

## **PERSPECTIVES ON MARKED LANGUAGE CHOICES AND USES IN TAIWAN\***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores types of marked language choices and their uses in Taiwan, using examples from both everyday and e-generation online communication where language mixing, crossing, and stylizing are rampant despite the fact that most of the same individuals consider conventionally codified Mandarin, English, and Japanese more prestigious. The paper argues that this kind of hybrid language practice owes much to Taiwan's twice-reformatted national language policies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to a rapid regime transition from one party dominance to a multi-party society. That is, the historical enforcement of both Japanese and Mandarin helped nation-state development but didn't leave other linguistic varieties with an equal chance for social advancement, modernization, and codification. Indigenous and ingenious, the language choices and uses in question tap into the lack of codification and standardization of non-Mandarin varieties, into the stereotypical features of Taiwanese-accented Mandarin, and into the incongruities of so many phonetic schemes and use of Chinese characters as phonetic symbols to sound out English, Mandarin, and Japanese. The pragmatics goes beyond immediate functional purposes and are used metaphorically to tap into taboos, for example, or to create humor by adopting a marked choice, in real and virtual discourse. By connecting these emerging language features to broader socio-historical changes in Taiwan, we are able to see the coming of age of a new pattern of reappropriating Chinese characters and therefore Chineseness in online communication. It is a development that may help us reflect on the meanings of speaking/writing Chinese in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Keywords: codeswitching, language choice, language use, markedness, national language policy

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Scholars interested in language choices and usages often focus on systematic variational studies, connecting linguistic variables such as changes of pronunciation, choices of words, or certain grammatical usages to social variables such as locality, age, or gender (Labov 1963; Lakoff 1975). The choice and use of different languages for communication by multilingual speakers receives more attention from scholars interested in the psychological, social, and syntactic aspects of language (Fishman 1967; Gumperz 1982). Nevertheless, with the exceptions of Hill and Hill (1986) and Hill (1995) who looked into the socio-political contexts of Mexican Spanish usage to account for certain language choices, few have explored past language histories and current social situations to account for why certain marked language patterns seem to thrive.

Several good works on language choices among college students in Taiwan have helped the author better understand the nuances of language use in the real world. For example, Chen (1996) has looked into language usage among college students in Taiwan with attention to pragmatic purposes. Su (2009b) applies politeness theory and adopts concepts such as face-threatening along with footing and stance to explain why the choice and use of either Taiwanese or Mandarin can be useful in elucidating ambiguities and managing potential face-threatening acts. These are representative works for our understanding of language use and choices in current Taiwan, but there is more to be done in online language usage among college students and more to be said as to how and why certain usages seem to be more prominent than others.

The present study tries to account for marked language choices and uses found in Taiwan in both real and virtual worlds by tapping into past language histories. In making a case, it adopts analyses from situational and metaphorical language switching as well as drawing on discussions with college students.

There are two objectives for this paper: the first is to encourage awareness of some of the less common language choices and uses

occurring in Taiwan both in public and in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) venues such as Facebook (FB). The second is to find ways to account for such marked language uses and choices, for those interested in language variation and discourse analysis. Though not a systematic research on classification of uses and choices, the paper finds in Taiwan's shifting national language policies a socio-historical accounting for some of the most pervasive features of both situational and metaphorical language used in both real and online worlds. This qualitative study is furthered by discussions with college students who exhibit discrepant results for why they choose certain usages for real and online occasions.

The paper is structured as follows: first, it starts with common language choices and uses in Taiwan and analyzes examples by applying theoretical works on codeswitching and markedness, suggesting that Taiwan's language policies and their legacies can explain some of the less common but nevertheless mundane metaphorical usages. Having established a theoretical foundation for metaphorical language choices and uses, the paper moves on to a related phenomenon, the stylizing of English, Taiwanese-accented Mandarin, and Taiwanese for CMC, using examples from Facebook to point out some of the more intriguing examples and what they mean both for people interested in variational sociolinguistics (how this is done) and in discourse analysis, and considering whether this kind of language choice and usage is subverting or reinforcing the status quo of existing language ideologies. Finally, the paper rounds up the discussion of marked language choices and uses in Taiwan in both mundane and online communication by looking quickly at markedness practices in another country, the United States, where Spanish among other languages commonly intrudes into popular English for purposes humorous or otherwise.

