

LANGUAGE USE OF THE CHINESE IN BANGKOK

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This paper is part of a research project which was commenced in 1984.¹ The paper aims to present findings from two major areas of investigation : 1) language use of the Chinese in Bangkok, and 2) their attitudes towards the Thai and Chinese languages.

SUBJECTS OF THE STUDY

The sample of population for the study is confined to 319 Teochiu Chinese subjects, randomly selected from the Bangkok metropolitan area. Teochiu speakers were chosen as representative Chinese subjects because their dialect constitutes the largest dialect group among the Chinese dialects in Thailand. The investigated subjects were classified into 5 groups based on educational attainment in the Thai school system as follows.

The subjects in Group I were the Chinese immigrants or first - generation Chinese in the Thai society.² By contrast, the Chinese subjects in Group II, III, IV, and V are restricted to the Chinese of subsequent generations who were born and raised in Thailand,

in the families where Teochiu Chinese is spoken as the parents' first language and Chinese cults are practised.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The data were collected by means of interviews. The questions used in the interviews consisted of two main parts : 1) questions to investigate the subjects' choices of codes in different situations of language use, as well as their language proficiency in Thai and Chinese, and 2) questions and rating scales to determine the subjects' attitudes towards the Thai and Chinese languages.

In analyzing the data, the responses for the five - point scale rating were converted to a one - to - five scale for numeral analysis. Five was given to the most favorable rating, 4, or 3, or 2, or 1 was assigned to the less favorable rating respectively. The arithmetic mean (\bar{x}) for each attitude scale was then calculated. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) with F - distribution was used to test the statistical significance of differences of the attitudinal evaluations. In addition, the responses to the completion questions and the checklists were converted into percentages and tabulated.

Group	Education	Persons	Age range
I	no formal schooling	54	45 - 87
II	elementary level or less	61	23 - 72
III	lower or upper secondary level (10 - 12 years of school)	44	16 - 62
IV	vocational level or equivalence (13 - 15 years of school)	53	17 - 57
V	undergraduate students and university graduates	107	18 - 52

RESULTS

1. Language Use

1.1 Number of languages the respondents can speak

Most respondents from all groups (58.34%) reported that they were able to speak two languages, Thai and Teochiu Chinese. In addition to these two languages, Group IV (50.94%) and Group V (56.07%) respondents claimed that they could speak English as well. This clearly indicates their superior education over the other groups.

1.2 Language choices with particular interlocutors

Table 1 shows the relationship between typical code choices and particular interlocutors. The data are presented in an implicational scale. They are arranged in such a way that the highest degree of scalability³ is obtained. As seen in Table 1, the horizontal axis indicates the types of interlocutors with whom the respondents interacted. By reading across each row, we see that the occurrence of any of the categories in a cell implies the occurrence of particular categories in the cells to the left and the right. Hence, if a respondent uses C with an interlocutor, then only C can appear to the left of that and C, CT, or T to the right. If the respondent used CT with an interlocutor, then only C can appear to the left and T to the right. If the respondent used T with an interlocutor, then C, CT, or T can appear to the left of that, but only T to the right. Such knowledge of which language a person uses with a particular interlocutor allows us to predict that person's language choice.

Evidently, almost all groups of respondents spoke Chinese to their older relatives and parents -- the interlocutors who were socially higher in status and respected by the respondents. As these parents and older relatives were generally the early Chinese generations in Thailand who retained relatively more Chineseness in Thai society, they were likely to expect their family members to speak Chinese when interacting with them. This claim can be supported by Punyodyana's study (1971 : 18) of the Chinese assimilation in Bangkok. His study reveals that the group of Chinese respondents whose occupation was trade and commerce found it important and necessary to speak Chinese with their parents and older relatives because they were expected to do so.

When interacting with their spouses, the respondents exhibited different language choices. Group I respondents used Chinese as can clearly be expected. Group II and Group III respondents used both Chinese and Thai, whereas Group IV and Group V used mostly or wholly Thai. That Group II and Group III interacted with their spouses equally in Chinese and Thai can be explained by the fact that these groups of bilingual respondents, although they were less educated, were engaged in trade and commerce, and were relatively more oriented to the Chinese way of life. Consequently these couples probably felt obligated to interact in Chinese in the presence of their Chinese parents. On the contrary, the respondents in Group IV and Group V, who were more educated and engaged more in the Thai daily life, e.g., being students or working in the Thai government or non-government services, may have felt more comfortable and natural in using Thai with their spouses.

Table 1 Choices of Language with Particular Interlocutors

Groups	Interlocutors										
	Older relatives	Parents	Spouse	Siblings	Younger relatives	Colleagues	Employers	Children	Work assistants	Neighbors	Customers
I	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	T	T	T	T
II	C	C	CT	T	T	T	T	T	T	T	T
III	C	T	CT	T	T	T	T	T	T	T	T
IV	C	C	T	T	T	T	T	T	T	T	T
V	C	C	T	T	T	T	T	T	T	T	T

Language choice :

- C = mostly or wholly Chinese
- T = mostly or wholly Thai
- CT = equally Chinese and Thai

