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# Language and Development of City: The Linguistic Triangle of English, Mandarin, and the Shanghai Dialect

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Yuwei Xie

## INTRODUCTION

During the course of a city's development, a multitude of interrelated factors determine the outcome. Among these factors, the role played by the language(s) spoken in a city is frequently overlooked as a seemingly irrelevant element compared with other more visible factors such as economic activity, urban planning, and infrastructure provision. Nonetheless, language is an important constituent of a city's culture and facilitates the advancement of a city in a tangible way. In a city where a variety of languages or dialect groups form part of the fabric of society, language reflects diversity and the cultural fertilization of urban life. This paper examines the way language can affect urban development through a case study of Shanghai, a vibrant cosmopolitan city in China. The Shanghai dialect, Mandarin Chinese, and English, as the three most commonly spoken languages in Shanghai, have each contributed to shaping Shanghai into the global city it is today.

A multilingual city, in most cases, is a city of much dynamism and vitality, and this holds true for the city of Shanghai. On the contrary, a city like Chongqing (a land-locked city in southwestern China with the largest municipal population in the country), where the local dialect is the predominant language for communication, lacks the vibrant metropolitan aura of Shanghai. At the most basic level, the presence and experiences of foreigners in the two cities differ vastly. Walking down the streets of Chongqing proves to be a most uncomfortable experience for those who look distinctively foreign since everyone turns to stare as *waiguoren* (foreign people) pass. In Shanghai, however, goggling at foreigners almost never happens. The busy downtown commercial areas and tourist attractions of Shanghai teem with visitors from all over the country and the world. In certain parts of Shanghai, such as Xintiandi—an upscale shopping/entertainment spot in the former French concession—the presence of foreigners can even exceed that of locals. Shopping malls filled with stores selling expensive international brands are ubiquitous in Shanghai, whereas in Chongqing, these high-end malls are still rare. On a larger scale, Shanghai has been host to numerous events of international influence, including the F1 race, and the World Expo, which

took place from May 1 to October 31, 2010. Few cities in China can be compared with Shanghai in terms of the level of global connections.

Given that a wide range of non-linguistic aspects such as geographical location, government planning, and historical events have contributed significantly to the success of Shanghai, the question that naturally arises is the degree to which the presence of multiple spoken languages has contributed to its vitality. While the main focus of this paper is Shanghai, a number of other Chinese cities are also used as comparative examples to further elucidate the role that language plays in a city's advancement. The discussion is divided into three parts, each dedicated to one of the major languages spoken in Shanghai—the Shanghai dialect, Mandarin Chinese and English. The analysis of each language allows us to understand how it impacts the urban development individually. Then we go on to explore the collective force of the three languages. Since the existence of a distinct local language is not unique to Shanghai, a significant part of the paper is used to explore this nationwide phenomenon. Although the presence of the dialect could impede further development, this has not been the case in Shanghai.

## THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE SHANGHAI DIALECT

Historically, there has been extensive linguistic diversity in China. Following the Yuan Dynasty, seven major groups of languages were spoken in China, including Mandarin, which was spoken in the north of China (a broad grouping of dialects instead of the national language in its contemporary sense); Wu in southern coastal China; Min in Taiwan and the Hainan Islands; Hakka; and Yue (Hamed, 2005). The contemporary Shanghai dialect originated from the Wu dialect. During the Spring and Autumn Period of Chinese history, the powerful kingdom of Wu was founded and later invaded by the kingdom of Yue. The language of “Wu Yue,” as it came to be known, was the earliest form of the Wu dialect (Li, 1987). As civil wars raged on and brought an increasing number of refugees to the Wu region, the Wu language and other dialects of inland China came into contact. Local elites learned to speak Mandarin, the official language at the time, while the immigrants learned the Wu dialect. During the succeeding dynasties, the Wu language underwent more changes mainly due to the invasion from the north. After the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the Wu language stabilized and became essentially the same as the modern Wu (Li, 1987).

