The New Zealand-born Chinese Community of Auckland: Aspects of language maintenance and shift

Susan Sun
Auckland Institute of Technology New Zealand

Abstract

Roberts (et. al. 1991) carried out research within the New Zealand-born Chinese community of Wellington in 1988-1989 in the attempt to describe patterns of language maintenance and shift within the community. She found that “the pattern for this community is one of steady language shift from Cantonese to English marked by fairly consistent community efforts to maintain some capability in the language.” Roberts also reported on the community’s attitudes to language maintenance education.

Using Roberts’ questionnaires (with slight modification), the present study focuses on Auckland, which has in recent years emerged as the biggest centre of Chinese in New Zealand. It attempts to find out whether Roberts’ findings also hold true to the Auckland New Zealand-born Chinese community.

It was found that Roberts’ findings mostly hold true for the Auckland respondents, especially regarding the patterns of childhood language use, the attendance of language maintenance schools and its correlation with their proficiency levels today. However, there do not seem to be consistent community efforts to maintain the language in Auckland. On issues such as Chinese language being taught at the school system, Chinese culture and identity, etc., the Auckland respondents have overall less favourable attitudes than the Wellington respondents.

Introduction

The Chinese community in New Zealand and their mother tongues

Chinese people started to migrate to New Zealand in the 1860s as miners to work in the goldfields. In 1866, the total Chinese population was recorded as 1219, and the migration continued thereafter. The rate of migration varied from a trickle to larger surges, depending on the socio-political climates both in New Zealand and China (Ip, 1990). By 1996, the population had reached...
Population figures taken from census data, including the percentage of the total population where available, are shown in Table 1.

### Table 1: Chinese Population in New Zealand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Chinese Population</th>
<th>% of total NZ population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>1219</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871 Census</td>
<td>2641</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>5000 app.</td>
<td>1.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896 Census</td>
<td>3700</td>
<td>1.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>2570</td>
<td>0.289%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951 Census</td>
<td>6316</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 Census</td>
<td>10,283</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976 Census</td>
<td>14,236</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981 Census</td>
<td>18,480</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986 Census</td>
<td>19,566</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991 Census</td>
<td>37,689</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996 Census</td>
<td>82,320</td>
<td>1.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: *New Zealand Official Year Books* and the chronology in Ip, 1990)

Most of the Chinese in New Zealand are speakers of Cantonese from the Guangdong province. Since the beginning of immigration to New Zealand in the 1880s until the 1970s, almost all Chinese immigrants to New Zealand were part of a pattern of chain migration from Guangdong.

In 1996 for the first time in New Zealand history the census included information on what languages people speak in their everyday life. It is recorded in the 1996 census that among the total of 82,320 Chinese respondents only 57,540 claimed to be able to speak Chinese, a mere two thirds of the total Chinese population (Table 2). These hard data confirm what the Chinese people in New Zealand have suspected for a long time, namely that whatever other cultural values were being retained, the mother tongue was being lost. Since in 1996 there were only 57,540 out of the 82,320 respondents who claimed knowledge of Chinese, that leaves at least 24,780 Chinese people in the country who were not speakers of any Chinese dialects when the Census was taken. The breakdown of the different dialect groups is shown in Table 2.
Table 2: Speakers and non-speakers of Chinese in 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Dialect Groups</th>
<th>No. of Speakers</th>
<th>No. of Non-speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>33,579</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>18,486</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Min</td>
<td>5,475</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>82,320</td>
<td>57,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24,780</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who are these twenty five thousand-odd Chinese who do not speak their heritage language? Based on her extensive statistical research, Ip (1996:143) profiles the ethnic Chinese population around 1995 as follows:

- 10,000 (approx.) New Zealand-born
- 10,000 (approx.) ‘Old immigrants’ who arrived prior to 1986
- 50,000 to 60,000 new comers since 1986

Interestingly, the Chinese population growth since 1986 (50,000-60,000) closely coincides with the number of speakers of Chinese shown in the 1996 Census (57,540 as in Table 2 above). If we presume that the newcomers, being first generation immigrants who came within the last 10 years, still maintain their mother tongues and claimed so in the 1996 Census, we can then infer that most of the Chinese who had been here before 1986, as a group, had lost their ability to speak Chinese.

Of course some of the ‘old immigrants’ who arrived prior to 1986 may still maintain their mother tongue well, and many new comers since 1986 could have rapidly lost their mother tongues within 10 years. This could especially apply to young children who immigrated with their parents and shifted to English as they started school.

