SOCIOLINGUISTIC PHENOMENON OF CODE MIXING IN HONG KONG: FROM A PERSPECTIVE OF MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Code mixing is an interesting sociolinguistic phenomenon in Hong Kong, where people integrate English words into their host language (Cantonese) for more effective communication. This paper first reviewed the previous research findings on code mixing and then discussed the results of a recent study on the usage of code mixing between English and Cantonese in Hong Kong particularly from the perspective of the marketing communications. The research results revealed various reasons of applying code mixing in marketing communications, including awareness, impression, referential usage, pun/joke, original quotation, emphasis, convenience, euphemism, and cyberspace convention. At the end of the paper, sociolinguistic implications are discussed.

Keywords: sociolinguistic phenomenon, code mixing, marketing communications, language evolution

INTRODUCTION

The expansion and global spread of the use of English as an international language has significant socio-cultural and linguistic implications. While English has rapidly developed complicated relationships within and between the communities around the world by playing its roles in the lives of communities ranging from marginalization, empowerment to upward mobility, it has become the borrowed linguistic constituent in most of the languages. English can be used as guest language with the host language, which is the primary language of an individual or the community, for verbal or written communications. For example, English words or phrases are often embedded into the sentential structure of a host language in daily practices or routines for bilinguals. This is considered as a natural phenomenon involving the presence of two or more languages within the same speaker, although one language (usually the host language) may be used more fluently than others. This phenomenon is known as code mixing. Code mixing has been defined as linguistic practice of using more than one language simultaneously or interchangeably. The host language used in the sentence is the matrix language, whereas the guest language in the sentence is the embedded language.

In Hong Kong, code mixing between English and Cantonese (i.e., a variety of Guangdong dialects) is a deep-rooted phenomenon. Code mixing plays a significant role in the daily lives of individuals as well as the communities ranging from greeting to employment. For instance, Hong Kong people used to greet each other by using the English name of an individual, yet this practice is not popular in the majority of Asian countries. This phenomenon can be explained by the history, demographics and culture of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has been a British colony for about 150 years since 1841. Undoubtedly, this has given the rise of the linguistic invasion of English as a foreign language mixed with Cantonese in Hong Kong. Although Putonghua (i.e., the official Chinese language) has been included in the official multilingualism, the use of English has continuously expanded in Hong Kong (Zhang, 2005). Hong Kong is a largely homogenous society, with about 94% (i.e., 7.2 million) of its people being Chinese. Moreover, majority of Chinese (90%) consider Cantonese as their primary language (Hong Kong Yearbook, 2014). Today, Cantonese-English bilingual interaction is so common, as the local government has considered English as an official language. This is evidenced in the English and Cantonese versions of messages delivered from the local government to the public or target audiences (Chan, 2004). Hong Kong has a long history of linguistic contact with English. People in Hong Kong have an exposure to different objects and communication messages in English more often than in Chinese. Although most people in Hong Kong do not speak English fluently, they find it difficult to communicate with each other by using pure Cantonese without mixing English words (Chan, 2009).

The use of English often symbolizes modernity, technology and westernization. Across various cultures, English is often used in marketing communications in different channels such as broadcast media (e.g., television and radio), print media (e.g., newspaper and magazine), as well as the interactive media (e.g., the Internet and social media) (Li,

2000; Martin, 2002). Although a foreign language is considered as the major barrier to effective communication, it is not surprising to identify code mixing between English and Cantonese in marketing communications as people in Hong Kong have the understandings of both the Cantonese and English. For example, code mixing between English and Cantonese is often found in the content of the print advertisements, and their target audiences are mainly the mass markets that contain a large numbers of present or potential customers (Leung, 2010). This reflects code mixing phenomenon is popular among the whole society (Wu & Chan, 2007). The success of communication depends on how the target audience interprets the words in the message and the nature of the message. In other words, the selection of English words used in marketing communications is determined by the target audience, as well as the types and nature of the messages in marketing communications.

