

From China (Wenzhou) to France (Paris) : the social construction of the linguistic repertoire

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We will start our paper with a short history and description of the Chinese immigration in Paris.

1 - Chinese immigration

1.1. French plurilingualism

As it is well known, France is a monolingual country according to the law, but, plurilingual in the facts, in the reality of the social interactions, in the streets, in the families, even at school. It is a plurilingual country because of the regional languages such as “Breton, basque, occitan, corse, alsacien, catalan”. But also, since at least two centuries because of the migration languages. I just mention that during the first industrial revolution, french managers recruited workers from abroad and especially Poles in the years 1880.

1.2. Paris

Paris is about 3 millions inhabitants ; so it is small metropole in comparison with south American ones or Indonesian ones. But it remains a main place for immigration, like Marseille or Lyon. People are coming from : Spain, Italy, Portugal (since the beginning of XX^e) ; North Africa, (in the years 1960/70) ; Asia (increasing from 1975) ; Turkey, Pakistan, Sri Lanka ; and, since 1989, East Europe like Russian, Poles, etc.

1.3. Chinese immigration

We can distinguish three periods into the Chinese immigration. Chinese, or Asian immigration starts from the beginning of the XX century, after the first world war (1920) in a place called, Gare de Lyon : near the railway station, along the river Seine, in the east center of Paris). In fact, they were soldiers in the French army, coming from the “Indochine”, a part of the French colonies. The neighborhood will remain

until 1990. They built the first chinese or asian restaurant in the years 1925.

The second period take place after 1975 (the end of the Vietnam war). They were “boat people” coming from Vietnam, Cambodge or Laos ; not from China ; but nevertheless, there were chineses, because chinese from the south of China used to travel and to go to work into East Asia. So, this second migration included natives from this countries, but also chinese immigrants leaving in this countries : the so called “ethnic chineses”. They still live in the south of Paris, into “le triangle de Choisy” (district 13) called “Chinatown”.

Then, from the end of 1980, we note a large increase of immigrants coming directly from the popular Republic of China, and more precisely, from the district of Wenzhou in the South. We want now to precise two points. Our sample, as we will see after, is composed with youth who was borned in China, and arrived in France at the age 8 to 18 years old. Quite all of them are coming from Wenzhou. This is specific of the chinese immigration. But we can observe, from five or four years, two important changes. First point, some chinese are now arriving from the North and even from Pékin. It seems they are poor people from factories or even unemployed workers. Second point, young parents are now building family in Paris : in the schools we recently meet chineses french born.

This facts are new and they will probably modify the situation of Chinese immigrants in the future. We can expect from this changes a lot of transformations in the linguistic uses, in the future : but our research don't take in account this very new transformations.

1.4. Migration from Wenzhou.

Wenzhou has a large and historical tradition of immigration, especially in East Asia. It is a rich district, in relation with international business, with an important port. So, why do these chineses move to Europe or America ? It is not strictly an economic migration and the main reason is in relation with the education and future of the children. As it is known, couples in China are not allowed to have more than one child. But they have. So the second child is irregular, illegal. It seems that during elementary school, parents can succed to deal with their education. But it becomes more and more impossible to reach secondary school or University. So they send those children in others countries, like in France.

We want to emphasize the difficulty to count these chinese immigrants. According to the Government, they will be 22 000. But according to the research and to the associations, they could be about

150 000. We can mention two main reasons of this large difference. First, we are confronted, of course, by an irregular immigration. Most of Chinese immigrants are “sans papiers”. Secondly, we must notice the difference between “ethnic Chinese” – coming from other countries of East Asia - and Chinese coming from China with the Chinese nationality : the first one are not officially counted as Chinese even though they speak Chinese and are and they feel themselves culturally Chinese people.

2. FRAMEWORK

2. 1. The concept of linguistic repertoire

It is of course a very well known notion in sociolinguistics and very pertinent in order to understand and describe uses and functions of languages into plurilingual speakers, or into plurilingual communities. As we know, different criteria could explain the use of such or such language, as : topic, social situations, status of interactants, as we can see in this first example.

Exemple 1, B, (16) :

“... mon beau père i veut bien parler français avec moi et ma sœur – mais i parle tout le temps mandarin avec ma mère – si on parle ensemble – si y a un sujet de quatre alors i parle en chinois en mandarin – mais si i s’adresse qu’à moi ou ma sœur i parle en français.!»

We can note here, a strong relationship between language and interactant, building a quite stable “dyad” : French language between father and daughters ; Mandarin language between father and mother. This is a functional perspective where we describe and observe some stable relationship between social criteria and languages in the interactions. We agree with this notion but we would like to go a bit further and to question the static aspect of such a framework.

2. 2 . Research questions

So, our research questions will be the following.

- how plurilingual speakers built, organize their linguistic repertoire?
- how do they manage in order to re-construct their first languages, their values, even their linguistic competences during the migration experience ?