There is thus reason to believe that the 25 thousand or so non-speakers of Chinese are the New Zealand-born Chinese - ranging from the second generation to the fourth or fifth generation whose ancestors came in the 1860s, and some newly arrived very young immigrants (first generation). They are the ones who acquire sufficient English through the educational system and are most likely to shift to English. These represent the most vulnerable group as far as Chinese language maintenance is concerned. In one way or another, they have lost the ability to use Chinese, at times at a rapid rate. However, it is out of this survey’s scope to study the language maintenance and shift of the first generation young Chinese immigrants. The focus of this study, following Roberts’ Wellington study, is the New Zealand-born Chinese community -
“the minority within a minority” (Ip, 1996, p. 143) which are now outnumbered by the newcomers in the wave of accelerated Chinese immigration in the late 80s and the 90s.

The New Zealand-born Chinese in Auckland

The New Zealand-born Chinese in Auckland, in terms of their families’ immigration history and linguistic background are similar in many respects to the Wellington New Zealand-born Chinese - some of their parents or grandparents were literally “in the same boat.” As a result the immigrants tended to come from the same places, speak the same dialects, and make a living through similar means, such as vegetable gardening, managing fruit shops, etc. The way their parents chose to bring children up “out of the back of the shop chopping leaves off cauliflowers” (Don, 1905, quoted in Roberts, 1991, p. 38) through higher education was also identical. Interestingly too, they all gave interviews in English (although I did suggest to them that we could conduct the interviews in Chinese if they wished).

The study of ethnic language maintenance and shift

The phenomenon of language maintenance and shift of the NZ-born Chinese is not unique in New Zealand and in the world context. This is in fact a widespread phenomenon worldwide. In Fishman (1989)’s words, “what begins as the language of social and economic mobility ends, within three generations or so, as the language of the crib as well, even in democratic and pluralism-permitting contexts” (p. 206). This accords with the current situation in New Zealand, as Holmes, Roberts, Verivaki & A’aiapo note (1993, p. 1): “There is evidence from a number of studies of communities in New Zealand that language shift to English occurs over at most four generations, and is sometimes completed in as few as two ... the fact of shift and the direction of the shift seem inevitable.”

The study of maintenance and shift has a fairly long history. Most studies have been directed, right from the beginning, on the factors that accelerate language shifts as opposed to conditions that favour language maintenance. In theoretical and empirical inquiries, factors such as, just to name a few, the suppressive or permissive attitude by the majority group, the socio-economic and historical status of the minority, the numbers of birth rate and mixed marriages, the mass media, religions, the role of institutional power, the ‘success’ to interact with the majority group, the number of claimants of the
minority language and the number of institutions that support the language in the community, the social networks of the individuals, etc. have been examined (see Kloss, 1966; Giles, Bourhis & Taylor 1977; Fishman, 1985; Holmes, et al 1993; Li, Wei, Milroy & Pong, 1992).

Holmes et al (1993) study language maintenance and shift of the Wellington Chinese, Greek and Tongan communities through examining the language proficiency, the domains of language use and the attitudes towards their languages, and they identify eight factors that contribute to the survival of the three languages. These factors include regular social interaction in the community, using of the community language at home, positive attitudes to the language and relation between language and identity, residential contiguity, support for community language schools, community identified religious organization, etc.

Recent educational and political developments concerning Chinese language in New Zealand

Historically, Chinese language education has always been the sole responsibility of the Chinese community. The emphasis was on language literacy in the early days, shifting to language maintenance in the 1960s. Community run schools were the norm, as public schools showed very little interest in teaching the language. In 1995 however, after a long battle, Chinese language was officially written into the New Zealand school curriculum. It is thus important to know how the Auckland New Zealand-born Chinese perceive this dramatic change in Chinese language education, and how they took advantage of the change.

On the political front, with Asia playing an increasingly important role on the world stage and in the Asian-Pacific region in particular, New Zealand governments, especially the last and the current ones, have shown strong determination to have New Zealand seen as an integral part of the Asian-Pacific region. As a result, New Zealand’s relationship with the Asian countries has been developed and strengthened in recent years. It is interesting to see how this has affected the thinking of the Auckland New Zealand-born Chinese in terms of Chinese language education.
Methodology

This study supplements Roberts’ early work in Wellington and employs a slightly modified version of the well-designed and extremely comprehensive questionnaire used in that study. The basic method used to collect data on the language use patterns, the language proficiency and the attitudes to language of the Wellington New Zealand-born Chinese community was an extensive questionnaire administered in a face-to-face interview. The strengths of this method are two fold. While the questionnaire ensures that a considerable amount of basic data is collected, the face-to-face interview allows flexibility and the elicitation of crucial sociolinguistic data. The present study adopts the Wellington questionnaire with slight alternations to suit the Auckland situation.