Given the fact that code mixing phenomenon is popular in Hong Kong, a recent research study was conducted to advance our understandings on the code mixing from the perspective of marketing communications by examining various reasons of using code mixing in marketing communications by the marketers. A considerable number of latest print advertisements at local level were collected for analysis. This paper reported various reasons of using code mixing in marketing communications, including the causes discovered in the previous research, as well as causes identified in the recent research study. Although there were few prior studies on examining the reasons of using code mixing, they were conducted in ten years ago. One of the aims of this paper was to report and discuss the changes and new trends of the application of code mixing in Hong Kong particularly from the perspectives of the marketing communication. Sociolinguistic implications were also included in this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There were few prior studies that examined code mixing in Hong Kong. Gibbons (1979), who is the first study on code mixing in Hong Kong, systematically analyzed Cantonese-English code mixing at Hong Kong University and described it as "U-gay-wa" (i.e. university talk). Li (2002) found that Cantonese was used as the marker of solidarity in a Chinese community but gradually code mixing became a common scene among bilinguals in the whole society, instead of being limited to the university students. Luke (1998) studied the motivations of code mixing behaviors and recognized two types of languages involved in code mixing, namely expedient and orientational. As an expedient language, English words are used with Cantonese counterparts because Cantonese is formal and unsuitable for the conversational context. For example, the word "scan", instead of the formal Chinese counterpart 掃描, is often used with informal Cantonese chats. For orientational language mixing, "high" English is used with "low" Cantonese in spite of the availability of Cantonese counterparts. This attains assert that sociolinguistic effects are unavailable to the community of the monolingual speech and project an identity of being more educated and prestigious in English speaking group. Luke (1984) summarized that orientational mixing was socially motivated, whereas the expedient mixing was pragmatically motivated. Besides, Li & Tse (2002) found that there is a practical need of code mixing when English terminological terms and western concepts are imported and there is no Cantonese counterpart. In addition, code mixing is considered a kind of emotional buffer for the purpose of euphemism to avoid embarrassment (e.g. issues related to sex).

Li (2002) conducted extensive research and suggested four sociolinguistic motivations of code mixing between English words and Cantonese, namely (1) principle of economy, (2) specificity, (3) euphemism and (4) bilingual punning. For the principle of economy, people tend to select shorter words with fewer syllables. For example, the word "out" (means "being obsolete") is a simple and one-syllable English word that is usually embedded in Cantonese conversation. In some extreme cases, the English words are shortened and simplified so that it becomes one syllable and can be well embedded in Cantonese sentences. For instance, the word "contact lens" is shortened to the word "con". From the perspective of specificity, an English word sometimes is used for a particular context. For example, the word "fans" (means "supporter" and "followers") is mainly used for a few areas like film fans and soccer fans. For the euphemism function, Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong avoid embarrassing moments and issues by mixing English counterparts. For instance, the word "under" (a shortened form of "underwear") is commonly used in Chinese community in Hong Kong. For the bilingual punning function, people mix English words for humour purpose. For example, in the phrase "多 fun" (means "a lot of fun"), the pronunciation of the word "fun" is quite similar to that of its Chinese counterpart.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this research, marketing communications particularly in print advertisements were collected and analyzed to understand the current phenomenon of code mixing in Hong Kong and the reasons of using code mixing in print

advertisements. Marketing communications are business activities that involve various promotional elements (e.g., print advertisements) that are used by a corporation to communicate with its existing and potential consumers (Leung, 2010). While the improper use of language is identified as one of the major barriers to effective communication, marketers are required to select the most suitable languages, including code mixing, to convey commercial messages to their target audiences. Code mixing is found in most of the messages in print advertisements, reflecting the phenomenon of code mixing is deep-rooted in society of Hong Kong. In addition, print advertisements are used to draw the attention of the mass audience, instead of a particular group of people (like university students) and, thus, code mixing examples found in public advertisements should be common and acceptable to the majority of people in society. A considerable number of the latest print advertisements were collected in early September in 2015. The print advertisements collected within this period were mainly the outdoor advertisements, posters in subway stations, and newspaper advertisements. The content of the print advertisements were analyzed and classified into the several categories based on the reasons for code mixing. Two researchers were invited to conduct independent analysis and compare their findings with each other to increase the objectivity of the content analysis results when a high degree of agreement between the researchers is achieved. Some of the print advertisements were relevant to two or more reasons simultaneously.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings suggest that the major reasons for code mixing include awareness, impression, referential usage, pun/joke, original quotation, emphasis, convenience, euphemism, and cyberspace convention. Appendix A provides examples of print advertisements refereed in the following reasons.

