated that Hongkongers disapprove of the intra-ethnic use of English. Using pure-Putonghua seems to be impossible among Hongkongers as most of them refuse to speak Putonghua intra-ethnically. This repulsive attitude towards Putonghua is also reflected in the language attitudes research done by Lai (2010) in which most of the participants commented that Putonghua ‘is not considered a significant language’ (p.121) and only 5.7% of the participants agreed that Putonghua has a superior status in Hong Kong (compared with 35.7% for Cantonese and 58.6% for English). It suggests that for most of the Hongkongers, intra-ethnic uses of pure-English and pure-Putonghua are not preferred.

The use of pure-Cantonese also created problems. Hongkongers are used to code-mixing and do so unintentionally (Li 1999). They rely on “both English and Cantonese in functioning properly and naturally in social life” (Sung 2010: 414). On Day-2, both my former colleagues and university friends felt shocked when I tried not to code-switch. As most of the workplaces in Hong Kong are partly English-speaking (Evans and Green 2003), we cannot avoid using terms like *print*, *prefer*, *CV* and *TA*. Furthermore, since the MOI (Medium of Instruction) of all Hong Kong universities is English (except CUHK which is bi-lingual) (Kirkpatrick 2011), university graduates are accustomed to utter English terms like *present*⁸ and *dorm*. This code-switching behavior among university students mirrors Gibbons’ study (1983) on ‘University Talk’ between students from HKU, in which most of them constantly code-mixed. Also, my friend commented that I sounded ‘mainland’ when I used pure-Cantonese indicating that code-mixing also helps to maintain a ‘Hong Kong Identity’ which “asserts a separate identity from the Mainland China” (Hansen Edwards 2015). Since code-switching is said to function as an identity marker which adheres the people of the same community (Cogo 2007), the act of code-switching of Hongkongers can be viewed as an identity marker that distinguish them from other people, for example, from the people from the mainland.

The use of pure-Putonghua was also problematic. Although I could communicate with my cousins in Putonghua successfully, which shows that the ‘bi-literacies and trilingual’ policy has somehow been effective in promoting literacy in Putonghua among young Hongkongers, there are serious problems regarding the differences in

8 The word present here can be either a verb (to give a presentation) or a noun (a presentation). This kind of new usage of English can be seen as a feature of Hong Kong English, which is documented widely (See Cummings and Wolf 2011; Hung 2000; Setter, Wong and Chen 2010).

lexicons between Cantonese and Putonghua. Even though they are Chinese languages, the lexicon is frequently different, ranging from basic words, pronouns and even borrowed terms (Bruche-Schulz 1997).

The results indicate that there may exist a new form of code-switching among Cantonese, English and Putonghua in Hong Kong, which may be similar with the code-switching in other multilingual Asian countries like Singapore (See Lee 2003). Although the data presented above shows the code-switching behavior in Hong Kong is still mainly a Cantonese-English one, code-switching of Cantonese-Putonghua and Cantonese-English-Putonghua is also recorded in the present study. The new code-switching behavior may be related to the implementation of the PMI primary schools and the close contact between Hong Kong and China in recent years.

6. Limitation

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the number of participants (people who talked to the researcher during the three days) was limited, which might not fully represent the whole situation in Hong Kong. Second, although the researcher has been growing up in a trilingual environment, his proficiencies in Cantonese and English outweigh his ability in using Putonghua. The differences in language proficiency may alter the result of the use of code-switching as the researcher may lack the suitable expressions to communicate natively in Putonghua. Third, the research was conducted in a limited linguistic environment (e.g. universities and gatherings) with speakers of relatively high education backgrounds (most of the participants are teachers and/or researchers in Linguistics), which could only reflect the use of code-switching amongst Hongkongers with high education backgrounds in a rather artificial context. These limitations should be addressed and be overcome in future studies using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Further studies should be focused on the actual speech data (for example, the methodology used by Li and Tse 2002) on the code-switching among Cantonese, English and Putonghua among the new generations of Hongkongers who have attended PMI schools. The forms and functions of code-switching among the three codes should also be addressed and analyzed using natural occurring conversation data (for example, the experiment done by Low and Lu, 2006) in order to have a

clearer picture of how these codes are switched under different contexts and for different functions.

7. Conclusion

The present study shows that using pure-code may hinder communication amongst Hongkongers. Also, apart from the code-switching of Cantonese-English, there seems to be a new form of code-switching among Cantonese, English and Putonghua due to the implementation of the 'Bi-literacies and Trilingual' policy and the increasing contact with the mainland. More importantly, code-switching creates an identity for Hongkongers. Furthermore, code-switching has coined new lexical items and even the other levels of linguistics like phonology and grammar which gives rise to HKE (Li 1996) which has become a popular research topic in recent years (e.g. Hung 2000, 2012; Hansen Edwards 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Chan 2016). Since Putonghua has been more important among Hongkongers' lives, the code-switching between the three languages have become an interesting question of whether it would change the linguistic environment in Hong Kong. Obviously, the present study suggests that the code-switching among the three languages exists and it implies that more studies should be done on the topic with large samples of quantitative and qualitative data to investigate on the influence of it. Future studies may focus on the forms and functions of code-switching between Cantonese, English and Putonghua in different contexts as well as the use of HKE in different linguistic landscapes.

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