

The Multi-agent Model of language choice: National planning and individual volition in China

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Abstract

Language choice is often studied as choices made by the state at the level of national language planning or as individual choice of language or variety in language use. There has been little research to directly connect these two aspects of language choice. This paper attempts to incorporate the two aspects and other related phenomena in a Multi-agent Model of Language Choice and illustrates the proposed model with some data on circumstances in China. The agents involved are: policy makers, educators, family members, learners and other language users. After outlining the Model, the discussion focuses on how choices made by policy makers in China at the language planning level relate to choices made by individual learners or language users at the level of personal language development in China. It draws upon findings in the Language Education in China project based on three main types of data: policy statements, survey statistics (on 415 Han Chinese learners, the majority ethnic group in China, and 60 learners from different minorities in China) as well as interviews of 35 Han Chinese learners and 17 learners from ethnic minorities. The paper presents brief accounts of the policies and some key survey statistics before focusing on interview data on 6 Han Chinese learners and 3 minority learners. It is argued that realization of national language planning goals depends on whether individual learners abide by the choices made by the state and whether the intermediary agents such as teachers and parents co-operate; it is also suggested that learners learn well if they choose to do so, where choice assumes active investment of learning time and energy into learning or using the target language(s).

1. Introduction

The term ‘language choice’ can conjure up a host of phenomena ranging from language planning made by the state to individual language choices made by language learners or users. There has been little discussion in the research literature to directly connect these two phenomena or other related phenomena, which is unfortunate as it makes it difficult for some stakeholders in language education to see how the choices they make can have educational consequences for language learning. This paper is an attempt to connect the various phenomena relating to language choice by postulating the Multi-agent Model of Language Choice so as to enhance understanding of the inter-connectedness of the several aspects of language choice. It is hoped that such an understanding can help to integrate language education considerations at various levels and make it easier for all stakeholders to consider how they can contribute to the language development of learners.

The need for such a model has arisen partly because the research on language choice is fairly wide-ranging. While the choice of languages or varieties to promote in national language planning is a prominent area of study (Spolsky, 1998, p. 66-77; Cooper,

Shohamy & Walters, 2001), standard treatments of language choice have also focused on code-switching (or the alternate use of more than one language or variety of a language in verbal output) (Holmes, 2001, p. 19-50; Fasold, 1984, p. 180-212; Rasmussen & Wagner, 2002; Torras, 2005). Just as valid are other areas of research such as: language in education (Fordham, 1994), choice in adult foreign language learning (Lambert, 2001), classroom language (Cameron, 2001, p. 199-213), choice of language in mixed marriages (Piller, 2001), bilingualism in international families (Okita, 2002), choice of language for literary expression (Coulmas, 1997, p. 32-33) and issues of intercultural identity and cultural hegemony (Matsumoto & Britain, 2003). Although researchers such as Putz (1997, p. ix-x) or Fasold (1984, p. 180) have already pointed out the centrality of language choice in some of these phenomena, there has been little concerted effort to directly address the interactions among them. Nor has there been any explicit attempt to argue that all stakeholders in language education (language planners, educators, family members, learners or other competent language users) are active agents in language choice and have a direct, if not always explicit, impact on language education. The Multi-agent Model proposed in this paper is an attempt to make this argument.

The discussion of the Model is situated in the context of multilingual and multidialectal China and will make reference to data available from the Language Education in China (LEDChina) project, which studied the circumstances on the China mainland (hereafter referred to as China) (Lam, 2005). The central tenet in the Model, that it is fruitful to relate language policy decisions to individual learner experience, was a key research aim in the LEDChina project though the Model was only fully developed as an explanatory framework after the completion of the LEDChina project. The data in the LEDChina project are referred to in this paper more as an illustration as to how the Model can be usefully applied to understand language education circumstances in a particular country, rather than as conclusive proof of the Model's predictive potential since the Model is constructed more as a conceptual framework than as one with predictive power.

The argument in the paper proceeds in two main stages. In Stage I, the multi-faceted research on language choice (Section 2) is integrated into the Multi-agent Model (Section 3). In Stage 2, the Model is illustrated with data on China. The discussion on China covers the following aspects: languages in China (Section 4), the research parameters in the LEDChina project (Section 5), the work of language planners in China based on policy accounts (Section 6), the intermediary roles of teachers and family members based on a summary of survey data (Section 7), individual learner choice based on interview excerpts (Section 8) and an overall discussion of the interaction of choices made by all the agents involved (Section 9). The paper concludes with suggestions on how the Multi-agent Model could be applied to analysis of language choice elsewhere (Section 10).

2. Research on language choice

Language choice can be studied at several levels involving various agents of choice such as language planners, educators, family members, learners and other users of the language(s) in the milieu of the learners.

In multilingual and/or multidialectal circumstances, decisions concerning what language(s) or dialect(s) to promote in official or educational contexts are usually made at

policy level by the state. Skutnabb-Kangas (1996, p. 175) lists the three types of language planning as follows:

corpus planning (to do with language form and structure), status planning (to do with the uses to which language is put in various domains, and the prestige attached to the relevant languages) and acquisition planning (the arrangements made, generally by a Ministry of Education, for the learning of languages).

