



## Report 2015



The University of Manchester

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# **Language Choice of Individual Malaysian Chinese Students in Manchester**

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## **1. Research questions and methods**

This research aims to investigate individuals' language choice in different social domains. Our participants are two Malaysian Chinese undergraduates studying at the University of Manchester, who were born to early Chinese immigrant families and grew up in Malaysia. The reason why we choose this ethnical group, Malaysian Chinese, is that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and consequently multilingual country and Malaysian Chinese are equipped with the ability to use varying languages, among which Malay, Mandarin and English are the three most-used languages.

The present study would explore the influential factors of multilingual speakers' language use in diverse social contexts. Existing literature highlighted the role of interlocutors, topics and settings in individuals' language choice (c.f. Namei, 2008; Fishman, 2007; Ervin-Tripp, 1964). Thus, this research also takes these factors into consideration and we assumed that individuals' language choice does not depend on one single contributing factor; instead, it is a consequence of these factors functioning together.

During the exploratory phase of our study, we have employed a questionnaire and collected basic information of the speakers' language background. For both of the two speakers, they learnt Malay, English and Mandarin at school but were exposed to other Chinese dialects at home from birth. Alice is a 20-year-old female who speaks Malay, English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Hakka, and another participant, David, a 20-years-old male, could speak Malay, English, Mandarin and Hokkien fluently. This information lays the foundation of the following investigation achieved through the language diary and interviews.

We employed a self-report questionnaire which focuses on speaker's language history, a 7-day language diary which requires the speaker to record at least 3 situations of language choice per day within a week, and a face-to-face interview with the researchers as our research instruments. According to our research plan, the informants should have finished the language diary before 6<sup>th</sup> April following corresponding interviews on 12<sup>th</sup> April. However, during the Easter Holiday, the participants were abroad. Thus, we rescheduled the time for recording language diary from 13<sup>rd</sup> April to 19<sup>th</sup> April, with interviews rescheduled on 21<sup>st</sup> April. The interview guide was not available until the results of language diary were collected and analysed (see appendix 1). Specifically, the interview began with basic

questions focusing on their attitude towards minor language, self-evaluation of their language competence, and their motivations of code-switching. And we improvised other following questions related to their language choice on spot according to their answers during the conversation.

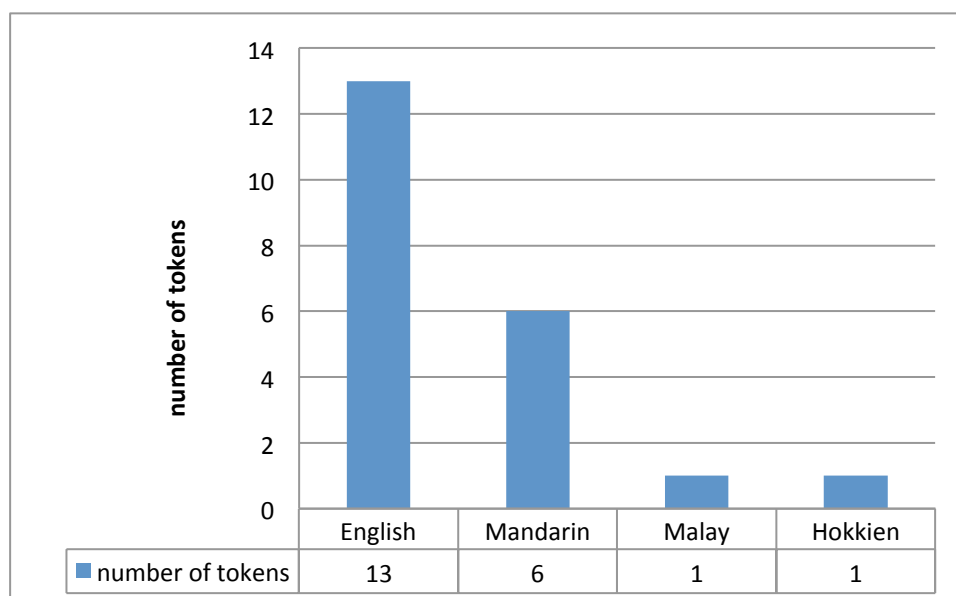
## 2. Results

In order to figure out the individual multilingual speakers' language choice in different domains, the two speakers in the current research filled in language diaries and participated in interviews with the researchers. The results of the language diary and interviews will be presented concerning three major potential determinants, interlocutors, topics and settings, which are assumed to affect their language choice.

