

Use Post-Structuralism Theory to Explain a Puzzle of Language Preference

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Abstract. Many people tend to prefer the dominant language of society to their mother tongue in conversation, even when the other person is using their mother tongue. This study uses Post-Structuralism theory to explain a common linguistic phenomenon. Taking the promotion of Mandarin in China and the loss of mother tongue in immigrant families as an example, this paper explores the formation mechanism of language preference by analysing the relationship between language learning, identity and social capital. Drawing on Norton's Identity theory and Bourdieu's concept of Symbolic Capital, it argues that people's motivations for choosing the dominant language are not limited to their personal habits, but are influenced by the wider social power structure. Individuals adjust their language choices in specific contexts in order to gain greater social acceptance and identity. The results of the study not only shed light on the understanding of language use behaviour, but also provide theoretical support for the formulation of language policies and the preservation of minority languages and cultures.

Keywords: Post-Structuralism; Language Preference; Symbolic Capital; Social Ideology.

1. Introduction

In this research, I will use Post-Structuralism theory to explain a puzzle about understanding why do people prefer using the dominant societal language over their heritage language, even when addressed in the latter. Starting with a brief introduction, the research will explain my puzzle and the reason why I am interested in it. Then I will introduce the theory I will use and explain how it enhances my understanding of my puzzle. Finally, my new theory-based understanding regarding the puzzle will be summarized.

2. A Description of the Context of Puzzle

In conversations, people unconsciously tend to choose the dominant social language rather than their heritage language. This phenomenon is common in immigrant and multicultural families. For example, Norton (2013) has mentioned children of families, who have immigrated to monocultural and monolingual communities, usually gradually shift to a predominantly English language use, especially when they enter environments where English becomes a dominant language, such as schools[1]. There is a specific example in the literature by Grosjean (2010): in immigrant families in the UK, the younger generation usually prefers to use English rather than their mother tongue[2].

The main case studied in this paper is linguistic acceptance in heritage language. Even when communicating in their native language, people still unconsciously respond in the dominant language of the society.

Before explaining my puzzle and its point of interest in detail, I would like to explain what the Wu dialect is in my personal case. This is because it is not as well known as Mandarin and Cantonese. Tang et al. (2017) demonstrated in their survey that the classification of dialects in China is complex and varied, and is mainly divided into 10 major dialect groups, which are Mandarin, Wu, Xiang, Gan, Hakka, Yue (Cantonese), Min, Jin, Hui, and Pinghua[3]. The Wu dialect, which is considered to be one of the major dialects of the Chinese language, is mainly spoken in the Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Shanghai area and is distributed in the south of the Yangtze River, some parts of Jiangsu, Shanghai and Zhejiang, and parts of Jiangxi, Fujian and Anhui Zhengzhang et al. (2015)[4].

The process of the homogenisation of the Chinese language commenced in 1956. On 6 February of that year, the state council of the People's Republic of China (1955) issued instructions on the promotion of Mandarin[5]. According to the policy, all schools have begun to promote the teaching of Mandarin instruction to the greatest extent possible, factories everywhere have begun to offer Mandarin courses and media are all using Mandarin for communication. Since then, Mandarin has become the official mainstream language of China and is now commonly referred to as Chinese.

3. An Explanation of the Puzzle and the Reason to Choose it

Following a long period of 70 years in which the promotion of Mandarin has been a key element of the linguistic landscape, proficiency in the language has been achieved by all Chinese citizens. However, this development has been accompanied by a gradual decline in the use of dialects, with a decreasing number of younger generations proficient in these forms of speech (Tang, 2014)[6]. I grew up in a completely Wu dialect family, where my grandparents, mum and dad were all fluent in and spoke Wu. However, I find that now I almost do not use the dialect in my daily life except to communicate with my family members. Even my conversations with my parents are subconsciously answered in Mandarin, except for some irreplaceable dialect words. The sole occasion on which I make a conscious effort to speak in the dialect is when engaging with my grandmother, who does not comprehend Mandarin.

My personal experience highlights a phenomenon: while my first language (L1) is Wu dialect, I have primarily spoken Mandarin since starting school, due to its promotion in China. Over time, I unconsciously began speaking Mandarin in my everyday discourse, even when conversing with my family. Many of my peers have undergone the same transformation.