These types of planning are highly inter-related. Acquisition planning, for example, cannot proceed systematically unless choices concerning corpus and status are concurrently made. Acquisition planning is also discussed as language in education (Spolsky, 1998, p. 67) and merges into the study of curriculum studies or classroom language (Cameron, 2001, p. 199-213). The agents involved are government officials and, in some countries, may include advisers from the teaching profession such as teacher trainers. Planners usually take into account the current language use patterns in the society, the availability of teaching resources as well as the desired national positioning in the global arena. Such national planning requires the co-operation from agents such as principals and schoolteachers for implementation.

From the individual learners' perspective, the agents involved are parents and the learners themselves. Parents (and perhaps other family members) choose the language(s) or dialect(s) to use at home with their children in their early years (Lanza, 2004, p. 248-317). Parents also choose for their children the medium/media of school instruction (Matsumoto & Britain, 2003, p. 337; Lin & Martin, 2005, p. 3). Learners themselves make choices, albeit not always overtly, in terms of what language(s) or dialect(s) they invest more of their learning time and energy into or what language(s) or dialect(s) they use in interaction with others, even from infancy (Lanza, 2004, p. 198-247). When learners have acquired a certain level of competence in the language(s) or dialect(s) they learn, they continue to make choices in their daily interaction with others in terms of code switching at home and in social and, eventually, workplace interaction (Holmes, 2001, p. 19-50). In their teenage years or adulthood, learners may even make decisions about what additional languages (foreign or domestic) they wish to learn. Adult language learning is so common an occurrence that it has been observed that the articulation between language learning in the school and adult language learning and use could be enhanced (Lambert, 2001, p. 184; De Bot & Van Els, 2001, p. 197).

Among learners who have acquired a high level of language competence in more than one language, there may also be those who make choices concerning what language(s) or dialect(s) they use for cultural or literary expression. This aspect of language choice, not often discussed in linguistics, is relevant to considerations of language choice as it represents the ultimate choice in language use. John Milton of 17th century England, for example, knew ten languages: "English, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Italian, French, Spanish, Dutch" (Hale, 1997, p. 8) and composed poetry in four: Latin, Greek, Italian and his mother tongue, English (Hale, 1997, p. 1). Examples of writers writing in a language not native to them abound in world literature, particularly in countries formerly colonized by people of another tongue; (see, for example, Chaudhuri, 2003, p. 104-106, discussing the use of English by Rabindranath Tagore). Nor is it a phenomenon that has only emerged in the last few centuries. Elad-Bouskila (1999, p. 33), writing on the choice of language of literary writing in the Arab world, traces such

activity to the Middle Ages. Coulmas (1997, p. 32) also observes, “Poets and writers are not forced to conform to the prejudice that only the mother tongue is suited to expressing the inmost, the most delicate, and the deepest things; and many of them don’t.” While issues of cultural or intercultural identity are particularly salient in non-native literary expression, they also need to be considered in relation to general language use among other language users (Fishman, 1999; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

Why Milton chose one language rather than another for composing a piece of writing is not entirely known; “Should we speak, not of Milton choosing a language, but rather of a language choosing him?” (Hale, 1997, p. 66) This seems to suggest that the psychological mixing of two or more languages in bilingual or multilingual persons may give rise to linguistic output not entirely of their own volition. Unintentional code-switching has, for example, been distinguished from “motivated” code-switching in that the former is more like sub-conscious slips of the tongue while the latter is conscious language choice according to the speakers’ desire to identify themselves with a particular language group (De Bot & Kroll, 2002, p. 137).

If a language takes over domains of expression leading to the lesser use of another language in the society against the wishes of speakers of that language or members of that culture, then it is a case of language dominance (Nunan & Lam, 1998, p. 118). If it is a foreign language that occupies the position of dominance, then it is known as linguistic imperialism (Spolsky, 1998, p. 75-77). According to Romaine (2000, p. 33), “[usually] the more powerful groups in any society are able to force their language upon the less powerful.” Matsumoto and Britain (2003, p. 316) even observe that “the “success” of cultural hegemony, and in particular linguistic hegemony, by powerful groups can be measured by acquiescence to and participation in the domination by the dominated”; in other words, domination is most complete when the dominated helps to maintain it. Even in the United States of America, where language rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994) are supposedly respected, assimilation to the majority language culture might also, to a certain degree, be “forced” as a result of a lack of choice (Romaine, 2000, p. 35). Globally, many languages with smaller populations are becoming extinct as a result of the spread of “world languages” like English, French or Chinese (Romaine, 2000, p. 50). Efforts to reverse such a trend in the form of linguistic revitalisation (Huss, Grima & King, 2003) or bilingual or multilingual education (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998) have sometimes been considered idealistically fruitless, a myth propagated by some speakers of the dominant world languages. In reality, “[choices] made by individuals on an everyday basis [do] have an effect on the long-term situation” (Romaine, 2000, p. 51). If Milton had not chosen to write poetry in English as well as Latin, “the *sine qua non* of an educated person” and the language of the European intelligentsia in his time (Hale, 1997, p. 2), would the development of English literature and the spread of English have taken a different turn? Although most of us will not compare ourselves to Milton, our everyday language choices do build up to language use patterns in a country or around the world and such patterns are normally taken account of by language planners at the state level, though the degree to which they would be respected may vary from regime to regime.

3. The Multi-agent Model of language choice

To synthesize the several dimensions of language choice in the research literature, I propose the Multi-agent Model (Figure 1) involving agents such as: policy makers in the

government, educators, parents (and other family members), learners and other language users.