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## **2. COMMON LANGUAGE SCENES IN TAIWAN IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: THE MULTILINGUAL AND CODESWITCHING SITUATION**

In present day Taiwan, common language choices and uses consist of Mandarin in public and for most official purposes, with English and Japanese among foreign languages used in education and trade, and Taiwanese, Hakka, and other Chinese varieties such as Wu and Yue used to a lesser extent in private settings.

A very prominent point in this landscape is the fact that most people use more than one language in most of their daily interactions, though they might not do so with equal fluency. That is to say, people constantly switch between English, Mandarin, Japanese, and Taiwanese as situations demand. In places other than Taipei where Hakka and varieties of aboriginal languages are more prevalent, there might be other combinations added to the mix. This is what is referred to as ‘codeswitching’ in the sociolinguistic literature. Speakers use more than one language in a discourse unit: an exchange, a sentence, or a paragraph. ‘Language’ here is defined loosely—it can be two different languages such as French and German, or varieties of a language family such as Mandarin and Cantonese, or a variety of language styles, such as a mix of different registers. A related but different term, code mixing, refers to hybridization in a shorter and fixed exchange, rather than an active movement from one language to another in a discourse. Code mixing suggests that the speaker is mixing codes indiscriminately, perhaps because of incompetence, whereas codeswitching refers to a more active manipulation of the symbolic and social meanings of a language choice.

## **3. SOCIO-HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF SITUATIONAL SWITCHING**

Codeswitching occurs at any linguistic boundary, sentence initial, sentence final, or word juncture. Speakers actively interject meanings into conversation by adding varieties. In general, there are two types of switching in the literature, situational and metaphorical. In situational

switching, speakers codeswitch according to factors such as topics, situations, and participants. Common examples of situational switches in Taiwan can be seen when speakers use more formal codes such as English, Japanese, or Mandarin to signal professionalism and authority, or switch to a more “intimate” code such as Cantonese, Hakka, or Taiwanese to signal solidarity or group identity.

The choices and pragmatics owe much to what was implemented on the island from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the late 1980s when a non-indigenous language—Japanese the first time (1895-1945), and Mandarin the second time (1945-1987)—was chosen by the authority as the national language to facilitate intense assimilation and nationalism. Codification, education, and standardization of the former and then the latter national language further placed them by turns on a higher social ladder than local languages, and the effects can still be felt decades after the end of monolingual national language policies. These two stringent policies, each lasting nearly half a century, provided a vital ground for the inculcation of systematic cultural systems and beliefs where good and bad as well as civilized or savage were as clear cut as the punishments laid out by the authorities for non-compliance.<sup>1</sup> Irvine (1989) has defined language ideologies of this sort as “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (255). In addition to the legacies left by waves of past ideologies, when the island experienced rapid democratization starting in the late 1990s local languages were exploited by both politicians and entertainers as political and moral capital to correct past wrongs or to promote local identity (Chen 2010; Su 2011; Wei 2008).

Ambivalent feelings toward a ‘standard’ language can still be felt among many well-educated youngsters. The author conducted a survey among college students on their choices and uses of more than one language and found that when confronted about their attitudes toward using local languages, some express the opinion that they only use the

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese was banned during the height of Japanese occupation; Japanese was banned in the initial stage of the post 1945 KMT (Kuomintang) administration; local languages were also banned in the late 1960s, but these bans ended with the lifting of martial law in 1987.

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standard language and deny their use or knowledge of the local languages; others indicate that using local languages gives the impression of not being cosmopolitan or sophisticated and that the mixing and using of more than one language can be a sign of a failure to learn the target language well—that is, showing a lack of linguistic competence, an embarrassing scandal that many of the well-educated won't admit. Ironically, many of the same students admit that they do use more than one language most of the time and that mixing languages is quite common among peers and most of the people they know. The inconsistencies between what the students opt to answer in public—that they use the standard language—and what they admit in private—that they do use more than one language and that mixing languages up is quite common—further points to the ambivalence felt by many people in Taiwan about their choices and uses of languages. Moreover, the lack of standardization of local languages and the localization of English, Mandarin, and Japanese has left students with a less than straightforward linguistic legacy. In fact, finding different ways to represent the local languages and hybridize the more global languages such as English, Japanese, and Mandarin has become one of the most popular features of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) among the e-generation. We will come back to this point and provide examples and discussion after our introduction of another type of codeswitching—metaphorical switching.