### 2.1. David

Figure 1 shows the general pattern of David's language choice during the week. In total, 21 situations collected from David's language diary are taken into consideration. Generally speaking, most of the time David would use English, with 13 tokens collected. In addition, he spoke Mandarin 6 times. However, Hokkien and Malay were seldom used in his daily life.

Figure 1. Frequency of different languages chosen by David



With the purpose of examining motivations of David's language choice, firstly, we focused on the potential influence of interlocutors. Although no significant differences were found between David's language choice and other factors related to interlocutors, such as sex and ages, it is worth noting that David's familiarity with interlocutors showed a tendency to affect his language choice, as is shown in Table 1. Since the familiarity was measured by a scale (from 1 to 5, the degree of familiarity increases), the level 1 to 3 were categorised as *unfamiliar*, while 4 to 5 were grouped as *familiar*. Obviously, for those that David was less familiar with, he constantly used English, while for those well-acquainted, he preferred to speak Mandarin. He tended to not use Malay or Hokkien with a speaking acquaintance.

Table 1. Numbers of David's language choice and the familiarity with the interlocutors

	English	Mandarin	Malay	Hokkien
Unfamiliar	12	0	0	0
Familiar	1	6	1	1

Secondly, considering that David is a university student majoring in mathematics, we classified the conversation topics into *academic* and *non-academic*.

Academic topics mainly included assignments, readings, contents of lectures, while others were categorised as *non-academic*, such as film, football, travelling and hometown. David's language choice concerning two types of topics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Numbers of David's language choice regarding topics

	English	Mandarin	Malay	Hokkien
Academic	2	3	0	0
Non-academic	11	3	1	1

For academic topics, both English and Mandarin were frequently used, whilst no Malay or Hokkien was involved. More specifically, examples of David using English in discussing academic topics included a talk about mathematics with his supervisor and a conversation with his Chinese classmates in lectures. However, when he talked with his Chinese classmates or Malaysian-Chinese classmates about readings or assignments at tutorials or

in Learning Commons, David tended to use Mandarin. For non-academic topics, David's language choice was complicated. He usually used English in discussing non-academic topics in his daily life; for example, he talked about football or film only in English. Also, he would use Mandarin, when he talked about Chinese food or life in Manchester. The only occasion on which Malay was used was that David and his Malaysian friend talked about the appearance of women in McDonald and the only case involved Hokkien was his conversation with his mother via *Skype*. Overall, both English and Mandarin were often used to discuss academic topics, while English were frequently chosen for non-academic topics.

Thirdly, taking the diverse settings into account, we categorised them into three types, *on-campus*, *off-campus* and *Skype*, all of which have their own distinctive features. Those settings classified as *off-campus* consist of pub, cinema, dormitory and restaurant. The results are displayed in Table 3. Only English and Mandarin were used on campus, and David mostly spoke English off campus. However, via *Skype*, David talked with his mother in Hokkien but with his father in Mandarin.

Table 3. David's language choice in different settings

	English	Mandarin	Malay	Hokkien
On-campus	2	2	0	0
Off-campus	11	3	1	0
Skype	0	1	0	1

In addition, qualitative data were collected through the interview with one Chinese researcher who could speak Mandarin and English, and the interview was conducted in Mandarin according to David's will. However, we observed that David used certain terminology related to his major Mathematics in English during the interview. David claimed that among these four languages that he could speak, he was most confident with his Mandarin and least confident with Hokkien, with English and Malay in between. Also, he declared that he had no social prejudice against any language, and the criterion for his language choice established by himself was interlocutors' language ability and ethnic background. Based on the results of language diary, we further asked David which language he would prefer when discussing academics with others and he chose English. He explained