Figure 1 The Multi-agent Model

<i>Agents</i>	<i>Language choices</i>	<i>Phenomena</i>
Policy makers in the government	What language(s) or dialect(s) to promote in government, education and the public media.	Language planning. Linguistic imperialism (if enforced by a foreign power).
Educators (principals, teachers)	What language(s) or dialect(s) to use as the medium/media of interaction or instruction in and outside the classroom, in what proportion and under what circumstances.	Models of bilingual or multilingual education.
Parents (and other family members)	What language(s) or dialect(s) to speak to each other and the child in and what medium/media of school instruction to choose for the child.	Language use in mixed marriages and international families. Interface between the home and the school.
Learners	What language(s) or dialect(s) to use with others or invest learning energy/time in while growing up and also in study plans in adulthood.	Language acquisition and learning. Adult language learning.
Competent language users	What language(s) or dialect(s) to use in everyday interaction (for example, the workplace) and cultural or literary expression.	Code-switching/code-mixing. Workplace interaction. Interculturality and negotiation of cultural identity.

In making policy decisions, policy makers are not only influenced by the patterns of language use in the society at the time of policy making but also by their hopes for the national future, taking into account language use around the world. Likewise, all agents in the model take account of the *status quo* at their level and make choices, overtly or covertly, to “engineer” (Spolsky, 1998, p. 66) some desirable linguistic future. All choices involve conscious and active investment of resources such as time, energy and money to optimize learning or language use conditions such as learning materials, teaching input and language use opportunities.

With reference to this model, this paper is an attempt to relate choices made by language planners (through intermediary agents such as teachers, family members or other language users) to learner choices in multilingual and multidialectal China. Just as governments can systematically plan the propagation of a certain language or languages to thereby achieve results within a certain time period, individual learners can also consciously choose to succeed in language learning by setting their learning goals, opening themselves up to learning opportunities and taking advantage of language use situations. For a language policy to succeed, learners have to tacitly consent to adopt the goals set by the state. In other words, governments or individuals succeed in achieving societal or individual competence in a language or languages because they choose to do so, or at least abide by choices “forced” upon them by circumstances.

4. Languages in China

The circumstances in China offer immense possibilities for understanding language choice because many languages and dialects are in use. On the China mainland (area: 10 million square kilometres; population: 1,265,830,000) (Hook & Twitchett, 1991, p. 17; National Bureau of Statistics, PRC, 2001), there are 56 officially recognized ethnic groups. The Han Chinese, the majority population, speak several Chinese dialects falling into two main groups, the northern dialects and the southern dialects, but share the same writing script. The northern dialects can be subdivided into seven sub-groups and the southern dialects into six sub-groups (Huang, 1987, p. 33-45). The national language, Chinese, is also known as Hanyu (Han Language). The standard dialect for oral interaction is Putonghua, a northern Chinese dialect mapping well onto Baihua, the written variety of Standard Chinese promoted from around 1920. Among the 55 non-Han ethnic minorities making up 8.4% of the mainland population, over 80 to 120 languages are used. Various foreign languages, such as English, Russian, French, Japanese and German, have been taught in China (Lam, 2005, p. 8).

5. The Language Education in China project

The Language Education in China (LEDChina) project aimed to relate language policy changes from 1949 directly to the experience of different cohorts of learners in China. In addition to age as the main variable for relating the effect of policy changes to learner experience at different times, other factors considered were the learners' first dialect or language and their birthplace location ("coastal" versus "interior"). The range of language choice possibilities in the data makes the findings useful for considerations of language choice.

There were three main types of data: policy statements, survey statistics and interview transcripts. The survey questionnaire, presented in Chinese to 415 Han Chinese respondents and 60 minority learners, included sections on: biographical background and the learning of Chinese, other Chinese dialects, minority languages and foreign languages. Interviews aimed at eliciting learning biographies were also conducted in Putonghua for 35 Han Chinese learners and 17 minority learners. The survey was administered by post and interviews were conducted during field trips to the China mainland. All learners participating in the study were university graduates. Each interview took about an hour. To enhance comparability of data from different locations, the main points of entry for data collection were the key universities (as recognized by the state) and the schools affiliated to them. The main limitation in the study is that all participants were university graduates. Hence, the findings might not apply as readily to non-university graduates.

This paper selects from the LEDChina research report (Lam, 2005) data pertaining to language choice in China to illustrate how the Multi-agent Model can be usefully applied to understand the inter-relations between the choices of different agents in language education. In the following three sections, the work of policy makers and the intermediary role of teachers and family members are first summarized before the analysis focuses on individual choice with reference to interview excerpts selected to reveal a range of learner choices as related to learners' age, first language/dialect and birthplace location. The specific issues to be examined are:

1. What shapes the choices made by policy planners? (Section 6)

2. What roles are played by intermediary agents such as teachers and family members? Does this vary according to whether the language learnt is the standard official language (Putonghua), a foreign language (English) or a minority language? (Section 7)
3. How are individual learners influenced by language choices made by policy makers and other agents around them? How does choice affect learning success? (Section 8)

6. Choices made by policy planners

From 1949, to unify and strengthen the country against foreign aggression, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has implemented three language policies: the standardization of Chinese, the development of minority languages and the propagation of foreign languages.