- how do they manage with their linguistic resources, that is “*langues de depart et langues d’arrivée*” in French ? ; or the target languages and their first languages ?¹

2. 3 . Main hypothesis

We consider migration experience as a social and also a subjective process of re-construction of cultural and linguistic resources, of behaviour, values and attitudes. With such a position, we obviously situate our paper into *constructivisme as a theory of social link*. The objective resources – like the languages in contact – are of course one of the fact that could explain the organization of the linguistic repertoire. But it is not sufficient in order to explain the changes, the dynamic, even the differences into a community.

We consider the migrant experience as an extreme situation in which we can observe the linguistic dynamic into the “first” languages – here, Mandarin and dialect - and into the target languages – here French. But also into *the new relation* the speakers are building into target and first languages ; for instance, in our data, into French and Mandarin.

3. METHOD

3. 1. Two different surveys

As a consequence of our hypotheses, we emphasize the following point. It is important to know not only about the linguistic uses into the target country, but also about the linguistic uses into the native country : linguistic changes, uses, educational organization ... That why we organize two different surveys.

3. 2. In Wenzhou

From a linguistic point of view, China is divided into two large linguistic areas ; the North where is spoken Putonghua language – also called Mandarin, or standard Chinese - and a lot of dialects ; the South

¹ We have here a problem of conceptualisation and nomination
Mandarin is an “origin language” but it is not a mother tongue or a first language for our youth. It is a school language in China. It can be considered as a second language. Some parents don’t speak mandarin ; they just understand a bit : it is quite a foreign language for them. We will return to.

where is spoken Cantonese language and dialects, like Wenzhou dialect, the mother tongue of our youth.

The survey in China has been conducted by C. Saillard who is both a sociolinguist and specialized in Chinese languages. During two months, she did observations of interactions in the city, at work places like trades. She could note interaction in English, Putonghua, dialects. She also did interviews about the uses, changes, functions of the languages in Wenzhou.

3.3. In Paris

The second survey took place in Paris. Our sample included 27 young people from 11 to 23 years, who were born Chinese born and arrived as scholars in Paris (8 to 18). Each interview has been going on for one hour. We did also a lot of observations in some ethnic associations where chineses are learning Mandarin or French.

4. RESULTS

4.1. In China

The main result of our observations and interviewes is that we are confronted by *a process of vernacularization into Putonghua (or Mandarin)*. Of course, it still remains the standard, prestigious, cultural language. But it is more and more used as a language at work places by chinese speakers from “l'intérieur” who use non mutual understanding dialects : dialects from the north. Wenzhou’s speakers used to work in wenzhou dialect ; but the migrants from others areas in China do not : they use to speak Putonghua. The contact between Putonghua and dialect at work places is now producing an important process of vernacularization into Putonghua.

Putonghua, Or standard chinese	Dialect, Wenzhou
Official language!:	Family language

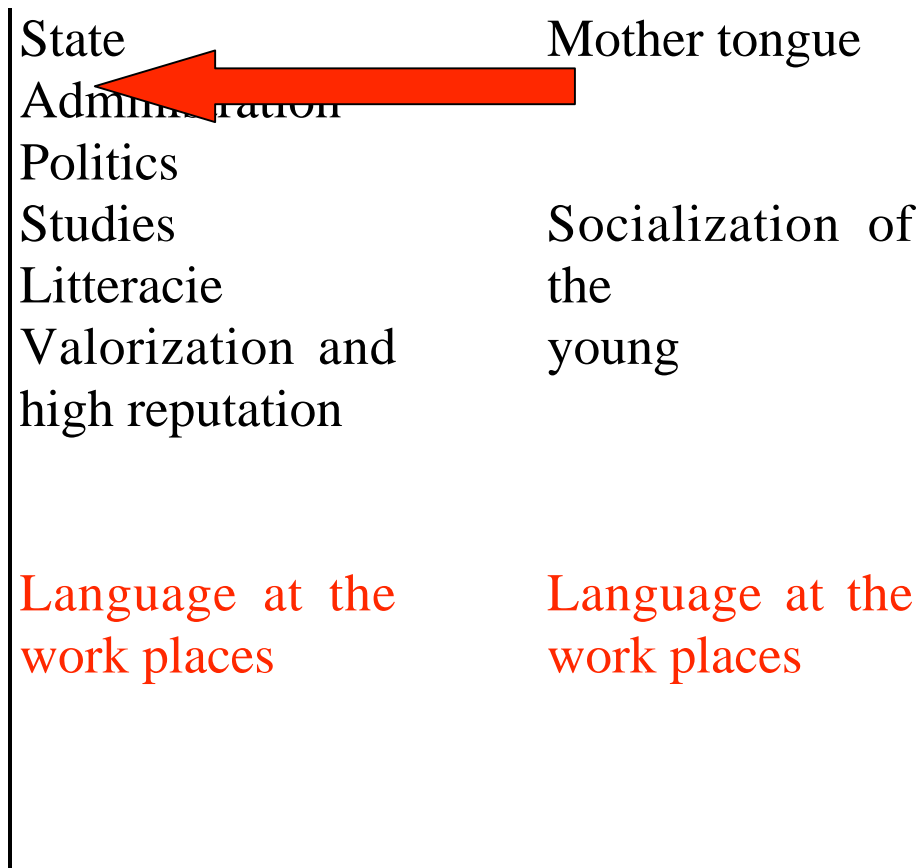


Figure 1 : *In Wenzhou . Vernacularization process in putonghua*

As a consequence of this process, we can note some important phonetic and syntactic changes in spoken Putonghua at Wenzhou. As we can see in the following example, the word order in some verbal construction is different into Putonghua and dialect :