The criteria established by Roberts were that respondents to the questionnaire should be New Zealand-born Chinese married to New Zealand-born Chinese and that they should have children who were all still living at home. The idea was to look at the adult New Zealand-born Chinese’ language maintenance career - their childhood language use, their language use today, their language proficiency and their attitudes towards language maintenance. It was also intended to investigate what decision these parents have taken regarding mother tongue maintenance for their children. In the same way, eleven Auckland New Zealand-born Chinese (of seven families) were chosen as respondents and interviewed for the present study.

Result and Discussion

Language use at home (in childhood and today)

In previous research on minority language maintenance, the importance of the home domain has been stressed, for example, Fishman (1991) suggests the use of the ethnic language at home in the interaction between children and their parents in normal daily life is the sine qua non of language maintenance or revival. Similarly, Holmes et al (1993, p. 10) observe that “it is predominantly in the family domain that Cantonese maintains its hold.”

The result of this study shows that most of the respondents grew up in Cantonese-speaking homes but most of them today live in English-speaking homes (see Table 3). This is very similar to what Roberts (1991) finds in the Wellington respondents: the shift from Cantonese as the main language of the
respondents’ childhood homes to English. Roberts suggests that the differences between childhood and adult circumstances may shed more light on this. From talking to the respondents, my feeling is that the shift to English is not simply an inevitable circumstance, but represents conscious choice in the New Zealand-born Chinese community. In another word, they did not arrive to today’s situation accidentally, but somehow chose it to be so. Many respondents were amused that the question about home language use was even asked. To them it was inconceivable that families like theirs could still speak Cantonese at home after all those years’ efforts to assimilate and survive in the English speaking society. Of the only two respondents who said they do speak Cantonese at home today, one in fact did not speak Cantonese to her husband or children, but only to the older people in the household; another said there was “half Cantonese half English”, but the speaking of Cantonese at home was a deliberate attempt to make her three school children learn some Cantonese.

Table 3: Predominant Language Used in the Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood home</th>
<th>Today</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wellington (Total of 48 homes)</td>
<td>Auckland (Total of 11 homes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixture</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First language learned and patterns of Cantonese use in the childhood home

Most of the respondents in the present study said that they had learned Cantonese before they learned English (see Table 4), and that their childhood homes had been predominantly Cantonese speaking. Over 90% of the childhood homes were characterized as predominantly Cantonese-speaking. This contrasts with Roberts’ findings, where only a third of the Wellington respondents actually used Cantonese themselves at home “most of the time” (see Table 5). There seemed to be more cases of either the mother or the father or both speaking to children in Cantonese in Auckland. Two thirds of the respondents used Cantonese “most of the time” compared with a third in Wellington. This suggests that the Auckland New Zealand-born had a better start as far as the potential for language maintenance is concerned.
**Table 4: First Language Learned**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wellington</th>
<th>Auckland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78.4%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixture</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5: Patterns of Cantonese Use in the Childhood Home**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wellington</th>
<th>Auckland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondents who said their parents spoke Cantonese most of the time</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80.4%</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents who said their homes were predominantly Cantonese speaking</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents who used Cantonese with their mother most of the time</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62.7%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents who used Cantonese with their father most of the time</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>52.9%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents who used Cantonese at home most of the time</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Roberts observed a common family pattern where the oldest children of a household were Cantonese speaking until they went to school. They would then learn English at school and bring it into the home, as would the next child down, so that by the time the third and fourth children were born, they would grow up in a home environment that was, at least amongst the children, English rather than Cantonese-speaking. This also appears to be true for Auckland. Some of the Auckland respondents added that they could not remember when exactly they started speaking in English to their older brother and sisters, but they were sure that they all shared an English speaking world at home with their older brothers and sisters once they started school.

**Other domains**

Though language use at home is critical in language maintenance, there are other domains outside the home in which language is reinforced. As Holmes et al. note (1993, p. xx), “the community language does not disappear from a person’s linguistic repertoire overnight. Rather... it slowly retreats from more and more social settings or domains as the community members are required to use the majority language with majority group members in those
domains.” Sadly, Roberts finds that outside the home, even less Cantonese was used in Wellington’s New Zealand-born community. Cantonese was usually only spoken outside the family home when children were involved in distinctly Chinese social occasions, whether family or community based, and had to speak with the family friends as part of these. There is a similar situation among the Auckland respondents. They again pointed out to me that even in those family or community gatherings, there was also an English speaking world among the children of different families. English appeared to be the dominant language in almost every domain of the child’s world.