The standardization of Chinese was aimed at enhancing literacy and educational opportunity and took a two-pronged approach from the 1950s: the simplification of the writing script and the development of a phonetic alphabet, Hanyu Pinyin, to aid pronunciation. From 1956, all schools in Han Chinese regions were required to start the teaching of Putonghua in Chinese lessons. Around 1951, linguistic analysis of the minority languages was also initiated to enhance literacy among the minorities. In terms of foreign language learning, in line with the PRC's early political affinity, Russian was initially promoted as the most important foreign language. When relations with the Soviet Union did not develop as hoped in the late 1950s, English regained importance.

By the early 1960s, China was ready to further her ties with the West. Unfortunately, events within China developed into the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), cultural in the sense of enforcing a political culture to continue the communist revolution. During that era, schooling was irregular and the promotion of Putonghua suffered a severe setback. The local offices for promoting Putonghua were largely disbanded but propagation work was not entirely halted. By comparison, the work on minority languages suffered much more. Even before the Cultural Revolution, from around 1957 to 1965, the attitude towards minority languages was vacillating between egalitarian respect and Han chauvinistic disdain. During the Cultural Revolution, minority languages were suppressed and some minority parents enrolled their children in Han Chinese schools, resulting ironically in more minority learners becoming bilingual. Likewise, foreign language learning was considered unpatriotic during the Cultural Revolution, particularly before the 1970s. Around 1971, this stance towards foreign learning began to change. In that year, the PRC replaced Taiwan as a member of the United Nations and Richard Nixon's visit to China as President of the United States of America in 1972 paved the way for further exchange.

After the Cultural Revolution ended, China began to implement the Policy of Four Modernizations (to modernize agriculture, industry, science and technology as well as defence) from 1978. In parallel, the work on all three language policies resumed. The revised 1982 Constitution of China reaffirmed that Putonghua should be promoted. 1986 saw the confirmation of the Character Simplification List for codifying Chinese, which was originally publicized in 1964. Likewise, the 1982 Constitution reaffirmed that "every ethnic group has the freedom to use and develop its own language and script" (National People's Congress, 1999, p. 6). Codification work on some minority languages was revived. In the same period,

national policy directions concerning English Language Teaching (ELT) met with support from ELT professionals in China and from overseas.

In 1991, the disintegration of the Soviet Union provided the political space for China to adopt an increasingly international agenda. China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 and will host the Olympics in 2008. This international outlook has two main language education effects: more foreigners are interested to learn Chinese and the Chinese also need to develop greater competence in English. With more foreigners learning Chinese and the spread of Putonghua throughout China, particularly in urban areas, China's current concern is to aim for quality assurance in Chinese language education. Proficiency tests like the Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi (PSC or Putonghua Proficiency Test) for Han Chinese learners and the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK or Chinese Proficiency Test) for non-native learners of Chinese are accorded much importance. Where ELT is concerned, in the new school syllabus publicized from 2001, the learning of English is conceived of as a continuous process from primary school to university. The current requirement is to start teaching English from Primary 3 but some schools in coastal areas may even do so from Primary 1. Another less obvious effect of the dissolution of the Soviet Union on China is that it prompted China to take a more decisive stance on how to integrate the 55 minorities without antagonizing them. The measure taken from 1991 onwards has been to recast the minorities (formerly referred to as nationalities) as ethnic groups. Though the language rights of minority groups are still protected by law, the general rhetoric seems to call for them to become bilingual in their own language and Chinese.

To summarize, the policy choices made by the Chinese government have largely been shaped by the desire for three outcomes: political stability, economic progress and national development. It is difficult to judge which of the three is most motivating as it is almost impossible to have one without the other two. (This section is based on Lam, 2005. See also Wang et al., 1995; Dai et al., 1997; He, 1998; Chen, 1999; Bolton, 2003; Zhou, 2003.)

7. The role of intermediary agents

Learners are seldom directly influenced by policy makers. More likely, policies are articulated for them through intermediary agents such as teachers, family members or other language users around them. Hence, whether the language learnt is used as a medium of instruction at school or of communication at home or in the community has a direct effect on the language choice patterns of learners. The impact of intermediary agents may vary according to whether it is a domestically dominant language such as Putonghua, a foreign language such as English or another domestically non-dominant language such as a minority language. This section highlights the role of intermediary agents with reference to a brief summary of survey findings from the LEDChina project.

Survey trends indicate that the policy to spread the use of Putonghua, Hanyu Pinyin and the simplified script among the Han Chinese as summarized in the previous section has been largely successful (Lam, 2005, p. 44-46). Younger Han Chinese are more willing to speak Putonghua and find Hanyu Pinyin easier to learn. The simplified script was accepted even from the early years of its propagation. But differences according to the learners' first dialect remain; while there was no statistically significant difference between northern dialect speakers and southern dialect speakers in terms of their use of Putonghua at work or at government offices, northern dialect speakers use

Putonghua more often at home, with friends and when shopping or in restaurants (Lam, 2005, p. 48-49). This finding could be related to the fact that more southern dialect speakers began learning Putonghua later, particularly if they were from the interior region, partly because fewer of their teachers in primary school used Putonghua as a medium of instruction and more of their family members preferred to speak a southern dialect at home (Lam, 2005, p. 47-48). It appears that, in the propagation of a dominant domestic language, teachers, family members and other language users in the community all affect language choice on the part of learners.

