

Hungarian Language Competence of the Chinese Immigrants

Linda Labancz

PhD candidate

Faculty of Humanities, Doctoral School of Linguistics

Applied Linguistics

Eötvös Loránd University

Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

The present research is based on a sociolinguistic fieldwork focusing on the generational patterns of linguistic practices and attitudes of Chinese immigrants in Hungary. The purposes of this study are: 1. to describe the main characteristics of the multilingual language use of the Hungarian Chinese diaspora; 2. to describe significant differences between the language competence of the first and second generation speakers. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in the study. The findings indicate that the language shift appears at latest until the fourth generation, which process will result in a Hungarian monolingual and monocultural status for Chinese people in Hungary.

Keywords: bilingualism, Hungarian Chinese diaspora, immigration, language shift, language attitudes, sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

Present research examines the language use of two generations of the Hungarian Chinese community. Even though in Hungary resides a remarkably great number of the Chinese diaspora, just as well as in the USA or in Australia, where the researches are going on since 10 or 20 years (see Chen, 1999; Clyne, 1999; Holland, 2007; Kane, 2006; Norman, 1988; Shi, 2004; Wu, 2005; Terrazas-Devani, 2008 etc.), this question was unrevealed in the Hungarian linguistic literature. The aim of the present research is to describe the habits of the Chinese minority concerning language use, as well as to show a significant difference between the Hungarian language use of the two generations.

According to the hypothesis in the case of the first generation (from 40 to 80 years) Chinese dominant bilingualism, while as for the second generation (from 7 to 40 years) Hungarian dominant bilingualism and bicultural identity can be assumed.

2. The Sociological Status of the Hungarian Chinese Diaspora

According to the official data, the number of the Hungarian Chinese population is around 9-10.000 (Office of Immigration and Nationality, Ministry of Interior). It is worth noting that these are the official figures, the estimated number could be much higher. The main characteristic of the Chinese migration to East-Central Europe is that most of the immigrants are transnational migrants who come to Hungary in order to launch out on an enterprise to get wealth and to send their children to the best possible institutions. Therefore it is not so surprising that between 2001 and 2006 only 46 Chinese got the Hungarian citizenship.¹ We can understand that if we know the fact that China does not recognize dual citizenship and for the immigrants Chinese citizenship is necessary not only because of some business consideration but especially because of their identity and attitudes towards language, culture and nationality as one of the informant from the second generation expressed: „*I don't need Hungarian citizenship, because in that case I would lose the Chinese one, which is more important for me.*”

Another particularity of the diaspora is that these immigrants are from South-China (especially from Zhejiang and Fujian) and most of them work in their own businesses in the catering trade/commerce sector.

¹ Source: <http://www.ksh.hu/pls/ksh/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/allpolg/allpolg06t.pdf>

As Pál Nyíri shows (2002) out in his study, the majority of Chinese immigrants are highly educated workers in Hungary, especially on the field of natural sciences and engineering. The immigration to East-Central Europe started in the 1990's when Hungary became the center of distribution of the Chinese products in the region. Those times, the number of the Chinese community reached 30.000 (Nyíri, 2002: 163), but later most of the early immigrants moved back to China or to the West. Today, after joining to the EU, the old markets closed and the Chinese vendors had to move their businesses to department stores such as Asia Center which was established in 2003. But despite of the constant advertising it seems to become bankrupt, because half of the stores are still empty and most of the tenants moved from the Józsefvárosi open air market, where the rental fee was much lower (Nyíri, 2009: 14).

It is also important to mention that the Hungarian Government does not pursue the integration of the immigrants as it ignores the growing number of Chinese and other Asian migrants. The first generation of the Chinese migrants are not open either, most of them do not imagine their future in Hungary as it is considered only as a gateway to the western countries. "The Western countries are seen as where they will relax; enjoy the years of retreat, where their children can be educated, who will get good and high-quality jobs. In contrast to the traditional view, these countries are not targeted for economic reasons, but because of a much more diverse consideration in which the quality of life - including their perception of "modernity" - , a livable environment and the equal treatment and opportunities for the ethnically diverse immigrant groups play a very important role. As for their economic, social and cultural participation, these migrants - and especially their children - in these countries of establishment, they assume a more active role ("scenes of life"), compared to the business locations („scenes of business"). The economic and cultural capital they accumulated in these transit countries is spent and invested in the countries of establishment" (Nyíri, 2002: 177).

The second generation of the Chinese immigrants however shows a completely different behavior and attitude than their parents. The Chinese identity and the strong relationship with China and the other relatives live in the PRC are reduced which results changes related to the language use and attitudes towards culture and identity too. The linguistical and emotional bond to Hungary and generally to the western customs gets greater emphasis among the younger generation and this back and forth process becomes more powerful from generation to generation resulting a complete language shift at latest until the fourth generation (Fishman, 1966).