As a branch of the Wu language, the Shanghai dialect shares many of its characteristics. It is referred to as either Shanghainese or simply Shanghai. Throughout the course of its history, the Shanghai dialect underwent significant changes due to contact with other dialects spoken by waves of immigrants. Despite the influence of other dialects, in particular the Mandarin group, Shanghainese still differs greatly from Mandarin in

various aspects. For example, the tonal stability prominent in Mandarin is absent in Shanghainese (San, 1999). Another significant departure from Mandarin is the pronunciation of syllables. Most Mandarin syllables are full and therefore heavy whereas in Shanghainese, the weight of the syllable depends on its position (San, 1999). Even the term Shanghainese is a broad generalization that incorporates a large variety of different versions of the language. In Shanghai there are seventeen districts and one town, in which an array of different Shanghainese dialects are spoken. The discrepancies between Shanghainese and Mandarin often make it impossible for speakers to understand each other.

Shanghainese is an ever-changing language with an expanding vocabulary, reflecting the unique spirit of the city as well as the creativity and imagination of its speakers. The dynamism of the language is partly attributed to geographic location. Situated at the mouth of Yangtze River on the east coast of China, Shanghai functions as “an effective link between the port cities of North and South China, and also in the wider Asian sub-region, encompassing Japan and Korea” (Zheng, 2005). Given the high quality of its port facilities, Shanghai was selected as a “Treaty Port” after the Opium War and the signing of the Treaty of Nanking with Great Britain in 1842. It soon attracted an enormous population of foreign traders and missionaries (Darwin, 2007). As Shanghai rose to become one of the few global cities in China, the Shanghai dialect came into contact for the first time with languages from a different language family, the most prominent of which was English.

When the first wave of foreign settlers arrived in Shanghai in the nineteenth century, the interaction between Shanghainese and English gave rise to a new type of language, “Yangjing Bang English,” the Shanghai branch of Chinese Pidgin English (Hall, 1944). It was formed during the early eighteenth century mainly to facilitate communication between foreign masters and Chinese servants in business settings in southern China treaty ports (Hall 1944). With the promotion of standard English in the late nineteenth century, Chinese Pidgin English, including “Yanjing Bang English,” gradually disappeared (Hall, 1944). Nonetheless, Shanghainese still retains traces of “Yangjing Bang English” even in its contemporary vocabulary (Qian, 2006). The Shanghainese words derived from this pidgin language are mainly novelties of Western origin. When first introduced to Shanghai, a variety of products such as sofas, motors, coffee, cocoa and cement were given local names that sounded close to the original English name (Qian, 2006). For example, the Shanghainese pronunciation of “sofa” – “sufa” – resembles the original English word.

Interestingly, Shanghainese words of foreign origin are not limited to novelties. Other examples of Shanghainese influenced by “Yangjing Bang English” include a number of interesting phrases used to describe a concept

or phenomenon. For example, the Mandarin word *shimao* originated from the Shanghainese pronunciation “semo,” which traced its origin to the English word “smart.” Adopting the traditional British meaning of “smart,” Shanghai natives used “semo” to describe someone dressed in a stylish way (Xiao Maju, 2009). The Shanghainese version of “gossip” is *gasewu*, a vivid expression adapted for local use to describe the popular practice of chatting as entertainment. Another classic example is the phrase *wengqiangsi*, which is the Shanghainese version of “take a chance.” Instead of simply borrowing the English phrase without changing it, Shanghai people localized the expression by substituting *wen* for “take” because *wen* has a negative connotation, suitable for the use of the phrase to describe someone who is excessively given to taking risks (Zhu, 2006). The phrase *zadexing* originated from the English adjective “dashing” and is now used to describe the act of trying to look dashing (Zhu, 2006). These popular expressions’ phonological resemblance to their English counterparts adds a global touch to the Shanghai dialect.