The policy to promote English has also met with some success. Teachers of younger cohorts of Han Chinese learners used the foreign language more in foreign language lessons both in secondary school and at university (Lam, 2005, p. 87-88) but only 8.1% of them used the foreign language they knew occasionally with at least one family member; 91.3% indicated that the foreign language was not used at home because no family member knew it (59.9%) or preferred to use Chinese (31.4%) (Lam, 2005, p. 96). It seems evident that home support could not be depended on for the promotion of foreign language education, at least not in China. More interestingly, a comparison of learners who became foreign language professionals and those who did not showed that the former, in addition to having much more class time (and hence teaching input) during their university days as foreign language majors, spent much more time outside the classroom in various independent learning activities to learn the foreign language (Lam, 2005, p. 97-99). This difference in independent learning engagement suggests that there is a certain degree of self-selection in the development of successful foreign language learners. Because they choose to do more learning on their own, they achieve better results and because they achieve better results, they do more learning; in other words, achievement, investment of learner energy and motivation are interactive (Ellis, 1994, p. 514-515). This perspective is empowering in the sense that whether learners can succeed in foreign language learning depends, to some extent, on whether they choose to do so.

While the learning of Putonghua is supported both at school and at home (at least for most northern dialect speakers and some southern dialect speakers) and English is increasingly used by teachers of English at school, results from the exploratory survey of minority learners in the LEDChina project (Lam, 2005, p. 153) indicate that most minority learners seem to learn and use their minority language mostly at home; many never learnt how to write their minority language. Although most minority learners do not seem pleased with their limited minority language competence, except perhaps in conversation and pronunciation, they do not seem too concerned, perhaps because many of them do not need to use the minority language in education or their working life in future. The lack of a wide range of domains of use is probably what discourages minority learners from trying to acquire greater minority language competence. It seems that many minority learners in China usually go through a period of transitional bilingual education in primary school during which a minority language is used as a medium of instruction, along with a Chinese dialect, before they switch to Putonghua, mostly during secondary school. The dilemma for minority learners, and for the Chinese government, is that if they are educated entirely in their own languages, they cannot fit into university life as easily, unless university education and jobs are also widely available in minority languages, which, in view of the fact that there are 55 minority groups in China, is unlikely for most of them. Hence, bilingualism is encouraged. What policy makers seem not to have given sufficient attention to is that minority learners do not just need to learn Chinese. To do well academically, they also need competence in English.

In summary, the propagation of Putonghua, the national language, seems to have received increasing support from teachers, family members and other users. The learning of English depends for the most part on teachers and the learners themselves. Minority language learning has some support at home but little support elsewhere. (For full details on survey findings, see Lam, 2005.)

8. Individual volition of learners

How are individual learners influenced by language choices made by policy makers and other agents around them? How does choice affect learning success? This section considers these questions with reference to interview excerpts from 6 Han Chinese learners (3 on learning Putonghua and 3 on learning English) and 3 minority learners; they were selected from the LEDChina interview transcripts on 35 Han Chinese learners and 17 minority learners to reveal a range of learner choices as related to learners' age, first language/dialect and birthplace location. For learners to "plan" their individual language development in line with national goals, the policy has to be clear in the first place. For the majority group, the Han Chinese, policy directions are clear: competence in Putonghua, the standard and hence dominant Chinese dialect, and proficiency in English are both educational goals; other Chinese dialects can be retained for use at home or informal use. But the policy concerning minority learners is more ambivalent. The state encourages them to be bilingual in Chinese and their own minority language. However, 24 of the minority groups are still without an officially recognized writing script (Lam, 2005, p. 135); English proficiency is also vital for their educational and occupational advancement. How do both groups of learners feel about the policy trends? The following sub-sections present their "voices". All names used are pseudonyms. (Full case reports on the learners cited below are available in Lam, 2005.)

8.1 Han Chinese learning the national language

Because Putonghua was given status as a national language and its corpus planning has been widely publicized, the norms of interaction have undergone change; Chinese speakers in the community have adopted Putonghua by and by; younger learners therefore have had a wider pool of Putonghua speakers to teach them and interact with them.

The experience of Yan, a political scientist born in 1956 near Changan (now known as Xian), highlights the intermediary role of teachers between policy makers and learners. Yan spoke the Xian dialect, a northern dialect, from birth and was educated in the Xian dialect in junior secondary school; even in senior secondary school, not every teacher in his school taught in Putonghua. He could pinpoint the circumstances in which he consciously chose to improve his Putonghua (Lam, 2005, p. 53):

It was ... during my Teachers' College days ... I had a teacher who emphasized the standardization of the Chinese language.... He prepared materials on the differences between Putonghua and the Xian dialect and requested that we should use Putonghua in class and when conversing. There was also another teacher ... from the south of Shaanxi. There were some characters she could not pronounce in the standard way. She was

always asking the other teacher how to pronounce some characters correctly. These two teachers made a big impact on me. I became willing to speak and to learn Putonghua.

Yan was apparently influenced by the dedication of his teachers, the intermediary agents of policy choice.