1. Awareness

The use of English can attract the attention of the audiences. Usually, code mixing is found in the headlines and product names of the print advertisements that arrest the awareness of audiences for a longer period of time (see Example 1). The common examples include English words like more, new, now, and best (Martin, 2002) that are mainly simple and monosyllabic words for easy reading and understanding.

2. Impression

Different foreign languages may create certain impressions to people (Mujiono et al., 2013). The use of English is associated with a sense of specific impressions such as internationalization, modernization, technology and science (Chen 2006; Lee, 2006; Hsu, 2006). Therefore, code mixing is commonly found in advertisements of technological or innovative products such as computers and mobile phones (see Example 2). Hong Kong is a metropolitan and an international city where various cultures are readily accepted and appreciated by people. Besides English, Japanese is also commonly found in the print advertisements in Hong Kong (see Example 3). This can give an impression that the product is imported from Japan, which in turn may enhance the consumers' confidence of purchasing and using the product.

3. Referential use

When there is no equivalent word in a particular language, a foreign language may be mixed and used with the host language for communication. This is usually occurred when a new concept appears in society long before the equivalent translation is formed and adopted by the people. Trendy and new products usually come with English vocabularies and are readily accepted by the consumers in Hong Kong. It is important to note that once people have accepted a particular English term for this reason, it is quite difficult for them to use a proper Chinese translation that may be formed later (see Example 4). For example, "spa" and "high tea" are commonly spoken by Hong Kong people, although their formal translations are finally shaped.

4. Pun/joke

Bilingual puns and jokes are quite common in the print advertisements in Hong Kong and the marketers use elements such as humorous and entertainments to build and enhance the relationships with their audiences (Li, 2000). Because the language of Chinese (including Cantonese) consists of monosyllabic characters, mixed English words for punning purpose are usually with one syllable and their pronunciations are similar to those of particular Cantonese words. This can make the audience read the whole phrase poetically. It is remarkable to note that code mixing is even used in promotional messages prepared by the government (see Example 5) and public transport companies (see Example 6) in Hong Kong.

5. Original quotation

Slogans of foreign companies are usually appeared in print advertisements without any translation (see Example 7). Such direct quotation can be explained by two reasons. First, it saves the translation cost (Wang & Yang, 2006). Second, marketers simply assume their audiences can understand English anyway (Gerritsen et al., 2000) and this can keep the original meaning of the slogan and avoid translation that may cause embarrassment and mistake unexpectedly. When KFC opened its first restaurant in the Mainland China, its slogan "finger lickin' good" was mistranslated to "eat your finger off".

6. Emphasis

A Chinese sentence may be presented along with its English equivalent in a print advertisement. The promotional messages are repeated in another language either literally or in a modified form (see Example 8). This emphasizes the importance of visual elements especially in print advertisement (Kang, 1999). This is referred as code switching (Ariffin & Rafik-Galea, 2009) in which two languages are used in an intermingle manner at the sentential level, instead of insertion of words of a foreign language into a sentence of the host language. Code switching in Hong Kong is usually not as common as code mixing, although it may be found in advertisements occasionally.

7. Convenience

It is common that even when there is an equivalent word in Cantonese, people in Hong Kong still like using the English equivalent in their conversation informally. One major reason is that the mixed English words are usually shorter and simpler and they are more popular than the Chinese (or Cantonese) equivalents. In Example 9, the word "van" (one syllable) is much shorter than its Chinese translation (小型公共汽車 with six syllables).

In the extreme case, an English word may be even translated into a Cantonese character phonetically when they have similar pronunciations. In Example 10, superficially the first sentence is made up of Chinese characters only but one character (叉) is actually the phonetical translation of an English word (charge). This is not a formal usage of the language, although it is becoming popular in Hong Kong. To make it more practical for the daily usage, such phonetical translation may generate a shorter form ungrammatically. For example, the word "security" is spoken as "實 Q" in Hong Kong because the former consists of four syllables while the latter is just two syllables long.