## THE SHANGHAI DIALECT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SHANGHAI

Although these words are of foreign origin, they still sound distinctively Shanghainese. Therefore the pronunciation of these new words came naturally for the local population. Soon Shanghai natives started to use them in their daily speech and eventually incorporated the novelties from the West into their daily life, establishing a national reputation of being open to foreign products and concepts. In a way, new words and phrases in Shanghai dialect fostered an open attitude towards the outside world. By using the new phrases on a daily basis, Shanghai residents managed to quickly familiarize themselves with initially unfamiliar things. If the names of these novelties and concepts had not been localized into easily pronounceable words in Shanghainese, the city’s population would not have so rapidly adopted the foreign ideas and commodities. By adding bits of pidgin English into the dialect, Shanghai took a great stride toward becoming a metropolis. Thanks to Chinese pidgin English, Shanghai is now able to host numerous foreign enterprises as well as a growing number of foreign visitors and expatriates.

In contemporary Shanghai, the inaccessible Shanghainese dialect is not spoken exclusively by locals. Migrants and even some ambitious expatriates tackle the language for different purposes. Some locals use the dialect not only to communicate among themselves but also to proclaim their identity as natives of the city, distinguishing themselves from the growing number of migrant workers. Many local residents hold prejudices based on stereotypes against people from other provinces. It is worth noting that “native-place identity, not race, religion or nationality, provided the most significant quasi-ethnic distinction in Shanghai” (Honig, 1990).

My own experience growing up in Shanghai makes me well aware of the presence of these stereotypes. For example, people from Subei (the northern

Jiangsu Province bordering Shanghai) are known for their poverty and poor taste in clothing; Anhui people are perceived as troublemakers. As previously stated, people from different provinces of China speak their own dialects and even those who have learned Mandarin speak it with a distinctive accent, which makes them easily identifiable. These stigmatized migrant workers are subject to discrimination by Shanghai natives. The prejudice against *waidiren* (non-natives) is currently diminishing since locals have learned to be more tolerant of migrants. Nonetheless prejudice has been, and to a lesser extent continues to be, a source of affliction in the already hardship-ridden life of migrants, especially those with a low level of education and no special skills. Although this type of discrimination exists nationwide, it is particularly notable in Shanghai as locals take tremendous pride in their identity as natives of the city.

Dissatisfied with the way they are treated, migrant workers strive for the same respect and social status. In many cases, instead of holding grudges against locals, they seek to acquire the local identity by learning the dialect. It is an effective way of eliminating discrimination "since language is the only recognizable marker" of a *waidiren* while "those with no accent can effectively disguise their native-place origin..." (Honig, 1990). To that end, numerous migrant factory workers aspire to master Shanghainese, or at the very least to speak Mandarin with a reduced accent. After years of hard work, some migrants are able to attain fluency in Shanghainese. For those not blessed with the linguistic talent to master Shanghainese, they try to perfect their Mandarin. Once discrimination based on the linguistic barrier is gone, they are granted a higher social status, which subsequently brings them a better job and higher salary. A perfect example would be my mother, who came to Shanghai 25 years ago from Jiangxi Province. Upon arrival, she had no knowledge of the dialect and thus had a hard time adjusting to the city with her lack of higher education and expertise. Locals often treated my mother with contempt and refused to trust her, based solely on the accent. As she conscientiously studied Shanghainese throughout the years, my mother was able to attain fluency in the dialect, which brought her not only into the higher social circles of locals but also led to her obtaining better jobs and more economic stability.

The situations of the coastal cities of Guangdong Province such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou parallel that of Shanghai. The prestigious language in factories is the local dialect of Cantonese, since the high-ranking managers are mostly Cantonese speakers. Most workers from other provinces make tremendous efforts to learn Cantonese since only with an excellent command of the dialect can they effectively communicate with the managers, which increases their chances of promotion. In the book *Factory Girls*, Leslie Chang tells the stories of a number of female migrants in the industrial city of Dongguan in Guangzhou Province. One of the girls, Chungming, was an ambitious assembly-line worker with excellent communication and public speaking skills. Since the first day working there, she was determined to

master Cantonese, which she used to her advantage as she worked her way to becoming a senior manager (Chang, 2008). Although her career success was mainly attributed to her hard work and highly developed interpersonal skills, her fluency in Cantonese was a critical factor, without which she could not have attained the trust of her managers.