#### **4. METAPHORICAL SWITCHING**

Our brief socio-historical digression on the island's language history helps explain the other type of prominent language choice that arises in metaphorical situations where the choice of a language is not a matter of here and now pragmatics. That is to say, the choice and use of the language is seen as a way to express emotions or opinions, to challenge established rights and responsibilities, and to poke fun through puns. Holmes has found that speakers can adopt different languages to discuss ambivalent feelings on a subject (1992). This is what we refer to as 'metaphorical' switching where the choices of language are not made

due to situational changes such as participants, topics, or locations. Rather, languages are seen as ways for conveying weighty facts or personal feelings in previous experiences.

Metaphorical switching not only allows us to express matters beyond here and now pragmatic concerns but it can help speakers challenge existing rights and expectations when they opt for a less marked choice. Myers-Scotton and Bolonyai have adopted rational choice to account for such a linguistic phenomenon (2001). According to the authors, the way speakers choose to speak reflects their cognitive calculations to present a specific persona that will give them the best 'return' on their interactions with others, in whatever ways are important to them and are rationally grounded (23). For our study, rational choices through marked usage in Taiwan might challenge the established rights and responsibilities settled by previous interactions and thus present risks for the speakers opting for a less common language practice.

An example from discussions with students in a sociolinguistics class should help elucidate the point. Most college students in Taiwan communicate with their parents in both Mandarin and Taiwanese, with different degrees of fluency. To speak only Mandarin and Taiwanese at home might be an index of what their parents might prefer as the unmarked rational choice which further signals ethnicity. Should any student opt for switching between English or Japanese at home, a less preferred rational choice might be indexed, from the parents' point of view. However, should the student insist on speaking only English or Japanese with the parents at home, a marked rational choice departing from the established family norms would be indexed. As some students reported, they do try to make such a 'rational choice' occasionally when they get into an argument with their parents; their choice might amount to an assertion of their independence from familial control and possibly even their 'defection' in power relations between parents and children.

Summing up, in the first part of the paper we sketched the linguistic landscape for Taiwan's current language choices and practices and analyzed them through the scholarly lens of both situational switching and metaphorical switching and through the historical lens of Taiwan's twice-reformatted national policies in the last century, to account for some of the ambivalent attitudes on the choices and mixes of the local

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languages among the well-educated. In Section 5, we will turn our attention to the virtual world where the e-generation has grown accustomed to mixing languages, and where such ‘marked’ or ‘mock’ language uses might present both a space for poking fun and making puns as well as subverting the old linguistic ideologies still experienced in the real world.

## **5. SOME OBSERVED CHARACTERISTICS OF FB IN TAIWAN**

Before we turn our focus to the language choices and uses in online usage, we should first state the notable differences between real and virtual communication that will affect our analyses. First, communication on the Internet is both public and private, and the medium is both oral and written. It’s a hybrid form; therefore conventional situational switching analysis cannot help much in effective analysis. Secondly, social media such as Facebook (FB) are used less for informational than for creative, poetic, or polemic exchanges. This contradicts the conventional line that Internet usages such as Instant Messaging or ‘Googling’ are all about convenience and immediate gratification (i.e., speed). Thirdly, speakers are not preoccupied with issues such as language proficiency, standardization, or authenticity since the Internet and a certain degree of anonymity allow individuals some leeway to say and write things as they please. Lastly, this seemingly ‘democratized’ language scene might also temporarily suspend the advantageous resonances of old language ideologies such as ‘official speak’ and ‘professional speak’ associated with English and Mandarin. In CMC contexts, Taiwanese and Taiwanese-accented Mandarin might not appear to be so *déclassé*. All language devices seem to enjoy equal status; they can be used as sound and/or written symbols for the users to make fun of something or to make a point in an interaction.