Another learner around Yan's age, Tian, a Chinese teacher born in 1962 in Jiangxi, exemplifies instead the unwilling learner "forced" by circumstances to learn and use Putonghua. His native dialect was Kejiahua, a southern dialect. He reported that in his region, "there was no market for Putonghua" (Lam, 2005, p. 55). He remembered how his whole class laughed at a teacher who tried to teach them in Putonghua (Lam, 2005, p. 55), "Kejia people have a saying 'Rather sell the land of the ancestors than change the speech from the ancestors.'" In spite of his not wishing to use Putonghua, when he started to speak it more at university, he was conscious of his own improvement (Lam, 2005, p. 55):

Throughout my four university years, I spoke only Putonghua, except when I was with friends from my home village. My Putonghua became more and more standard year by year.

Tian was "forced" by communicative needs at university to use the standard dialect more. He did so because he had no choice.

Unlike Tian, Danny, a younger hotel employee from the south, did not report negative feelings towards Putonghua at any age. Danny was born in 1972 on an island off Xiamen in southern China. He recounted how he consciously chose the use of Putonghua over Minnanhua, his native southern dialect, for interdialectal communication (Lam, 2005, p. 56): "In a group of three or four people, if one does not speak Minnanhua, we immediately switch to Putonghua. This is a kind of respect for that person." By his readiness to code-switch, Danny evidently supported the national goal of propagating Putonghua for interdialectal cohesion, perhaps because he achieved high proficiency in it early having been taught in Putonghua from kindergarten (Lam, 2005, p. 56) and probably because of his professional need.

These excerpts on the three learners illustrate that they all adopted the use of Putonghua, the standard dialect, as planned by the state, though, for the two older learners, Yan and Tian, it was not without some initial reluctance; for unwilling learners, the role of intermediaries such as teachers and other users may be particularly crucial.

8.2 Han Chinese learning a foreign language

Earlier on in the discussion of some survey results in Section 7, it was already pointed out that foreign language learning requires much learner effort outside the classroom. In the following interview excerpts, this same finding emerges. To invest effort, learners must first know their learning needs or what mode of learning can help them improve.

Deng, a logic/philosophy teacher born in 1954 in Shanghai, admitted he did not learn English well because he did not spend much time outside the classroom on English (Lam, 2005, p. 104-105):

I have been learning English for almost 30 years. I am very ashamed I have not learnt it well. In primary school, I learnt mostly in class. Outside class, I spent very little time – about 15 to 30 minutes a day. After primary school, I would pick up an English dictionary or textbook often but each time, I only read it for a little while. So I did not improve much.

In other words, he “chose” not to invest his learning resources in learning English and so did not succeed in doing so.

In contrast, Xue, a teacher of English born in 1956 near Yinchuan, succeeded because she took advantage of many opportunities to learn though she only started learning English when she was 19 (Lam, 2005, p. 105):

... my teacher lent me a book, *English 900*.... Every day, I memorized those 900 sentences almost until I graduated in 1978. ... In 1979, the first batch of foreign teachers ...came to teach the teachers. I was the youngest teacher then.... [That] was the time when my English ... improved especially quickly.... In 1989, there was a joint project between the Chinese and the British. Two British teachers came I worked with the British for a year. Then I was sent to England. ... After a year, I returned to work with the British again. ... Almost every day, we had to discuss ... the development of the course ... and I had to write the reports on our project. So my English improved.

Xue’s experience illustrates well that initial commitment to learning and resultant success may open up more opportunities to learn and further learning success (Ellis, 1994, p. 198-199). Although it was likely that she was chosen to support the foreign language education project by her superiors, she herself had to be sufficiently interested to invest learning time into, for example, memorizing the 900 sentences in English in her early learning days. Without her initial success achieved on her own, she would probably not have been selected for further training in England.

Another learner, Hua, a teacher of Chinese born in 1975 in a city in Guangxi, also pointed out how a change in awareness about her learning needs resulted in her conscious decision to make a greater learning effort (Lam, 2005, p. 109):

The only time I really felt I wanted to learn English was when I was a graduate student Around me, many classmates had very good English. Many of them wanted to go overseas.... I felt I should also try harder. When I first went to university, I tried going to the English Corner but I was too shy.... When the other person spoke, she too was very nervous. So after going twice, I stopped. But as a graduate student, I felt I should go to the English Corner because it was meaningless to learn English if I could not speak or understand it. So I went and I spoke.

Hua’s story shows that other learners could also influence a learner’s desire for further improvement and choice of learning activity.

In summary, foreign language learning seems not possible without learners choosing to do so, no matter how much the state wishes to promote it. Deng is one such example. But when learners such as Xue and Hua decide to invest their learning energy into it, success is possible even if conditions are not ideal. Successful and unsuccessful foreign language learners may differ especially in engagement in language production activities such as talking with classmates at university or writing letters (Lam, 2005, p. 98).

8.3 The experience of minority learners

While the Han Chinese seem, by and large, to have chosen to co-operate with the state by adopting the national language goals as their personal language development choices, the choices open to minority learners are more complex. For them to be on par with the majority group, they need to acquire Chinese and English but most of them still identify in some way with their own minority language or culture. The cases presented below exemplify various degrees of such identification.