The cases of Shanghai and the coastal cities in Guangdong perfectly illustrate how lower-class migrants can manipulate language as a tool to acquire better jobs as well as higher social status. “Language is system of differences, produced and reproduced in a web of social differences, hierarchies and distinctions which construe social reality. Struggle over legitimate language, as Bourdieu notes, is highly political, as it encompasses a struggle over identity, status and power” (Ngai, 1999). In the case of Shanghai, discrimination caused by the difference in languages motivates a massive number of ordinary migrants to work even harder. Attracted by the prospect of better social and financial status, immigrants attempt to master the dialect to better adapt to the local community while continuing their hard work to prove their abilities. This type of competitiveness not only enables individual immigrants to potentially rise in society, but also proves to be beneficial to the society as a whole. As the aspiration transforms into high productivity, the migrant workers generate a positive effect on the economy and development of the host society. Without the ambitious lower-class migrant workers that could move up the social ladder through acquiring the language, Shanghai would not be what it is today. Thus, the Shanghai dialect adds to the complex social and economic dynamics of Shanghai, shaping the city in a significant way.

Despite the fact that proficiency in the Shanghai dialect brings promising social prospects to many migrant workers, it is worth noting that an expanding group of migrants in Shanghai are spared the difficult task of mastering the dialect. They have come to be known as “New Shanghai People (*xin shanghai ren*).” With their high level of education and special skills, these Mandarin-speaking professionals are able to establish themselves as social elites, distinguishing themselves from the lower-class migrant workers. In recent years, this rapidly growing group has become more and more visible in Shanghai as the city continues to absorb non-native young talents. These stereotype-defying “New Shanghai People” play an important role in diminishing discrimination by locals.

Impressed by their education and expertise, locals see these new migrants as equals and treat them with respect. Some have even extended this newly formed hospitality towards the lower-class migrant workers. Despite the rise of “New Shanghai People,” learning the dialect still helps migrant workers of all classes better assimilate themselves into the city and further advance their careers, for the language is deeply embedded in the culture of Shanghai. A good command of Shanghainese helps one make local friends more easily. A number of television personalities have learned the dialect in order to host

shows in Shanghainese to increase their popularity among local viewers. As intermarriage between locals and non-natives becomes more common, it is important that one should learn the dialect for ease of communication both within the family and out in the community. Yet the language is undoubtedly more important for lower-class migrants as they are mostly insufficiently educated and the rough manners of some tend not to agree with the metropolis. Despite increasing tolerance towards immigrants in Shanghai, the ability to speak the dialect still remains a highly-valued asset that makes it easier in general for immigrants to integrate into the local society and achieve social and economic success.

### THE CULTURAL AND INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE LINGUISTIC TRIO

The discussion above reveals the positive effects of mastering Shanghai dialect on the society by allowing immigrants to be integrated into the local culture. Additionally, a significant part of the original charm of Shanghai would be lost if Shanghainese were no longer spoken. Growing up in Shanghai, I have become familiar with a variety of artistic performances featuring the dialect. *Hu Ju* is a type of opera in which performers sing only in Shanghainese. Traditional entertainment in Shanghai also includes a unique type of comedy show called *Dujiao Xi* featuring two comedians telling jokes in Shanghainese. These shows continue to entertain generations of local residents. The language not only captures the spirit of the city and its residents but also reveals traces of its history. Shanghainese is a dynamic language that has continued to evolve since its very beginning. The history of the language as discussed above shows that Shanghainese has been influenced by the inland dialect spoken by the wartime refugees that flocked to Shanghai. The Western influence of contemporary history is also clearly seen in the dialect. Thus preserving the dialect is critical to the preservation of the local culture.