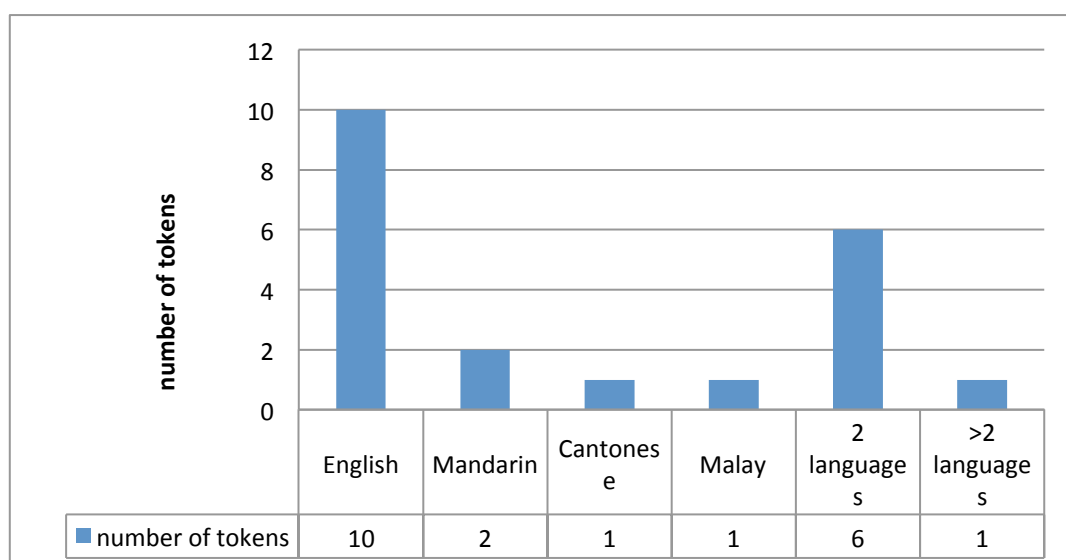
that he acquired the knowledge in English and it might be difficult to translate it into another language. However, according to the feedback of language diary, it was interestingly found that David used both English and Mandarin frequently for academic topics.

## 2.2. Alice

With the other speaker, Alice, the same method of reorganising data, such as categorising familiarity of interlocutors and dividing topics as *academic* and *non-academic*, was adopted. We will present the use of different languages regardless of potential affecting factors first, and the results of language diaries will be displayed next in terms of interlocutors, topics and settings.

The exact numbers of times of Alice’s language choice during the research time are presented in Figure 2. Alice differed from David in that she used more than one language on several occasions. As could be seen, among the 21 situations reported by Alice, she used merely English most of the time. The second mostly used language was related to the use of two languages, that was six times. However, it should be noted that the specific choices of the two languages used varied as well. Mandarin ranked the third in her language choice, which was two times, and Cantonese and Malay were used relatively infrequently, with only one token. It is also noticeable that Alice reported to use more than two languages in one occasion.

Figure 2. Frequency of different languages chosen by Alice



For the familiarity between our speaker and her interlocutors, Table 4 suggests that when talking with unfamiliar interlocutors, Alice tended to use English in most situations and she used two languages (Mandarin and Cantonese) once. Alice showed a similar pattern in the use of English with familiar interlocutors, which ranked the first, and her second favorite choice of language involved using two languages together.

Table 4. Numbers of Alice's language choice and the familiarity with the interlocutors

	English	Mandarin	Cantonese	Malay	2 languages	>2 languages	total
familiar	7	2	1	1	5	1	17
unfamiliar	3	0	0	0	1	0	4

In terms of academic and non-academic topics, English was Alice's first choice in discussing both topics. Table 5 indicates that among three of the conversations regarding academic topics, she reported to use English twice in Learning Commons and Study Room, and she used Mandarin once when talking with a Chinese classmate about exam revision in lecture. For non-academic topics, she widely used English. Second to English was the use of more than one language, the choice of which mainly depended on the language abilities of her interlocutors. More specifically, she would use both Malay and English when talking with her Malaysian Malay friend about issues of Malaysian politics. When talking about non-academic topics with her Chinese friends, she used two languages out of English, Mandarin and Cantonese, while she used more than two languages with a Malaysian Chinese friend who was capable of speaking English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Malay.

Table 5. Numbers of Alice's language choice regarding topics

	English	Mandarin	Cantonese	Malay	2 languages	>2 languages	total
academic	2	1	0	0	0	0	3
non-academic	8	1	1	1	6	1	18



In discussing the settings of conversations in Alice's case, the method used in David's data is followed. Since conversations on campus are mainly related to academic topics, and most off-campus talks focus on non-academic topics, the general trends in Alice's choice of language in both types of settings are similar to the patterns with regard to corresponding topics, as is shown in Table 6. A noticeable difference is that more choices of languages other than English were involved in the category of *on-campus*, since it was not restricted to academic topics. In the two *Skype* conversations with her mother and boyfriend respectively, Alice used English with her boyfriend, and she used Mandarin and a Chinese dialect, Hakka with her mother.