3. Research Methodology

The methods of the research were sociolinguistic interview, participant observation and questionnaire in three languages (Hungarian, English, Chinese). In the questionnaire there were 60 questions on basic sociological information, self-reported language use, language skills and attitudes. The corpus consists of more than forty pages of notes, 20 hours of voice recording, 110 fulfilled questionnaires, and several pages of messenger-text. In the research 110 informants participated, from this 66 were female and 44 were male. Among the informants 32 are first generation Chinese migrants and 78 of them are members of the younger generation.

Instead of the sampling according to age groups the selection of informants according to generation's preferred. The consistence of the group of informants according to language knowledge and education was differentiated further:

First generation: Those Chinese, who have been living here for 15-20 years and had arrived at about the change of the form of government, in the 1990's. In average they have family, mostly with two children.

Second generation: The children of the first generation, growing up, school-aged Chinese as well as young adults.

Categories within the first generation:

1. Generation:
 - a. Those immigrants, who speak only Chinese.
 - b. Those, who speak both Chinese and English.
 - c. Those, who speak both Chinese and Hungarian.
 - d. Those, who speak Chinese, Hungarian and English.
2. Generation:
 - a. Those Chinese, who speak only Chinese.
 - b. Those, who speak only Hungarian.

- c. Those, who speak both Chinese and English.
- d. Those, who speak both Chinese and Hungarian.
- e. Those, who speak Chinese, Hungarian and English.
- f. Those, who speak both Hungarian and English, but no Chinese

4. Results

4.1. Language Use of the Chinese Immigrants in Hungary

Bilingualism can be formed in many ways and the definition of it is also varied. In this study we use the definition of Bartha Csilla: “bilingual are those, who use two or more languages during their everyday communication (in spoken and/or in written form, or through signing) according to the persons’ communicative, socio-cultural needs” (Bartha 1999: 40)

It can be evolved as a result of political expansions (like in the USSR), border rearrangements (the result of peace treaties and pacts), peace treaties (1848: New Mexico, Texas and California placed under the jurisdiction of the US), political regime changes (former Soviet states), migration (temporary vs. permanent, in groups or individually), internal labour migration, trade, religions (Muslims in the UK), modernization, globalization and internet (Bartha, 1999).

Examining the psychological dimensions of the individual, migrant bilingualism, then in general we can say that the Hungarian and Chinese language skills of the second generation are unequal, the language acquisition happens in adolescence or in childhood and the status of the two language is subtractive compared to each other as the acceptance of the Chinese language is much lower in Hungary than in China, and in the case of identity, we can claim that the second generation has bicultural identity while the first generation’s monocultural identity with strong Chinese monolingualism.

To the questions concerning language usage, the informants had to answer by their own admission and personal judgment.

Obviously the difference between the generations is remarkable. While about 45% of the first generation speaks at least fair Hungarian, in the case of the second generation it is 95%. The proportion of those who completely do not speak Hungarian among the representatives of the second generation was 0%, and only they overlap a 5% part, who cannot speak fair Hungarian. In contrast the first generation does not speak a fair Hungarian in 55% or do not speak the language at all (see figure 1.). Those, who completely do not speak Hungarian are either English-Chinese bilinguals or Chinese monolinguals. This depends on the original and present occupation and education as well.

According to the admission of the informants, the most difficult is reading and writing, in the case of both languages. In the first generation, in the case of the Hungarian language we could notice a 37-63% opposition, while in the second generation the same was 93,4-6,6%. Thus, among the members of the first generation, who cannot read fair or at all the proportion is 63%, while the same in the case of the youth is 6,6%. These huge differences obviously come from the presence or the lack of the education in Hungarian language (see figure 2. and figure 3.).

The reading skills are tightly related to the writing skills. The diagrams show remarkably different proportions. The 70,5% of the first generation cannot write or cannot write fairly in Hungarian, the same proportion in the second generation is only 18,3%. The 29,5%, who, from the first generation can write fairly or good, was attending a Hungarian university, or learned the language in an institution in Hungarian language. They are the ones from the Chinese diaspora, who are thinking in long-term, and fulfilling a white-collar position in Hungary. For the young generation the most difficult is the adoption of Chinese writing, since it does not consequently ensue from the spoken language.

In the quality of language competencies not only the frequency is important but the type of the texts that people usually read, write and listen to. The first generation reads the easier readings, like journals, magazines and other periodicals, and as well the episcopal works in Chinese language, the proportion of Hungarians are infinitesimal, and so the other languages are effaced. Almost the half of the second generation prefers reading in Hungarian, but they have a big proportion too who read in both languages journals, books, but in the first place they read in Hungarian and Chinese, and other languages, mostly in English.