Having stated the incompatibility between real and virtual communication and the limits for adopting situational switching, we searched for quasi ‘metaphorical switching’ where the choice of a language is made not only to express feelings (humor, sarcasm, or mocking) but also with deliberate manipulation to overturn conventional

expectations, thus subverting the ‘official speak’ still found in the real world. This kind of crossing and stylizing of online language in Taiwan might be compared to what Coupland (2007) and Rampton (1995) have done in London where the mixing up of real language is a way to reappropriate linguistic resources brought by immigrants. However, the virtual crossing and stylizing in Taiwan further witness waves of colonialism before rapid democratization and a way to speak against the fallacy of a standard language, since inconsistency, incompatibility, and incomparability are exactly what makes for puns and fun in virtual metaphorical switching (Klötter 2004; Su 2009a). In Taiwan, the terms ‘stylizing’ and ‘crossing’ stress not only the writers’ manipulation of an array of linguistic choices, but also the flippancy of this usage with regard to conventional expectations. For data collection and data analyses, we have opted for the most representative examples collected by students and adopted the drastic socio-political transitions on language policies since the last century as well as a seemingly utopian virtual world for their creativity and prominence. In general, our data confirm the observation of Su (2009a) that inconsistency and incongruity between sound and symbol render usage playfulness, a kind of benign language play popularized among well-educated college students. Specifically, we want to point out that although the data are limited and not collected in a systematic way as most of the quantitative researchers would have hoped, we do have representative cases where the socio-political contexts of language policies in Taiwan and a standard language practice from English, Japanese, and Mandarin help explain the tension and contention between the marked and mock choices. Here are the examples, chosen for representative quality:

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**Stylized English:** In examples (1) to (4), what is intended as ‘stylizing’ a language is shown in the choices of Chinese characters, numbers, (phonetic) alphabets to sound out English. In addition, the punch is in subverting the conventional status of Chinese characters as semantic symbols (*biao yi de xiangzheng*) and that standardized written languages such as Chinese and English always written (spelled) correctly.

- |                    |        |
|--------------------|--------|
| (1) What happened? | 花黑噴?   |
| (2) Facebook       | 非死不可   |
| (3) Thank you.     | 3 Q    |
| (4) I am in love   | 戀愛 ing |

More specifically, in examples (1) and (2), the inconsistencies of character choices render the playfulness of the examples. In example (3), the choice of a numeral number and an English letter to sound out ‘you’ attests to the incongruity of the conventional translation of English. Example (4) is one of the most popular ways to adopt English into Chinese. The popularity comes from its deviation from the conventional adaptation and its marked/mock use of ‘-ing’ right after the Chinese phrase.

**Stylized Japanese:** These examples use Chinese characters to sound out Japanese, adopting some form of Japanese grammar into Chinese syntax. Though we don’t have many instances of ‘stylized’ Japanese, we do find the most common ones in the next two examples.

- |                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| (5) Really?    | 紅豆泥 |
| (6) Very cute! | 卡哇伊 |

In examples (5) and (6), the incongruity between the sound and symbols is now adopted to mock the popular Japanese phrases in the virtual world.

**Stylized Mandarin:** More linguistic mocking is incorporated in these examples, enriched with what we have learned from the incompatibility between Chinese and Taiwanese—its phonological features and its social status and how Taiwanese as one of the non-standardized languages whose passage to become a fully Romanized/standardized language has come to be entangled with the ideologies of different political regimes. The history and the political uncertainty all add ‘fun’ to the making of mocking Mandarin.

- |                      |     |           |
|----------------------|-----|-----------|
| (7) You are welcome. | 不客氣 | ㄅㄛˋ ㄎㄜˊ ㄍ |
| (8) Would you?       | 好嗎? | OK ㄇ?     |

In examples (7) and (8), the use of phonetic alphabets mixed with English is used as the mock choices.

- |                        |      |      |
|------------------------|------|------|
| (9) Almost gone crazy. | 快發瘋了 | 快花轟惹 |
| (10) I am              | 我是   | 偶似   |
| (11) teachers          | 老師   | 老蘇   |
| (12) students          | 同學   | 同鞋   |

In examples (9), (10), (11), and (12), the mock choices are tapping into the stereotypical phonological features of Taiwanese-accented Mandarin. The linguistic ‘stylizing’ can be characterized as the substitution of the labiodental /f/ for /h/, the substitution of retroflexes /zh/, /ch/, /sh/ for /z/, /c/, /s/, respectively, the substitution of /u/ for /i/, and the simplification of the diphthong /uo/ for /o/.