Table 6. Alice's language choice in different settings

	English	Mandarin	Cantones e	Malay	2 languages	>2 languages	total
On-campus	2	1	1	0	1	0	5
Off-campus	7	2	0	0	4	1	14
Skype	1	0	0	0	1	0	2

Based on these results generated by Alice's language diary, an informal interview was conceived in Chinese. From the interview, Alice claimed to have a good grasp of English, Mandarin and Cantonese while her Malay and other Chinese dialects were not so good as these three. She thought what motivated her to use English most was the English-speaking environment in general, which enabled both her and her Malay friends to speak English naturally in all situations. The fact that they all mastered English contributed to this choice as well. As for using merely English with her Malaysian boyfriend, she explained that this choice resulted from her dislike of Malay to a certain degree, apart from her relatively inadequate acquisition of it. In terms of topics, only English was used in discussing math-related and sciences-related subjects, yet Chinese (not limited to the once use of Mandarin in the diary) was also used when talking with Chinese friends about other subjects in order to better communicate.

### 3. Discussion

Before analysing the data, we predicted that the three aspects that the essay focused on, interlocutors, topics and settings, would have a great influence on our participants' language choices. However, not all of the choices support our hypotheses. First of all, David tended to use English when chatting with unfamiliar interlocutors and Chinese with familiar interlocutors, while Alice frequently used English in conversation with either familiar or unfamiliar persons. For David, he might believe that it is more polite to speak English than other languages with unfamiliar people within a context of an English-speaking country. Yet, for Alice, based on her answers in the interview, this might be accounted for by two reasons. On the one hand, studying and living in the UK provides her with an English-speaking environment. She has been accustomed to talking in English with those who are proficient in English, regardless of locations and interlocutors. On the other hand, those interlocutors who she was familiar with in our research are almost Malaysians. She insisted on talking with them in English instead of Malay, since she self-reported that she did not like the Malay language. She regarded it as the language of Malaysian Malays whom she did not identify with; yet, according to the results, she does show a tendency to maintain her Chinese identity by using Chinese. The results, to a great extent, have supported the statement of Jaspaert and Kroon (1988) that language attitude is a key factor affecting individuals' language choice. Thus, our research indicates that both the speakers' familiarity with interlocutors and their social attitudes may affect language choice.

Additionally, Fishman argued (2007) that certain topics that have close relations to a language are likely to generate a specific language choice. Considering that our speakers were studying the courses taught in English during the time of data collection, it is reasonable to assume that they would prefer English when talking about academic topics. Nevertheless, David displayed a pattern of language choice different from our assumption. Although in the interview, he answered that he preferred English referring to academic topics, the language diary has shown that he used both English and Mandarin instead of English alone. The distinction between his answer and reality suggests that the choice of Mandarin in discussion of academic topics may be below his consciousness. His

unconscious choice of Mandarin could be explained by the interlocutors' ethnicities. It is likely that when David communicated with Chinese friends, his sense of group belongingness makes him feel comfortable to use Mandarin even in discussion of academic topics. Moreover, his choice of Mandarin can be attributed to the language competence of the interlocutors: his Chinese partners were probably less skilled in English than Chinese so that discussing academics in Chinese could be more helpful for better communications.

Therefore, our findings, to a certain degree, support Fishman's argument (2007), while at the same time demonstrate that other factors, like a sense of group belongingness and interlocutors' language capacity, can also affect the choosing of languages.

As for the last factor, settings, the results do not show great difference in terms of *on-* or *off-campus*, but it could not exclude the potential influence of settings on individuals' language choice. Since the participants are students in the UK, their studying and living in an English-speaking country has decided that the settings, both *on-campus* and *off-campus*, are mostly English-dominated. Their preferences to English, to a great extent, support the fact that settings are influential to individuals' language choice. Moreover, we have also investigated the informants' language choice under the setting labelled as *Skype*, which mainly depends on the interlocutors' language ability. For example, when David had a Skype chat with his mother, he used Hokkien because of his mother speaking good Hokkien. However, the small data size in current research hinders us from arriving at a grounded conclusion and the effects of settings on language choice still need more investigations.