Exemple 2

“Give me a book” :
 “give **me** (a-C1-book)”, into Putonghua
 “**give** (a-C1-book) **me**”, into Whenzhou dialect

Now, in Whenzhou district, chinese speakers use this dialectal construction “give (a-C1-book) me” but into Putonghua.

4. 2. In France

French and dialect

French is still being learned by the youth. It is of course not a mother tongue. Generally, the parents don’t speak and don’t learn

French. So we could have expected that dialect will remain as it was in China, the colloquial, family, vernacular language. And that French will be considered more as a second language, the school language, as a vehicular. But, it is not the case. Young people re-organize these obvious functions. They rapidly construct a complementarity between French and dialect as two vernaculars, as we can see in the following exemple.

Exemple 3, H.G., (16, arrived at 8) :

H.G. : (à la maison) j'explique mieux en français si vous voulez – quand j'essaye de raconter, quelque chose qui s'est passé à l'école ou quelque chose comme ça – c'est très difficile pour moi – en wenzhou – j'arrive pas – j'arrive pas trop bien à expliquer ça – des phrases correctes et tout ça

I. : votre langue maternelle c'est le wenzhou et vous avez l'impression que vous avez un peu perdu alors ?

H.G. : non non – si je veux raconter quelque chose de précis c'est dur à raconter – mais si je veux dire quelque chose - comme ça – euh je le dis en wenzhou (...) après le cinéma je raconte le film à ma sœur – en français – et puis après aux parents - quand le film il est vraiment bien je commence à raconter l'histoire en wenzhou – mais c'est dur à raconter – par exemple pour les réunions à l'école quand parfois c'est moi qui y va – et que j'essaye après j'raconte le résultat à mes parents – en chinois – c'est dur aussi

Putonghua

Putonghua is not a mother tongue for any of our young people ; Wenzhou dialect is the mother tongue. Moreover, the use of Putonghua is rare into family. It is a language, like the french one, that is still being learned. It was the school language in China and of course the official one. In all those functions, Putonghua is obviously, in France, concurred by the French : officiality, culture, studies .

In a country like France with an historical monolingual background and with a deep monolingual ideology, with the weight of the standard French in all the social situations, we could have expected that our young would have progressively abandoned Putonghua. On the contrary, they learn putonghua in sundays schools, even in opposition with their parents who will prefer a total investment in French. They try to maintain written relations ships in Putonghua with relatives or friends in China. They use to read newspapers or books in Putonghua. In the future, they want to transmit standard Chinese, eventhough they don't speak it themselves, like :

I. : quand tu seras plus grand si tu te maries et que tu as des enfants tu aimerais qu'ils parlent quelle langue ?

Z.C. : ben : euh les deux

I. : les deux c'est les deux quelles ?

Z.C. : ben les deux – français et euh euh mandarin – surtout pas trop wenzhou

I. : wenzhou ça t'intéresse pas ?

Z.C. : non non si – mais je veux qu'ils parlent mandarin

I. : et toi tu pourras leur apprendre le mandarin ?

Z.C. : ben moi je vais je vais : je vais l'apprendre là au lycée

One of them argue that “mandarin is the language for the international business” and she asks me whether she could learn mandarin in H.E.C (Hautes Etudes Commerciales) one of our more prestigious “Hautes Ecoles”.

5. INTERPRETATION and CONCLUSION

In terms of “capital symbolique”, symbolic capital of P. Bourdieu, Mandarin (or Putonghua) is clearly conceptualised as an important, prestigious and valued linguistic resource by the youth : there is no doubt that it represents a “capital” in the future, in their professional life and even for their children. Except in the official function that is clearly and obviously restricted to French in France, we can observe that French and Putonghua have both the same functions, representations, and values : transmission to children, studies, culture and symbolic power, economic and political power, even in the future.

All these features create a very different “gestalt” compared to other immigrant groups in France. They are building a well-balanced plurilingualism : dialect will remain at home, and French and Putonghua will be concerned with all the other linguistic functions. We could propose that they are building an “happy” plurilingualism. In order to explain this specific “gestalt” into Chinese migration, we can propose several features :

- . the historical and cultural weight of China
- . there is no historical links between China and France, which create very important differences with communities like North Africa
- . the youth is absolutely confident in the importance, in the past, present and future of Chinese culture, language
- . our youth is absolutely confident in the future economic power of China.

In conclusion, I think it will be very interesting to compare this “gestalt”, produced by the process of re-construction of values and languages in France, with others results in others countries, and, for instance, on the West Coast of America.

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