The hybridization of languages and the subverting of English and Japanese to provide ‘phonetic symbols’ to sound out Taiwanese are some of the most pervasive ways for marked usage on FB. In addition, the mixing of non-standard Taiwanese with Chinese characters and phonetic symbols is a marked and mock language usage worth noting.

Are these examples only humorous? As hinted at before, something more than college humor may be involved, so as we conclude our search for perspectives on current marked language choices and uses in Taiwan we should at least raise the question of whether hybridization is not

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exploiting and reinforcing stereotypes and language ideologies left over from previous language policies. It's an issue that has been raised regarding a similar situation in the United States. Comparison of that situation with Taiwan's may leave us with some last things to say in this discussion.

## **6. CONCLUSION: TO MOCK OR NOT TO MOCK**

Jane Hill (1995) describes the use of mock Spanish as a dual indexicality for how Spanish and its speakers have been stereotypically projected and exploited as the latest lower status laborers, and claims that most of the mock Spanish in use by whites (despite their persistent denial of any intent to discriminate and ready insistence that these are only for humorous effect) are both directly and indirectly activating (provoking) stereotypical language use by Spanish speakers, especially with language ideologies as complicated as they now are thanks to a dominant English-first movement and backlashes against a countermovement to advocate Spanish as a second official language for the United States.

Despite broad differences in language history and culture between the United States and Taiwan, there may be parallels between marked language use in public discourse in the US and in Taiwan and Taiwan CMC forums. 'Marked' has a double meaning, not only because most users when confronted would deny that they actually use a mixing/crossing form, and if pressed would only mention that they are used for humorous effect, but also because it is very prevalent in Taiwan, found for example in commercial slogans in TV, magazines, and online mostly for purposes of mocking conventional use of Chinese, English, Japanese, and Taiwanese Mandarin. Yet, while Hill (1995) has claimed that many of users of 'mock Spanish' are whites who are not fluent in Spanish and concludes that their (in)deliberate use and choice of this kind of language is reinforcing stereotypes of Spanish speakers in the United States, the author has found that many of the users of 'marked' (mock) Taiwanese/Taiwanese Mandarin (and English, Mandarin, and Japanese to a lesser extent) are college students who are quite competent

in most of the languages (though with various proficiencies). In fact, it is exactly the indigenous and ingenious use of ‘metaphorical’ language choices that lends the marked language choice to fun and pun. So what really needs to be heeded in Taiwan is the issue of the metaphorical usage challenging the existing norms (as in the case of students’ occasional usage of English or Japanese with their parents at home) since it is an emerging (but very prevalent) kind of language choice among the e-generation and very little has been done by scholars in the field of language education and language policy to evaluate it. By providing examples from both real and online communication and delving into the complicated history of the island’s language choices through waves of colonialism and rapid democratization, we hope we have now achieved our objectives and raised consciousness about the mixing and crossing of languages in Taiwan.

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台灣人標記性語言選擇及用法之面面觀

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本文探討台灣人標記性語言選擇及用法之類型，語料來自日常交談和線上溝通，即便使用者較為推崇正規國語、英語和日語，他們的日常／線上溝通仍充斥著語言混和(mixing)、跨越(crossing)和類型化(stylizing)。本文主張這類混合語言的使用肇因於台灣在二十世紀先後推行的語言政策，以及由一黨獨大到多黨共治的政治轉變。也就是說，日語和國語之強制推行雖促成了國族發展，但卻讓其他語言無法隨社會進步，也因而無法現代化和系統化(codification)。本文所研究之語言選擇及用法，包含了利用國語以外的語言欠缺書寫形式和標準化的特質、台灣國語(台灣腔的國語)之刻版特徵、不同的語音系統之差異，和以漢字為音符來說英語、國語及日語。這種語言使用超越了功能目的，在真實或虛擬的言談中，被用來暗指禁語或製造幽默。將這些新出現的語言特徵聯結到台灣的歷史—社會變遷，我們便能見到漢字以及中文性(Chineseness)在線上溝通之再運用的新型態。這種發展可助我們反思二十一世紀中口說／書寫之中文的意義。

關鍵字：語碼轉換、語言選擇、語言使用、標記性、國家語言政策