

# ***How Does Language Status as Majority or Minority Influence Mandarin-English Bilingual Children's Code-Switching Pattern?***

**Mingen Liang**

*Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China  
645810686@qq.com*

**Abstract:** This article is a literature review that focuses on exploring how can the frequency, syntactic characteristics, and situational differences of code-switching be impacted by the language popularity of Mandarin-English bilingual children in different social environments, more specifically, in environments with varying levels of status in two languages. It is discovered after looking through enough literature that the language status of Mandarin or English impacts the code-switching pattern through sociolinguistic mechanisms on families and children. Children thus tend to code-switch more in the minor language context. Nevertheless, there are some special cases. The research gap regarding this topic is mainly on the impact of language status on syntactical characteristics of code-switching and whether one language as the community language, but not the national language can overwhelm the impact of national language on the code-switching pattern. Depending on some relevant literature, it is predicted that the impact of language status on syntactical characteristics does not exist and the latter gap may have the answer “no”.

**Keywords:** code-switching, bilingualism, language status

## **1. Introduction**

Code-switching is a common phenomenon in communication, expression, and other behaviors among people who are proficient in multiple languages. It should be noted that some researchers thought that the definition of code-switching needs to be distinguished from code-mixing. Code-switching tends to be used to describe intra-sentence switching of language code and code-mixing tends to be intersentential switching. In this article, code-switching refers to the phenomenon where bilingual or multilingual individuals use two language codes in their communication or expression, whether within or between sentences. In other words, this article believes that code-switching includes the meanings of code code-switching and code-mixing in these researchers' view, and does not distinguish between these two terms.

This article is a literature review that focuses on exploring how can the frequency, syntactic characteristics, and situational differences of code-switching be impacted by the language popularity of Mandarin-English bilingual children in different social environments, more specifically, in environments with varying levels of status in two languages.

It should be noted that in the case where one language is considered major and another language is considered minor, the family (previous generations) or community of children (the research targets)

may speak major or minor language or half major and half minor (like OPOL). In other words, there are a total of six situations: Mandarin is the majority language in vast societies. Mandarin is spoken by families and communities (can't be considered as bilingual); Mandarin is the major language. English is spoken by families and communities; Mandarin is the major language. Mandarin and English are spoken half by families and communities; English is the major language. Mandarin is spoken by families and communities; English is the major language. English is spoken by families and communities (can't be considered as bilingual); English is the major language. Mandarin and English are spoken half by families and communities (OPOL). The literature selected in this review nearly all used bilingual children in the third and sixth types (OPOL). In this way, the independent variable only contains the situations of language majority or language minority. The variable of family and community language situation is controlled.

## 2. Previous study

In the early stages of code-switching research, only a few researchers have attempted to understand how bilingual children are socialized into using code-switching in the Mandarin-English context [1]. Researchers were more concerned about the impact of code-switching on children's language and cognitive abilities, as well as some of the obvious code-switching characteristics. Several researchers associate the children's code-switching behavior with the language input in their community [2]. This in turn raises questions regarding acquisition in general, provides the lens of "input" for studying the impact of language majority and language minority on code-switching.

Hui Tzu Min first observed and discussed the topic of Mandarin-English bilingual children based on input theory. He observed the code-switching behavior of three Mandarin-English preschool children living in Canada [3]. He found that Canadian uses English and French as official and major languages, and Mandarin is a minor language that can only be accessed through communication with their families. From the perspective of input, as immigrants, nevertheless, family members have the idea of helping their children adapt to living in Canada. In the early stages of their children's language development, they do not use Mandarin, but English much in direct communication with them even in OPOL situations (children are more likely to develop their language through direct communication with them, rather than conversations with people around them who are unrelated to them) This was what all three families did. In the research, the author analyzed that this is the intergenerational influence in terms of social psychology. What's more, when children interact and communicate with their peers (some in OPOL, some in Mandarin, most in English families), they tend to use English and are more receptive to English input due to fewer children from the Mandarin-speaking community. This is the direct influence of input in terms of social psychology in self-awareness. English has language dominance in their mind as a result. In the context of speaking Mandarin, there would be more code-switching, as children cannot express certain meanings directly and quickly in Mandarin due to their language deficiency. Children thus would subconsciously use English to make the meaning complete. In addition, With the social psychology mechanism, these children always carried English codes when speaking, regardless of whether they had mastered how to speak what they wanted to say in Mandarin and whether the occasion was more suitable for speaking in Mandarin after growing up. These discoveries and analyses are composed of the author's subtle observations, statistics of recordings in children's families, and the theoretical framework of language input, which are authentic and scientific. This theory establishes a logical connection between discourse strategy(input) and language dominance or language minority in living place, explaining the latter's promoting effect on the former. Hua's research also discovered similar points. He, through intergenerational conflict talks among the Chinese diaspora in Britain, found that parents and children "use code-switching as a linguistic resource to try and dominate the interaction, to establish and negotiate their positions, and to oppose and challenge each other" [4].