Despite the merits of Shanghainese, it still poses a daunting linguistic barrier to outsiders since it is unrealistic to expect everyone to learn the dialect. To solve the problem of communication between speakers of Shanghainese and those of other dialects, Mandarin Chinese has been promoted on a large scale in Shanghai. Among native residents of Shanghai, diglossia is a common phenomenon. Diglossia describes a type of bilingualism that pertains to closely related languages or varieties of the same language, with each variant assigned to a different social function (Hamed, 2005). "These spoken variants are supplemented by standard forms that serve for communication across dialect boundaries, bureaucracy and as the written standard for literary and cultural tradition" (Hamed, 2005). Local residents are normally able to switch between Shanghainese and Mandarin with ease. The occasion and other participants in the conversation largely decide which language they choose to speak. Most locals opt for Mandarin at work, school and other formal settings, whereas



at home and in other casual settings, they revert to Shanghainese. Older generations tend to use the dialect more frequently, while younger generations are usually comfortable with both, sometimes switching for no obvious reason. The use of Mandarin makes communication much easier between Shanghai residents and the rest of the Chinese population. Shanghai natives, unlike Cantonese speakers, are more willing to speak the national language, usually with a much higher level of proficiency as well. Some school age children in Shanghai actually show a preference for Mandarin, the primary language at school.

In many other cities, especially inland ones, diglossia is not as prominent as in Shanghai. The majority of workers are poorly educated with a barely functional command of Mandarin. They speak Mandarin with a strong local accent, making it difficult for other Mandarin speakers to understand. Nationwide, the younger generation generally performs better in acquiring Mandarin due to the wide availability of television that broadcasts programs in Mandarin as well as the emphasis on standardized Chinese in school. Despite the increasing popularity of Mandarin, a vast number of Chinese people still struggle with their Mandarin. In many places, even government officials speak heavily accented Mandarin that is barely understandable. It is not uncommon for some high-profile government meetings to be conducted in the local dialect. Of course, preference for the local dialect is not limited to the government. In Chongqing, for example, it is frustrating for visitors when the taxi drivers persist in using their native dialect rather than Mandarin.

The ability to speak better Mandarin, therefore, proves to be a significant advantage that the population of Shanghai has over the rest of the country. The fact that locals can speak excellent Mandarin makes the city more accessible to visitors despite the existence of the dialect. As long as the non-natives can speak functional Mandarin, they are able to survive without difficulty. Thanks to the common usage of Mandarin, Shanghai has absorbed a huge number of immigrants, which continues to increase at a remarkable rate.

Shanghai “has advantages in engineering, R&D, and design due to its concentrated human talent and top-notch universities, with another advantage in the economies of scale from the critical mass of heavy industries such as petrochemicals, steel, automobiles, machines tools and information technology” (Chen, 2009). Even given this favorable environment, the city would not be as cosmopolitan as it has become if only standard Chinese were spoken. Despite a rapidly growing number of foreign learners of Mandarin, the vast majority remain incapable of conducting business in this language. In most cases, Mandarin would prove an ineffective means of communication for foreigners, but reality demonstrates the increasing popularity of Shanghai as a destination for expatriates. Statistics show that “Changning District is home to over 4,000 households of foreign nationalities, many of whom see themselves as becoming ‘indigenous Shanghainese’ and actively participate in community

affairs and community-organized Chinese arts, crafts, and cooking classes” (Lu, Ren, and Chen, 2009). A significant number of expatriates have adopted a local lifestyle, attempting to assimilate, both linguistically and culturally, into the city culture. In order for foreign visitors to flourish in this city, it is essential that the universal language, English, continue to be promoted.

Compared with other regions in China, people in Shanghai have a relatively high proficiency in English. Students are pressured by their parents and the school to learn English diligently. My experience growing up in Shanghai has taught me that unlike elsewhere in China, students are encouraged to speak English in class, which helps them gain further fluency in English, as they are not as tongue-tied as those in the rest of the country. In order to improve the effectiveness of English pedagogy, an increasing number of private kindergartens have adopted a special teaching method so that the children are “immersed in English.” As the result of this educational system in which tremendous emphasis is placed on English acquisition in addition to Mandarin, the majority of college graduates have sufficient knowledge of the language to communicate effectively with English speakers. In Shanghai there are also an increasing number of residents with study or work experience in English-speaking countries who therefore have better language skills as well as a better understanding of Western culture.