There is a 30% we noticed in the case of the second generation concerning Chinese language, we principally can feel the adherence to the mother tongue, because we enjoy more the episcopal works in our mother tongue, since the national literature is culturally embedded and attached.

The differentiation according to individuals can also be interesting, because in this way we can reveal the customs of the families' language usage (see Table 1). The communication with grandparents and with parents is always in Chinese. The proportion of Chinese is high as well in the communication with siblings. In every other case the second generation would prefer using Hungarian language, and also we can see an example for that, which language do they choose towards their children. However the data is slight, because most of the young generation has not reached the age of having a family on their own yet, but those who are already parents chose Hungarian in the communication with their children. The handling of relationship with friends also goes in Hungarian, which shows the consistence of their nationality. With shop assistants even the first generation Chinese communicate in Hungarian, to use Chinese they only have the opportunity in Chinese restaurants, markets or in shops. That stands for the doctors as well: with a Chinese doctor they speak Chinese, and with a Hungarian one, they use Hungarian. The next table arranges the languages according to topics (see Table 2.). Where the Chinese language has a greater importance in role is the field of private matters, religion and history, sports and the category of shopping. Except for the religion and history these are topics of lighter, family discussions, while education and work, health care, technologic topics are more complex, in several cases they are in connection with the matters of a country, therefore in these cases, the proportion of Hungarian language is higher among the first generation too, since these topics affect them because of themselves and their children as well.

In general we can claim that, the elder people use the Chinese more favorably, while the youth prefer Hungarian, irrespectively of the topic.

4.2. Attitude

The attitude, the relation to the languages not even only in a bilingual environment, but also as a monolingual is important aspect. In a bilingual immigrant state the adherence to the mother tongue is expected, thus the positive judgment towards the different national language undoubtedly is a sign, especially, if it appears in contrast to the mother tongue and not with it. The members of the Hungarian Chinese diaspora deem the Chinese language nicer than the Hungarian, especially the first generation. The second generation, because of its bicultural identity either deem both the two nice (50% of the informants), or esteem the Chinese nicer.

In response to the question, asking which language is more useful, the majority marked the Chinese (G1=60%; G2=50%). It's not surprising though, since China in the last decade showed a great economic recovery, and directly proportionally the country, the culture and the prestige of the language grew, on the basis of the so called principal: „where the wealth is found, there is the power.”

One marker of the degree of adherence to the Chinese culture and traditions could be the following question: In your opinion, should you keep the Chinese language in Hungary too? Regardless of age, gender, occupation, qualification, the reaction of every single informant was positive, 100% of the informant thought it is important to keep the Chinese language even in an environment of minority.

An important question is that, how the Chinese, themselves judge the consciousness of identity within their group (see Figure 4.). Who, in regard with the precedents, deem the Chinese in Hungary have a high level of consciousness of identity, have a high proportion, there were ones who do not agree with that, but them, they are the members of the younger generation, who know their own age group chose this option. Every informant decided based on their own environment and experiences, there were ones, who went through negative experiences related to Chinese children (they do not speak Chinese, do not eat Chinese food, do not know the Chinese culture etc.), and because of that, they did not agree with the statement, although their number is infinitesimal.

5. Conclusions

We can claim that the second generation is not so closely connected to their roots than the first generation, which can be observed in the decline of the Chinese language particularly in writing. The language shift however, has not changed entirely the cultural identity of this age group yet, as the majority of the younger generation is bicultural.

The first generation still nourishes the Chinese language and culture and most of them are Chinese-dominant bilinguals. Due to the modern pinyin-input systems and the L2 environment enhanced by Hungarian education the Chinese reading and writing skills are diminishing among the members of the second generation. If these conditions remain unchanged, this temporary bilingualism may lead to Hungarian monolingualism of the III-IV. generations.

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7. Tables and Figures

Figure 1: At what level do you Speak in Hungarian (n= 110) G1= first generation, G2= Second Generation

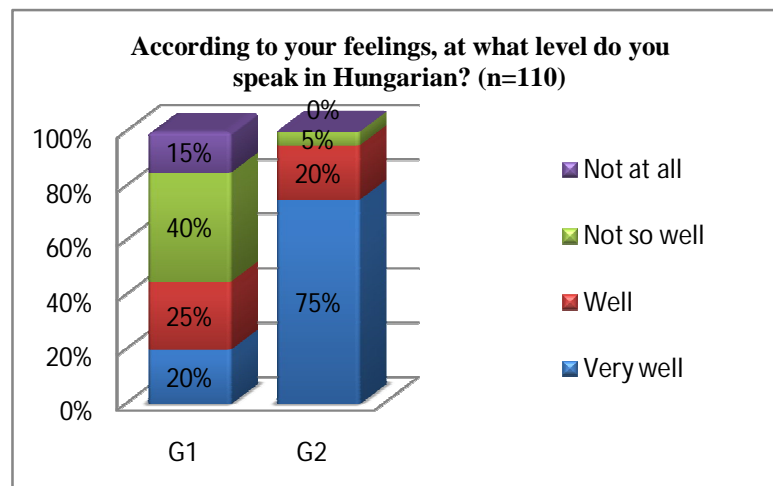


Figure 2: At what level can you Read in Hungarian (n= 110) G1= first Generation, G2= Second Generation