Cui Xiao Qing's research provides a more detailed explanation of the psychology of these children, through studying the use of code-switching functions for children. Her study focused on two members of one English-Mandarin bilingual family. The family two parents and one child who attended a school in Canada that used English as the medium of instruction. All speakers grew up dominant in Mandarin, so they seemed to be prone to speak in Mandarin although they could use both Mandarin and English regularly (In OPOL family) in their day-to-day lives [5]. Nevertheless, after many recordings were obtained and studied, she also found that these children inserted English codes much more frequently in Mandarin contexts than in the opposite situation. Her analysis of these phenomena is more detailed. She thought that primarily, with sufficient input and children's identity recognition of English people, these children preferred to speak in English. (mentioned by Min as well) Moreover, children would experience occasions that they talk to people who speak Mandarin, and suddenly someone who speaks English will come to talk to them. They passively have to switch languages and achieve code-switching between sentences. Next, due to the relative unfamiliarity with Mandarin (lack of practice with peers due to social psychological reasons although OPOL), there may be sudden situations in which suitable words and corresponding meanings cannot be matched when speaking Mandarin. (mentioned by Min as well) Based on the "lexical needs" and "lexical cohesion" functions of code-switching, they would use English code to insert within sentences. Lastly, Some vocabulary is subconsciously expressed in English due to input habits during preschool or school years. These are all formed due to the "input" theory, and the formation of "input" is mainly due to factors of language status (language majority or language minority). Her research can be seen as an extension of previous studies.

Nevertheless, some research indicated that, on specific occasions, the influence of language majority or language minority to code-switching is different from Min and QX Cui. Ng and He's study exploring conversations of three generations of Chinese diaspora families in New Zealand, found that some preschool children have a less obvious tendency to use code-switching in certain contexts when communicating with their family members less good at English. The author discovered that English-speaking parents (second generation) often spoke to their third-generation children who are primarily English speakers on most occasions in Mandarin and spoke to their first-generation grandparents who are primarily Mandarin speakers in many occasions in English in terms of greeting. The author thought that these parents may hope to help establish intergenerational connections by encouraging this. They referred to this type of code transformation aimed at adapting and promoting understanding between families with different proficiency in different languages as "interpretive code-switching". This study complements the arbitrary conclusion in sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics that families with a minority language as their native language tend to have children's inputs related to English. It reveals that with the expectation that children can greet the generation with the minority language as the native language, parents on the occasion of greeting may change the normal input tendency. This point also echoes Gumperz's model of "we code" and "they code" in language [6]. He distinguishes between the "we code" and the "they code": the "we code" is the code "associated with in-group and informal activities," and the "they code" is "associated with the more formal, stiffer and less personal out-group relations"; commonly, the ethnic minority language comes to be treated as the "we code" and the majority language as the "they code". When people who come from a social background where "they code" is a major language, due to the mechanisms of sociolinguistics and linguistic psychology, they want to integrate into "they" and are more proficient in using English in most situations, resulting in more code-switching in Mandarin contexts. But in situations where communication between "we" is desired, Mandarin is more proficient and there is more code-switching in the English context on the specific occasion ("we code" has the impact).

For regions where Mandarin is the primary language, the code-switching of such children (in OPOL families, so cases are rare) is generally opposite to that of regions where English is the primary language, providing strong evidence that language majority or language minority can cause more code-switching in the context of minor language, which is usually with little dominance through input from families or others. However, the number of literature is still relatively small, which deserves more research and papers.

### 3. Research gap

Although significant progress has been made in the research on the phenomenon of code-switching in Mandarin English bilingual children influenced by language majority or language minority, there is a lack of sufficient literature on the impact of language majority or language minority on the children syntactic characteristics of code-switching, and on code-switching in children in areas where English or Mandarin is the official language and major language in the national scale, but the communities living in involves a very larger population of Mandarin or English speakers. (inverse compared to national scale)

In terms of the topic about syntactical characteristics, based on the phenomena described in some papers (although these papers did not analyze and discuss similar phenomena in their and other literature), it can be inferred that language majority or language minority has no impact on the syntactical characteristics of code-switching and it may have the relationship with just properties of the language itself. Xuan Huang, Caicai Zhang's research aims to statistically identify the characteristics of code-switching in Singaporean Mandarin English bilingual children based upon the Childcare Center corpus. In the literature, they noted that in terms of syntactic categories in code-mixing, "nouns > verbs > adjectives" pattern was discovered, in line with the trend observed in the Cantonese-English bilingual children in Cantonese context, and with the general hierarchy of borrowability in language contact [7]. That is, nouns are most readily borrowed, followed by verbs and adjectives [8]. However, the pattern is not entirely consistent, for example, with the earlier study conducted by Poplack [9] analyzing the Spanish to English code-mixing by syntactic categories, he found that nouns are most likely to be mixed, whereas the second and the third frequently mixed types are adjectives and adverbs; verbs rank fourth in the mixing rate. It is widely acknowledged that Cantonese and Mandarin are languages same in writing but have different phonetic pronunciations, and have a high degree of similarity. In Hong Kong, both Cantonese and English can be used, but Cantonese is still a relatively major language. In Singapore, both Mandarin and English can be used as official languages, but English is still a relatively major language. Coincidentally, these two situations represent societies where Cantonese (which is extremely similar to Mandarin) and English are the major languages. In both cases, the syntactical characteristics of code-switching are the same. As the independent variable is the popularity of the language, while the dependent variable, the syntactical characteristics of code-switching, remains unchanged. Inversely, as the independent variable is different languages, and the dependent variable changes (demonstrated by the case of the Spanish English bilinguals in Popalck's study). Very obviously, it can be inferred that the syntactical characteristics of code-switching are not influenced by the social background of language majority or language minority and it is only related to the nature of the language itself and its borrowability.