It is worth noting that the English spoken in Shanghai today is completely different from “Yangjing Bang English,” the Shanghai branch of Chinese Pidgin English. Despite the fact that Chinese Pidgin English gave rise to a number of Shanghainese words that came to be used in daily speech, Pidgin English per se was never in wide circulation. As the most important foreign language, English today is not only widely spoken but also used ubiquitously on signs all over the city. Used mainly for business purposes, “Yangjing Bang English” was essentially a combination of English and Chinese. The English in use today, however, is Standard English, unaffected by the local language.

Because half of Shanghai’s population is non-native, the multilingual environment where Shanghainese, Mandarin and English are the predominant languages proves to be stimulating for further development. The increasing number of foreign companies benefit tremendously from the multilingual environment as they can easily hire locals who are capable of working in an English-speaking environment different from the conventional setting of a Chinese company. Their native knowledge of the city also enables the local employees to facilitate operations and maximize the company’s chance of success in Shanghai. The wide availability of employees with adequate English skills gives Shanghai an edge over most other Chinese cities where it is relatively difficult to find locals speaking proficient English. International business transactions are also made easier as miscommunication is minimized through the use of English. Given that multilingualism facilitates local

management and operation, Shanghai offers an excellent environment for foreign investment compared to other Chinese cities.

Multilingualism also qualifies Shanghai to host various events of national and international importance. The Shanghai World Expo in 2010 exemplified the scale of international events Shanghai is capable of hosting. The success of such a global event hinged upon the availability of volunteers speaking Mandarin and foreign languages. According to the official Shanghai World Expo website, “a total of 79,965 volunteers worked at the Expo venues,” with only “1,266 volunteers from other mainland areas and 204 volunteers from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and overseas” (Expo-2010 Shanghai, 2010). The volunteers were required to have an excellent command of at least Mandarin and English to accommodate the needs of national and international visitors. It would be impossible for the Expo to be held in a city like Chongqing due to its inability to provide such a vast number of volunteers with adequate language skills. Hosting a major global event such as the World Expo not only generates profit for the city, but more importantly brings Shanghai to global attention and increases future investment opportunities.

Linguistically dynamic and diverse, Shanghai is able to host people from all over the country and the world, whose presence in turn gives the city a cosmopolitan air. Immigrants bring their cultures and languages, adding to the cultural and linguistic diversity of this city. As Shanghai is on its way to become a full-fledged cosmopolitan city like New York, more global collaboration and projects are expected to take place, requiring a wider range of languages. Currently, multilingualism in Shanghai is not confined to the three primary languages but also extends to more languages such as Cantonese, Japanese, French, and German. With a larger presence of expatriates and visitors from more diverse origins, a wider range of languages will be spoken in Shanghai. The historically open-minded Shanghai residents will in turn have a higher awareness of the burgeoning multilingualism as a defining element of a cosmopolitan city.

## CONCLUSION

Language has played a significant role in the urban development of Shanghai and will continue to visibly affect the trajectory of the city. Although the Shanghai dialect can be a source of frustration for visitors and immigrants, it nonetheless constitutes an essential part of the culture. The Shanghaiese words of Pidgin English origin helped form a receptive attitude towards the world. The Shanghai dialect offers lower-class migrant workers an opportunity to climb social ladders and upper-class migrants a means of better integration. Mandarin connects Shanghai with the rest of the country whereas English makes Shanghai accessible to the rest of the world. Multilingualism has presented Shanghai with a wide range of opportunities that would otherwise have been unavailable. As the city attains more global significance, the

linguistic environment is bound to become more complicated with a larger variety of languages. It is therefore critical to maintain and enhance this booming multilingualism in Shanghai.

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