8. Euphemism

Euphemism is to avoid embarrassing situations and moments in communication among people. This language phenomenon is particularly common in Asian languages such as Chinese and Japanese (Yusuf, 2012). Using a foreign language can make people feel less uncomfortable when the topics are embarrassing to either speakers or audiences (see Example 11). However, euphemism in print advertisements is relatively rarer than that in the face-to-face communication between people. It is because indirect and one-way communication is not necessarily embarrassing to most people.

9. Cyberspace convention

With the advancement of information technologies, more and more people communicate with others on the Internet and the wireless networks. The language convention in the cyberspace may be applied in print advertisements in the offline environment (see Example 12). Similarly, the English technological vocabularies are used directly without any translation. As mentioned before, English terms are usually associated with an impression of new technology and this can attract audiences and create a positive image of the product.

10. Summary

Table 1 summarizes the findings of content analysis of the print advertisements by presenting the reasons of using code mixing in print advertisements in Hong Kong with percentages. The summation of these percentage figures is higher than 100% because some advertisements were classified into two or more categories simultaneously.

There are several significant findings. Firstly, awareness is the major reason for code mixing, with 80% of the print advertisements using code-mixing between English and Cantonese in the headlines and product names. This result can be anticipated because the general purpose of an advertisement is to create customer awareness about a product or a brand name. This research finding also reflects that code mixing is accepted by the mass audience in society and marketers find it effective to convey their promotional messages with the use of code mixing. Secondly, impression, referential use, pun/joke, emphasis, convenience and cyberspace convention collectively account for 72% of print

advertisements that use code-mixing. This suggests that there are diverse reasons for code mixing including practical, humorous and trendy purposes. Thirdly, original quotation involving a complete English sentence or phrase (i.e. code switching) was not found in print advertisements in this study because code switching is not as usual as code mixing in Hong Kong. Finally, euphemism was also uncommon in this study because of the cultural characteristics of society.

TABLE 1: STATISTICS OF REASONS FOR CODE MIXING IN PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS IN HONG KONG

Reasons for code mixing	Percentages
1. Awareness	80.00%
2. Impression	9.09%
3. Referential use	10.91%
4. Pun/joke	16.36%
5. Original quotation	0.00%
6. Emphasis	10.91%
7. Convenience	12.73%
8. Euphemism	1.82%
9. Cyberspace convention	12.73%

CONCLUSION

This research paper discussed the background of code mixing in Hong Kong, where most people are actually semi-bilinguals who do speak pure English fluently but cannot speak pure Cantonese without insertion of English words. Previous research identified reasons for code mixing in Hong Kong, namely principle of economy, specificity, euphemism and bilingual punning. This research paper studied and analyzed the latest print advertisements in Hong Kong and discovered several causes of code mixing, including awareness, impression, referential use, pun/joke, original quotation, emphasis, convenience, euphemism, and cyberspace convention. Some of these reasons are consistent with findings of the previous research while some are new trends of the language development in society that reflect cultural, technological and societal changes in Hong Kong.

There are several sociolinguistic implications based on the research results. First, code mixing is not confined to a group of people who are well-educated and use English fluently. But it is a common pheromone in the whole society because print advertisements usually target at the mass market without further classification and division of people into different segments based on their demographic characteristic like their education levels and ages. Second, as a phenomenon of a language that continuously evolves to adapt to changes of people, code mixing shows new societal movements. For example, popular jargons that are found in the cyberspace are now appearing in the physical environment. In addition, the government and public organizations also convey their messages by using code mixing between English and Cantonese to communicate with the public more effectively. It seems that code mixing now is not as informal as people perceived it in the past. Third, the previous research on code mixing mainly focused on English as a foreign language. But with the ceaseless impacts from other cultures, code mixing in Hong Kong has also involved other Asian languages (e.g., Japanese and Korean). This can reflect that Hong Kong is a place that readily accepts multicultural influences, and integrates them harmonically with local people. Finally, the various reasons of code mixing revealed in this research conclude that the sociolinguistic needs of people have been differentiated and it implies that people's need in terms of the language usage, commercial activities and cultural adaptation are also becoming more diverse.

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APPENDIX A – EXAMPLES OF PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS WITH CODE MIXING IN HONG KONG

Example 1	Example 2

Example 3	Example 4
Example 5	Example 6
Example 7	Example 8
Example 9	Example 10
Example 11	Example 12