As evident from the scale in Table 1, the respondents in Group II, III, IV, and V uniformly interacted with the rest of the interlocutors (those to the right of the spouse interlocutor) in Thai. If all of the interlocutors within the respondents' communicative networks were grouped according to their social status and roles, the individual respondent groups would be seen choosing language codes appropriate for each specific interlocutor. For example, the Chinese language would be chosen for interaction with the Chinese interlocutors of higher status and superior role, such as parents or older relatives. However, when communicating with interlocutors of equal or subordinate roles, e.g., spouses, siblings, colleagues, younger relatives, children, and work assistants, the majority of respondents used mostly Thai. It was interesting to see that Group I respondents who used Chinese with most interlocutors, chose to speak Thai with their children as the other respondent groups did. This indicates the present Chinese language situation in Thailand in which subsequent Chinese generations use more Thai in their daily life. Many of them can speak or understand only a little Chinese even though it is their parental language. Some responses to the question asking whether the respondents wanted their children to speak Chinese well disclosed that most of the parents or prospective parents in Group IV and Group V did not expect their children to speak Chinese well. They further stated that they generally spoke Thai to their children. With respect to the interaction with interlocutors outside the family domain, e.g., when communicating with colleagues, employers,

work assistants, neighbors, and customers, all respondents (with the exception of Group I interacting with their colleagues and employers in Chinese) used Thai with these interlocutors. This clearly indicates that the national Thai language presently serves as the most significant language for everyday use and as the language for business communication. Although Chinese has long been considered a language necessary for trade and business (since Thailand's trade and commerce are predominantly executed by the Chinese people), Thai remains the sole official language and is widely used for all types of communication. The fact that Thai is largely used by the majority of respondents in communicating with different interlocutors also indicates that the Chinese people in Thailand are socially and culturally well integrated with the Thai since language also serves as a powerful identifying feature for the members of a cultural or social group.

1.3 Domains and typical choices of language

The configuration⁴ in Table 2 illustrates the relationship between the respondents' code choices and the domain of use. It is interesting to see that the language choice patterns of most respondents, particularly among the Thai-born Chinese groups, were pretty uniform. Regarding the family domain, almost all groups used both languages with more Chinese than Thai. Interestingly, Group V was found to be the only group who used more Thai than Chinese in their home. The fact that Chinese is used most often in the family domain signifies that Chinese is the typical language choice for family communication.

Table 2 Domains and Their Typical Language Choices

Domains	Language chosen by respondent groups				
	I	II	III	IV	V
Family	CT	CT	CT	CT	TC
Work	TC	TC	TC	TC	T
School	CT	T	T	T	T
Shopping	TC	TC	TC	TC	TC
Religion	CT	TC	T	T	T
Recreation	CT	TC	TC	TC	TC

Language choice :

T = mostly or wholly Thai

TC = more Thai than Chinese

CT = more Chinese than Thai

among the Chinese people in Bangkok. However, when interacting outside their home, the majority of respondents spoke Thai more frequently. Thai was predominantly used in the school and religious domains. Moreover, the language choice patterns of the last four respondent groups were very much similar in the domain of work, shopping, and recreation as they used more Thai than Chinese in these situations.

Considering the language choice of Group I, we see that this group used, on the average, more Chinese than Thai. There are occasions, however, when they used more Thai, such as when at work or shopping. With respect to their choice of CT in the school domain, it can possibly be explained by the fact that some of them (among the very few 3-4 percent who responded to this specific investigation of code choice and school domain relationship) have attended informal classes of Thai and Chinese and used Chinese more frequently there.

When comparing the language choices of each respondent group, it is evident that Groups II, III, and IV had almost the same choices. Group V was different in that they used more Thai in all domains. This finding confirms the information related to Group V's language behavior presented in Table 1 which then leads us to deduce that Group V respondents possessed the most Thainess -- they were most assimilated into Thai culture and society. Conversely, the Chinese immigrants in Group I retained their high degree of Chineseness on the Chineseness - Thainess continuum. It is noteworthy that these first-generation Chinese proportionally used Thai along with Chinese in all domains. The findings that Group I also used Thai in their daily social interaction, and that the overall majority of respondents used more Thai than Chinese in most domains, verify the significant role and function the Thai language plays as the major language used in all communicative networks among the Chinese people in Thailand. Chinese, nevertheless, is largely confined to intragroup communications, especially among immediate family members and kin.

Before leaving the discussion of language choices, it may be advantageous to talk about the possible criteria on which the respondents based their code choices. Whether the choice was Thai or Chinese appears to be dependent on these particular variables: a) the interlocutors (parents, siblings, older or younger

relatives, employers, customers, etc.), b) the first language of the interlocutors, c) the topics of conversation. Unfortunately, the correlation of language choice with topic variable was not investigated in this study. This would be a good topic for future research.

1.4 Language Proficiency

Most respondents in Group I (89.21%), reported that they spoke, read, and wrote in Chinese more proficiently than in Thai. On the contrary, the majority of Thai-born Chinese (80.87% in Group II, 90.15% in Group III, 91.82% in Group IV, and 97.20% in Group V) claimed that their proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing Thai surpassed their proficiency in Chinese. When comparing the Thai language skills of the Thai-born respondents in the last four groups, it is interesting to find that these groups' proficiency in Thai proportionally corresponds to their levels of education. Group V had the most Thai language skills, followed respectively by those of Groups IV, III, and II.

2. Attitudes towards Thai and Chinese Languages

2.1 Respondents' attitudes towards Thai

Figure 1 shows the mean ratings (from the five-point scale) given by each respondent group towards particular attitudinal statements concerning the Thai language. In addition, the mean average of the combined five statements evaluated by each group is given in Figure 2. As can clearly be seen from the graphs, the majority of respondents, especially the Thai-born groups, showed favorable attitudes towards the Thai language. They viewed Thai as important and necessary for living in Thai society. However, the Chinese immigrants in Group I expressed less agreement with the statements.

Comparing the five groups, there is a slight proportional difference in most of the statements which shows a slight increase in favorability towards the Thai language. In general, the increase goes from lowest in Group I to highest in Group V. This proportional increase corresponds with the increased level of education. Similar correspondence can be found in Punyodyana's study (1971:67) which discovered that government employers who were the highest educated persons in his study have assimilated best into Thai culture and life. It can therefore be concluded that favorability towards the Thai language increases with the amount of Thai educational background a person has had.