Recently, I observed a similar situation in a Chinese supermarket in the UK: parents speaking to their child in Chinese, while the child replied in English. Although both parties could understand both languages, the child instinctively chose the dominant language of their environment.

This interesting puzzle is rooted in the interplay of language learning, identity and societal influence, and I am curious to understand the underlying reasons for this language preference.

In immigrant families and multicultural families, younger generation often prefer to use the dominant language of their environment (e.g. English in Chinese immigrant families in English-speaking countries or Mandarin in China).

4. An Introduction to Post-structuralism

The main theory I will use is post-structuralism, and in particular the work of Bonnie Norton, e.g. her investment model, which is a relevant theory to address the puzzle of why individuals often prefer the dominant societal language over their heritage language.

This framework explores identity as ‘fluid, dynamic, and shaped by social contexts’, there language plays ‘a central role in shaping individuals’ relationships to power, society, and culture” (Norton, 2019; Norton, 2013)[7][1]. Norton’s model emphasises that language learners are not simply motivated by personal desires but are also influenced by broader social ideologies and power structures. In environments where the dominant language holds greater symbolic capital, such as prestige, social mobility and access to resources, individuals may prefer it over their heritage language, even when conversing with family or within community that speaker latter. Next, I will present my new understanding in terms of identity theory, capital and ideology, three aspects of the puzzle.

5. Understanding of Language Preference Through Identity, Capital and Ideology

Starting from symbolic capital, Bourdieu points out that the value of symbolic capital also depends on its recognition in a particular social 'market'. In the context of language learning, the ability to

determine a particular language through social structures and power relations can be a form of symbolic capital. Norton's concept explains why people prefer the dominant language. It holds more prestige a social value, offering access to resources and opportunities. Learners' investment in the target language stems from the 'motivation' to increase their cultural capital and social power (Clément and Norton 2021)[9]. Thus, people achieve this goal by learning in order to acquire and use a wider range of symbolic capital and material resources. So we can think of it as a pyramid pattern (Figure 1 shown in next page), with the socially dominant language at the top and the heritage language at the bottom. It based on my puzzle design, the heritage languages which can be noticed in the left side of Figure 1, using English over Chinese in daily life by a descendant of an immigrant family in the UK reflects the higher symbolic value of English for social mobility. Similarly, Mandarin shows the same status, compared with other dialects, in China.

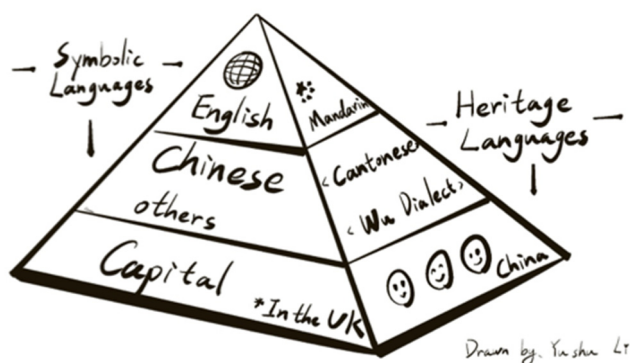


Figure 1. Capital - Symbolic Value of Dominant Language

Then identity theory, Norton (2013) viewed it as 'multiple, a site of struggle, and changing across time and space' in post-structuralism theory[1]. Her concept of 'investment' complements psychological theories of motivation (Norton, 2015)[11]. Based on this, I have attempted to draw a picture showing the complex relationship between learner identity and commitment to language learning (figure 2). It illustrates the dynamic interplay between identity, language use and social context, highlighting the role of home language, dominant language at school or work, and language choices. A circular relationship can be depicted whereby identity influences language use in work and educational settings, and these settings in turn influence identity formation and language preference.