Some like Mei, a minority language teacher born in 1963 in Lingui in Guangxi, are proud of their ethnicity. Mei started learning the spoken form of the Yao language at home from birth. She grew up in the Yao region and went to a primary school in a village where some Han Chinese lived. She only learnt the written form of the Yao language at work. While she was proud of her Yao ethnicity, she also had to learn Putonghua and English though it was not easy for her to do so, partly because she had to learn Chinese first through another Chinese dialect, the Guilin dialect (Lam, 2005, p. 160-161):

Ever since I was young, I have felt very proud that I can speak my own language. ... When I started primary school, I did not know Hanyu [Chinese].... During Primary 1 and Primary 2, my teacher ... taught us bilingually using the Yao language and Hanyu ... Soon when I spent time with Han Chinese classmates, I could speak Hanyu. But we were speaking in the Guilin dialect though the teacher was speaking Putonghua in class. ... By secondary school, only Putonghua was used to teach Hanyu and other subjects. But my classmates and I still responded largely in the Guilin dialect. Only at university did we really use Putonghua I really learnt English only when I went to university. It was a requirement. ... I did not learn it well

Mei succeeded in learning Putonghua well but did not learn English well because she needed Putonghua to function in the university but had little communicative need of English. If she had not been required to use Putonghua at university, perhaps she might not have learnt it so well since the Yao minority has a population as large as 2.6 million (Lam, 2005, p. 155).

In contrast, Mong, an anthropologist born in 1965 in the Mulao Autonomous Xian, came from the Mulao minority with a population of only 207,352 people (Lam, 2005, p. 155). Even though he could understand the Mulao language, he could not speak it because his parents were from two different minority groups and conversed in a Chinese dialect, the Guiliu dialect, which became his first dialect. His Putonghua learning experience was quite similar to that of some Han Chinese learners. His English learning experience demonstrated a sense of conscious goal-planning (Lam, 2005, p. 163):

I started learning English formally in senior secondary school. ... In our village, the thinking was that if we stayed behind to plow the land, at the most, we could only support ourselves. But if we could have contact with foreigners, we could have a better income and have a higher status.

Mong's instrumental motivation to learn English matched the national one. He succeeded in learning English so well that he could pursue a PhD at a top university in England.

Another learner, He, a computer scientist born in 1972 in the Ningxia Autonomous Region, came from the Hui minority which has long adopted the Chinese language and has a population of 9.8 million. He experienced difficulty in learning Putonghua though he did not acquire much Arabic, his ethnic language (Lam, 2005, p. 164-165):

Before I went to school, I learnt a little Arabic at home and mostly at the Muslim temple. ... I learnt to write a little Arabic too but I have forgotten all of it. However, Islam is still my religion. The Hui people have adopted the Chinese language but language is language and religion is religion. ... At home, ... we spoke the local northern Chinese dialect.... I started learning Putonghua only when I went to school my Chinese dialectal pronunciation was a hindrance to my learning of Putonghua ... Learning Chinese was very, very painful for me I often failed my Chinese. In junior secondary school, I spent about two years reading books of folktales and fairytales in our town library. Then I could link up the words into sentences and the sentences into texts. That was how I learnt Chinese

He succeeded in learning Chinese because he invested a tremendous amount of learning energy into it. Likewise, learning English was strenuous for him but eventually he could handle reading and listening in English. He could, of course, have chosen not to do so but then he would not have had as good access to the professional opportunities in China.

To sum up, while the three learners tried to abide by the national policy of promoting Putonghua and English, their compliance was not without emotional and learning difficulty. Minority learners often have to learn Putonghua initially through another local Chinese dialect. In addition, there are differences between their own minority culture and Chinese culture which need to be negotiated.

9. Interaction of choices at different levels

The discussion of the findings from the LEDChina project has shown that there are some inter-connections between the choices of agents at different levels in the Multi-agent Model. The impact of policy makers and intermediaries (such as teachers and parents) on learner choice is more evident. The influence of other language users in the community as agents affecting the choice of individual learners is more variable depending on whether the language is widely used in the community.

In the learning of a dominant language (such as Putonghua in China), for example, the Model can be used to explain why even if the initial language development plans of

individual learners (such as Tian) may not correspond entirely to choices made by policy makers (at least not in the early period of policy implementation), they may still acquire the dominant language because these “unwilling” learners will be influenced by other “willing” language users in the community (also classified as agents in the Model) who support the national goal. The choices made by the “willing” language users to use the dominant language increasingly in their everyday interaction will effect its spread; this in turn “forces” the unwilling learners to comply out of communicative necessity (for example, Tian’s acquisition of Putonghua at university). The promotion of Putonghua in China is successful because agents at all levels have chosen to support the national policy planners’ decision.

The learning of minority or foreign languages, however, does not normally enjoy the catalytic effect of the language choice patterns in the everyday interaction of most users in the community as, by definition, they are not widely used in the community. In addition, while minority languages tend to enjoy some support at home, they tend to receive little support at school unless they are spoken by large minority groups. The reverse is true of foreign languages which tend to be given some support at school but are hardly used at home. In other words, compared to the dominant language(s), foreign languages and minority languages have fewer sets of other agents to support their propagation, even if policy makers and learners are both willing to do so. In the case of minority languages, some minority learners may not be sufficiently motivated to learn their own minority language if there is a lack of a range of domains of language use for that language. While most learners may be positively disposed to learn a foreign language that has international currency, they may not always be ready to invest much of their learning time and energy into foreign language learning. The propagation of English in China, for example, does receive some support at school but with neither home support nor the input from users in the wider community, it has to depend mostly on the learners themselves. In such circumstances, policy success is achieved only if learners choose to invest their learning time and energy into learning the foreign language (Xue’s success in learning English). Foreign language learning success is not possible if learners do not have a positive enough attitude to want to actively invest their learning effort into it (Deng’s failure to learn English).