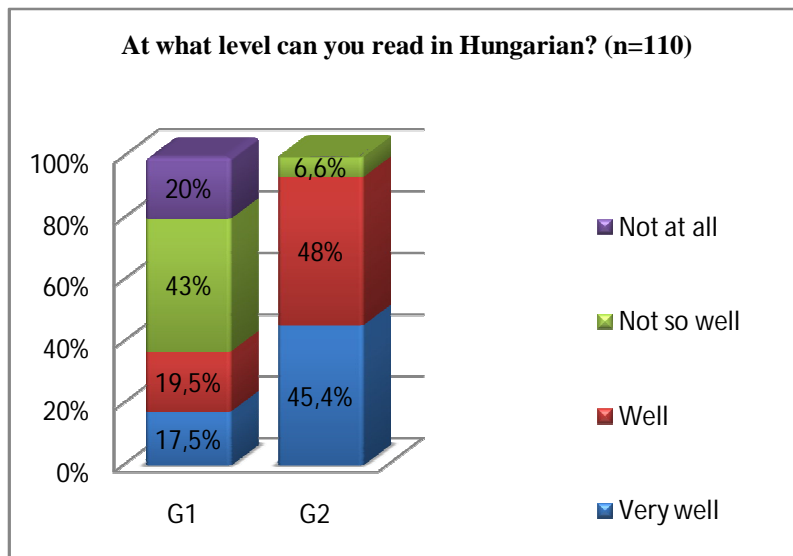


Figure 3: At what Level can you Write in Hungarian (n= 110) G1= First Generation, G2= Second Generation

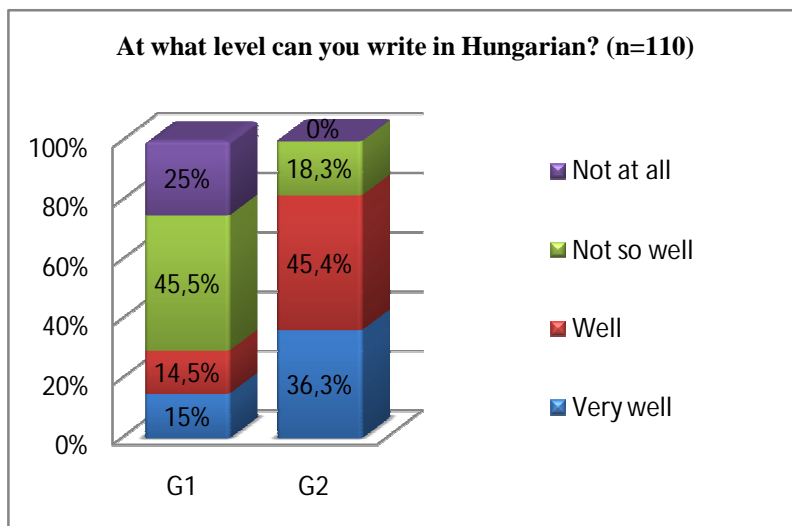


Table 1: Language use According to groups C=Chinese, H=Hungarian

Generation	In which language do you speak with your...?			
	Grandparents		Parents	
I.	100% C	–	100% C	–
II.	80% C	20% H	80% C	20% H
Generation	Children		Friends	
I.	75% C	25% H	85% H	35% H
II.	–	10% H	10% C	100% H
Generation	Siblings		Spouse	
I.	100% C	–	85% C	15% H
II.	50% C	20% H	–	20% H
Generation	Shop assistant		Doctor	
I.	30% C	85% H	10% C	100% H
II.	20% C	100% H	–	100% H

Table 2: Language use According to topics C=Chinese, H=Hungarian

In which language do you speak about...?				
Generation	Home affairs		Religion, history	
I.	95%C	10%H	82%C	25%H
II.	20%C	90%H	40%C	70%H
	Sport		Technical things	
I.	85%C	15%H	90% C	15% H
II.	50%C	70%H	10% C	90% H
	Education, work		Health system	
I.	75% C	20% H	65% C	45% H
II.	20% C	90% H	20% C	80% H
	Shopping			
I.	70% C	30% H		
II.	40% C	80% H		

Figure 4: The Hungarian Chinese People’s Identity (n= 110) G1= First Generation, G2= Second Generation