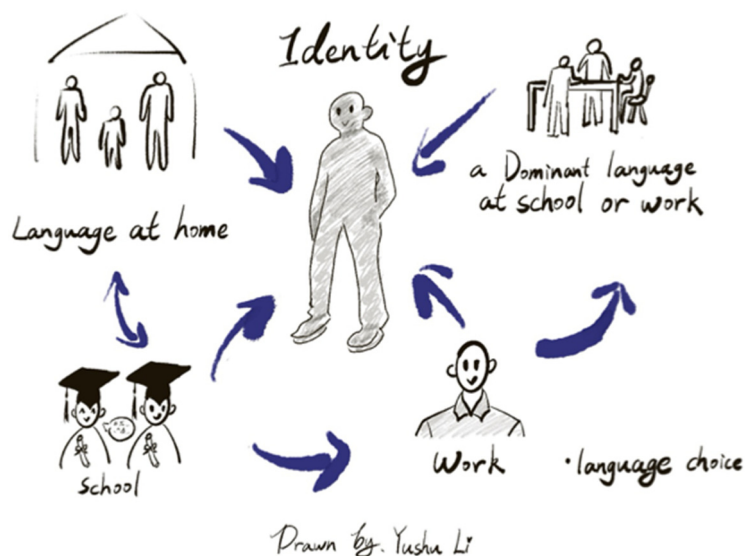


Figure 2. Identity theory - Socially constructed, Fluid and Dynamic

When learners 'invest' in the target language, they expect to acquire a wider range of symbolic resources (e.g. language, education, friendships) as well as material resources (e.g. capital) through the process (Norton, 2016)[10]. Language plays a key role in forming and expressing identity, as individuals negotiate different 'selves' depending on the environment. This shift from using a heritage language, like Wu dialect, to the dominant societal language, Mandarin, can be seen as a way of aligning with societal values. In my case, proficiency in Mandarin is indicative of social success and integration into the broader culture. The main reason for this is the aforementioned Chinese policy of placing Mandarin at the top of the pyramid. Such fluidity of identity may result in language preferences based on desired social positioning rather than on cultural ties.

Last but not least, post-structuralism emphasises that language is shaped by social ideologies. The dominant language in a society is linked to social, political and economic power. These ideologies create norms that privilege certain languages over others. For example, in the case of my puzzle, social ideologies place a higher value on Mandarin in China and English in the UK, associating these languages with intelligence, professionalism and upward mobility. This leads to a preference for these languages in different contexts, even when the mother tongue is available. The preference for dominant languages reflects societal ideologies that link these languages to success and acceptance. For instance, in case I mentioned before about the child in the supermarket, it is not merely about language proficiency but about aligning with the societal values of power and prestige that the English language represents in that context, that also mentioned by King, Fogle and Logan-Terry (2008) [14]. This phenomenon, also noted in Toohey's (2011) study, is that students often make linguistic choices that conform to social norms in order to gain recognition or avoid marginalisation[12].

In formal situations, such as in public or in the classroom, many students unconsciously adapt their speech patterns to the dominant language in order to appear more competent or socially acceptable (Anon, 2016)[13]. Norton (2015) has gave an example of a student who returned to Uganda from Canada and found that retaining Western language habits and conventions was not recognised in Ugandan schools. After that, his language use and classroom behaviour unconsciously adapted to the dominant local language and cultural habits[11]. This facilitates rapid adaptation to the linguistic environment and integration into social circles. However, Norton's (2013) exploration of the racial discourses embodied in educational documents that treat particular cultural practices as anomalous, as alien, was found to be detrimental to the educational prospects of ethnic minority children[1]. The monocultural and monolingual community conceived by educational policy makers is seen as normative and natural, and he notes that this normative imagined community values homogeneity over diversity.

Moreover, these unconscious transactions judged in Poplack's (2013) study of bilingual interactions, it was found that people tend to quickly integrate non-native (dominant social language) vocabulary into their native language, reflecting the influence of the dominant language[8]. Clément and Norton (2021) also argue that second language learning can threaten the mother tongue, and that a small number of minorities with low language vitality can lead to the replacement of the heritage language by the newly learnt language, as these groups are more likely to abandon it in order to integrate into mainstream society[9]. But they also add: it is possible to develop proficiency in another language without threatening the mother tongue sometimes.

6. Conclusion

Language as social practice highlights that language preferences are shaped not only by personal factors but by larger societal forces. The interconnected concepts of Identity, Capital, and Ideology work together to influence subconscious language choice. Identity is fluid and adaptable, with desired social roles. It is interesting how Capital reflects the social value associated with dominant languages, which are often seen as more prestigious. Ideology reveals how dominant languages are linked to power structures that privilege them over minority languages. This interconnected framework

provides a deeper understanding of how language choices reflect broader social, cultural, and political context.

In this written research, my reflections went deeper into the implications of the phenomenon of puzzle for the educational development of minority children and the cultural transmission of minority dialects. At the moment, scholars are not in agreement about this, and I hope that more research will be done on this subject in the future.

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