In addition, the latter question about different situations of community and national scales has not been specifically explored in literature. This may be due to the fact that the selected literature focuses on children from Mandarin-speaking OPOL families as the research subjects, in order to control for variables. There are almost no cases in which Mandarin is used as the major language and children are in very large English communities in mainland China. There aren't inverse cases in the mostly studied regions like Canada too. In Singapore, where Mandarin is also an official language although it is not the major language, there may be children from OPOL families living in large Mandarin

communities. According to the research of Xuan Huang and Caicai Zhang, these bilingual children have an overwhelming advantage in input of English. So even if the major language of the community(Mandarin) can be close to the status of the major language on a national scale(English), the major language on a national scale plays a key role in shaping the social language psychology, and identity recognition of the children, affecting the input pattern and leading to differences in language dominance, as well as the difference of code-switching rates and numbers in different contexts [10]. The influence of language status might be applied to Yip and Matthew's model, they thought usually language as the official language, major language>official language, relatively minor language> non-official language, and minor language with respect to influence on normal language dominance distribution in society [11]. The community language (Mandarin) can just be the official, but relatively minor language, thus can't be compared with the status and impact of the language (English) on a national scale in these researches according to this ranking, Of course, this is just speculation, and more exploration is needed indeed.

#### 4. Conclusion

With the mechanisms of social psychology, these bilingual children consistently incorporate English codes into their speech, irrespective of whether they have fully mastered expressing their thoughts in Mandarin or if the context would be more appropriate for speaking Mandarin as they mature. Furthermore, children often find themselves in situations where they converse with Mandarin speakers, only to be interrupted by someone who speaks English. In such instances, they are compelled to switch languages and engage in code-switching between sentences. Due to a relative unfamiliarity with Mandarin, there may arise sudden circumstances where suitable words and corresponding meanings do not align when attempting to speak Mandarin. All these factors contribute to an increased frequency of code-switching within a Mandarin context. A particularly noteworthy scenario occurs when children interact with older generations who do not speak the dominant language.

It can be inferred that the syntactical characteristics of code-switching are not affected by the social background associated with either language majority or minority; rather, they relate solely to the intrinsic nature of each language and its capacity for borrowing elements from one another. Regarding the hierarchy of national and community languages influencing patterns of code-switching, it is evident that community languages tend to rank lower.

Nevertheless, further research is necessary involving children residing in areas characterized by varying linguistic status patterns within their communities. Additionally, more comprehensive analyses concerning the syntactical patterns of code-switching in each language among bilingual children living in environments with different linguistic majorities or minorities should be conducted.

#### References

- [1] Anna Kwan-Terry, *Code-switching, and code-mixing: The case of a child learning English and Chinese simultaneously*, *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development*, 1992.
- [2] F Genesee, *Early bilingual development: One language or two*, *Journal of child language*, 1989.
- [3] G Lee, TN Ho, ES Chng, H Li, *A review of the Mandarin-English code-switching corpus: SEAME International Conference ...*, 2017.
- [4] Hui Tzu Ming, *The code-switching behavior of three Mandarin-English Speaking Children*, *The Graduate College in University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, 1996.
- [5] JJ Gumperz, *Language and social identity*, *cir.nii.ac.jp*, 1982.
- [6] Lanza, *Can bilingual two-year-olds code-switch*, *Journal of Child Language*, 1992.
- [7] Qx Cui, *English-Mandarin code-switching in a bilingual family*, *yorkspace.library.yorku.ca*, 2022.
- [8] R. Lass, *Historical Linguistics and Language Change*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1997, pp.189.

- [9] S. Poplack, “‘sometimes I’ll start a sentence in spanish y termino en espan’: toward a typology of code-switching,” *CENTRO Working Papers*, no. 4. Adults, 1979, 18(7-8), 83.
- [10] Xuan Huang; Caicai Zhang, *A Corpus-Based Analysis on Code-Mixing Features in Mandarin -English Bilingual Children in Singapore*, *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology International Journal of Cognitive and Language Sciences* Vol:12, No:4, 2018.
- [11] Yip, V.; Matthews, S, *Assessing Language Dominance in Bilingual Acquisition: A Case for Mean Length Utterance Differentials*. *Language Assessment Quarterly* 2006, 3, 97–116, doi:10.1207/s15434311laq0302\_2.