In other words, while the impact of policy makers on the choices of individual learners is rather explicit, the other agents in the Multi-agent Model such as educators, family members and other language users do not seem to have the same influence on learner language development, depending on whether the language being learnt is a dominant majority language, a non-dominant minority language or a foreign language officially promoted by the state or another not promoted by the state.

The analysis of circumstances in China also provides further evidence for a widely held opinion that not all agents in language choice enjoy the same degree of power to make choices in spite of what the law may provide in terms of language rights. The government and the majority ethnic group enjoy more power to make choices in that the national goals tend to favour the majority group in practice, even if the legislation and public rhetoric may emphasize equal opportunity for all. Individual learners are also more generally influenced by the intermediary agents of policy implementation such as teachers and parents, who are in turn influenced by the language dominance patterns in their society. Language dominance (Nunan & Lam, 1998, p. 118) goes beyond the borders of a country (Romaine, 2000, p. 50); countries with a smaller population or less

economic or political power (even if the population is large) will have less flexibility in making their policy choices, unless they choose not to worry about their economic or political position in the world.

While a government might be considered irresponsible if it does not recognize the realities of certain languages having greater economic and political power, if a state makes its language choices based only on instrumental considerations (Ellis, 1994, p. 513-514), eventually, when the economic and political benefits have been acquired, the nation may have little cultural soul left to enjoy them. Ultimately, it is a matter of achieving economic progress and political stability while nurturing cultural coherence. Languages in themselves are innocent. It is only excesses in language policies that lead to cultural attrition. Becoming bilingual or multilingual can be culturally enriching, both for a nation and its nationals, provided individuals are given sufficient latitude to make informed choices as to what language or languages they wish to devote their language learning energies to. At the very least, language rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994) have to be protected by law, even if resources do not always permit every individual to be educated in any language they wish to be educated in. This is because whatever little knowledge individuals can acquire in their ethnic language will still contribute in some way to their cultural coherence or identity. If they decide to make pragmatic choices not to learn their own ethnic languages, then they will have to bear their own cultural consequences. But the choice has to be theirs to make if a state does not wish to deal with linguistic discontent among its nationals.

At the national policy level or in terms of individual learning goals, bilingualism seems to be the best option (Cummins, 1994, p. 164; Widdowson, 2001, p. 17; Benson, 2003, p. 85). Even if a country needs one of the world languages to communicate with the world, it is advisable that the domestic language(s) is/are still propagated as well. Learners also need to appreciate that governments do not pursue bilingual policies sadistically to make their learning burden heavy but because it will benefit them in the long run. Ultimately too, it is bilingual individuals who achieve high competence both in their native language and another language (a world language if their own is not one) who, as agents of language choice in the wider community, can help to maintain or restore the intercultural balance in their society and the world through intercultural discourse including cultural or literary expression, perhaps even in a language not native to them (Coulmas, 1997, p. 32).

10. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has integrated the literature on language choice into a Multi-agent Model and has illustrated this model with some findings from the LEDChina project on language choice in multilingual and multidialectal China. Among the Han Chinese majority, the national and individual language choices seem to be merging in recent years as far as promoting Putonghua, the standard Chinese dialect, is concerned. In terms of foreign language education, while both policy makers and learners wish to improve learner competence in English, there still seems to be a gap between policy choice and the active investment of individual learning energy. For the minority learners in China, the correspondence between national choices and individual choices is even less definite. Most minority learners are likely to want the educational and occupational benefits that competence in Putonghua and English promises but some of them seem

concerned about losing their minority language or culture in the process. As in the past, so too in the future, while the Chinese government makes conscious educational choices overtly or covertly, individual Chinese learners within the constraints circumscribed by national policy also have to meet the challenge of making choices for their own development as learners, not only in terms of what language or languages or aspect of the language or languages they wish to devote their learning energy to, and to what degree, but also in terms of how to reconcile the intercultural tension between learning Putonghua and retaining their cultural identity as speakers of other Chinese dialects or minority languages and between learning English and retaining their Chinese or minority culture. It is also suggested that learners learn a language or languages well if they choose to do so. The relationship between attitude (or motivation) (Ellis, 1994, p. 198-200 & p. 508-517) and learning success has not been easy to delineate. Recast in this paper as language choice, the effect of attitude and motivation on learning success is less nebulous; choice as illustrated in this paper involves not just a decision to aim for competence in a language but active and conscious investment of learning energy to back up that decision. This conception of choice as active engagement of resources can apply to language development at all levels.

Although further research is necessary, this paper has demonstrated how the Multi-agent Model could be broadly applied to understand choice in language education at different levels. The centrality of learner volition in successful language learning also suggests that it is necessary to incorporate the beliefs and attitudes of language users in a community in the process of language policy making (Putz, 1997, p. xvi-xvii). How much and how this can be done depends on the political system in a country. Whether the system depends more on central planning or more on community input, the Model suggests that language education dynamics are ultimately interactive between levels, with different degrees of influence assigned to different agents depending on the status or spread of the language involved.

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