Furthermore, another linguistic phenomenon attracting our attention is that Alice exploited code-switching while chatting with friends. It was found that she used two or more languages in conversation with the multilingual addressees. For instance, when she talked about the film, *Interstellar*, with her Chinese friends, she spoke English in discussing the names of the film and the cast, while they discussed the plots in Mandarin. The result indicates that, although factors, like topics, interlocutors and settings, lead to a particular language choice, the ability of speaking multi-languages can lead the speakers to change into another language at any time if they believe it is suitable and reasonable.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, our research reveals that individual's language choice is a complicated mechanism resulted from various factors, including familiarity with interlocutors, types of topics and diverse settings. Based on our limited data, it is difficult to decide which aspect plays the most primary role, because the most significant factor differs according to individuals' various perceptions and language choice might be under speaker's consciousness on certain occasions. Additionally, given the fact that Alice and David present different language choice in the diaries, there are certain gender differences displayed in the current study. However, since only two speakers have been investigated, it is unreasonable to over-interpret these differences, and the results could be different if more tokens are collected. Hence, in order to explore the nature of individual's language choice, more multilingual speakers should be traced and more ethnic backgrounds should be taken into consideration.

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## Appendix 1. The outlines of the interview

1. Which language do you think you master?
2. Do you have any preference to use certain language? If do, please indicate which language it is.
3. From your perspective, what are the reasons that force you choice certain language in certain situation?

## Appendix 2. The results of David's language diary

Venue	Age	Sex	Familiarity	Interlocutor's language ability	Topics	Language choice
Accommodation	18	M	4	English	dinner	English
Cinema	20	M	3	English/Cantonese	film	English
Classroom	35	M	2	English/Mandarin	Mathematics	English
Classroom	20	M	3	English/Mandarin	lecture	English
Classroom	21	M	5	English/Mandarin Malay/Cantonese	assignment	Mandarin
Coach	27	M	5	English/ Mandarin /Malay	travelling	Mandarin
Friend's home	20	F	5	English/ Mandarin /Malay	homework	Mandarin
Home party	21	F	3	English/ Mandarin	life	English
Hotel	35	F	1	English/Welsh	check in	English
Learning commons	19	M	4	English/ Mandarin	reading	Mandarin
McDonald	21	M	4	English/Malay	girls	Malay
Mountain	10	M	1	English	destination	English
Pub	19	M	2	English/Romianian	football	English
Pub	18	M	3	English/Bulgarian	football	English
Skype	56	F	5	Mandarin /Malay Hokkein/Teochew	life	Hokkein
Skype	59	M	5	Mandarin /Malay Hokkein/Teochew	life	Mandarin

Supermarket	20	F	5	English/ Mandarin Malay/Cantonese/Hakk a	grocery	Mandarin
Supermarket	30	F	1	English	products	English
Temple	19	F	3	English/ Mandarin Indonesian	hometown	English
Voluntary fair	40	M	1	English/Polish	fair	English
Voluntary fair	20	F	3	English	Schedule	English

### Appendix 3. The results of Alice's language diary

Venues	Age s	Sex	Familiarity	Interlocutor's language ability	Topics	Language choice
Learning commons	27	M	5	English	course material	English
Flat	22	F	5	English/Mandarin	culinary arts	Mandarin
Malaysian society event	21	F	4	English/Mandarin Malay	Malaysian politics	English Malay
Study room	20	F	5	English/Spanish	group presentatio n	English
University	20	M	5	English/Mandarin Cantonese	daily life	Cantones e
Lecture	19	M	5	English/Mandarin	exam revision	Mandarin
Skype (Mother)	53	F	5	English (not good) Mandarin/Malay Hokkien/Hakka/Teochew	daily life	Mandarin Hakka
Badminton	21	F	5	English/Mandarin Malay	sports	English Mandarin
Grocery	30	M	1	English	prices	English
Skype (Boyfriend)	21	M	5	English/Malay Tamil	daily life	English

Theater	23	M	5	English/Spanish French	films	English
Birthday party	20	F	5	English/Spanish Russian/Bugarian	jokes	English
Student Union	19	M	3	English/French/Mauritian	culture	English
Richmond tearoom	20	M	3	English	Fashion clubs	English
Hiking	20	M	5	English/Mandarin Japanese/German Russian	Sencery travelling	English Mandarin
Chinese restaurant	30	F	2	English/Mandarin/Cantones e	order	Mandarin Cantones e
Flat	21	F	5	English/Vietnamese	films	English
Frend's home	20	F	5	English/Malay/Indonesian	academic issue	Malay
Arndale	20	F	5	English/Mandarin/Cantones e	Fashion Shopping food	Mandarin Cantones e
House party	22	M	5	English/Mandarin Malay/Cantonese	party	>2 language
Club	21	M	3	English	Fashion clubs	English