**Chinese language school and language use today**

There was one other domain where children were regularly exposed to Chinese: the Chinese language school. Here, spoken Cantonese was taught, but the written language taught there was standard written Chinese, which has significant lexical and other differences from spoken Cantonese. However, only 6 out of the 11 respondents went to this kind of school. Each child spent two hours there each week, and the length of time they had attended ranged from 3 years to 6 years. Of the 6 people who attended Chinese classes, their language skills self-report indicated that the number of years spent at the Chinese school positively affected their overall language skills. As would be expected, the longer they attended, the slight better language skills they possess, with speaking and understanding somewhat better than reading and writing. As for the people who did not attend Chinese school in childhood, compared with the Chinese school students, their overall Chinese language skills are poorer, especially in the areas of reading and writing. In the Wellington survey, Roberts et al. (1991) notices a striking difference in literacy skill between those attended language school for longer time and more intensive (more hours weekly) and those attended less time - the more and longer time spent, the better literacy skills one gets. This survey confirms absolutely Roberts’ finding. Table 6 below shows the respondents’ self-rated language skills today and the correlation between attendance at language maintenance school and the language skills.
As can be seen in Table 6, most respondents put themselves somewhere in the middle of the scale for speaking skills. No one was completely incapable of speaking Cantonese, but on the other hand very few thought they were very good (i.e. with native speaker competence). This also applies to their self-rating comprehension skill. However, people generally thought their comprehension skill was better than their speaking skill. When it comes to literacy skills however, nearly half of the respondents rated themselves as having “no ability”. The other half thought they had “limited ability”, because they somehow still remembered how to write their names in Chinese and were able to read a handful of simple or common Chinese characters such as the words “mountain”, “people”, and the numbers “one”, “two”, “three”, etc.

As for correlation between attending Chinese classes and language skills, the skills consistently get lower as they attended language maintenance school irregularly or not at all. The only two exceptions are respondents No.10 and No.11. The reasons for this are that no.10 was taught Chinese by her parents at home, and even though No.11 did not go to language school during childhood, she had recently completed one-year of full-time study in Chinese.

Clearly the Auckland respondents have very limited Chinese literacy skills but they are still using their oral Cantonese skills today. Then, where do they speak Cantonese as adults these days? At home, only 4 out of 11 respondents said ‘yes’ to the question of “do you speak Chinese in the home today”, while the other seven do not even try. Of
the four who did, only one who was genuinely trying; the two who did speak Cantonese were mainly to their children and had only managed to do so in a very little part of the day. Although they seemed nowhere near giving up, they did strongly feel that they were somehow fighting a losing battle. Another respondent who did use Cantonese at home was the same one we mentioned above who only spoke Cantonese to the older people in the family because she had to.

Outside their nuclear home, most of the respondents, as one would expect, spoke Cantonese to older family members. They also speak the language at the Chinese people social functions, and at work where there were either Chinese colleagues or Chinese clients. Contrasting very much with their Wellington counterparts, the Auckland respondents never mentioned any particular Chinese church or any Chinese community meeting place where they would every now and then go. The Auckland New Zealand-born Chinese community seems to have less social interaction between the members. Whether this is due to the size (bigger than Wellington) of the city and the wider spread of the population, we do not know for sure at this stage. A good proportion of the respondents, especially female respondents, did report their interaction with the new Chinese immigrants. This provides them with opportunities to speak Cantonese, though much of the time had been spent on either talking in English or helping the new immigrants learning English.

**The respondents’ children**

A large section of the questionnaire was devoted to asking respondents about their children’s patterns of Chinese language use. However, given the fact that only 4 out of 11 Auckland respondents spoke Chinese at home to their children, one should not be surprised to find that the children’s Cantonese ability are lower than that of the respondents. Of all and every four skill areas, all the children but one were in fact rated (the same scale as used for the respondents) by their parents as in between the levels of E (no ability) and D (limited). The only one who excelled the D (limited) level did not go too far either. She was rated C (fair) for both speaking and comprehension skills, but back to E (no ability) for reading and writing skills. In general, D (limited) for speaking and comprehension and E (no ability) for reading and writing were the norm among the respondents’ children.

Attendance at language maintenance schools had been an influential factor in the respondents’ Cantonese ability in their later life. Sadly, all but one of these respondents’ families did not send their children to any Chinese
school! This is the biggest finding the present study has found so far! These parents explained that you could not force the children to do so. Whereas in Wellington, less than 10 years ago, 46 of the 70 children had attended language maintenance schools for at least a short period or were attending at the time of the survey!

When asked whether they would regard a complete ignorance of Cantonese in their children as undesirable, which has been the view held by many general members of the Chinese community, all the Auckland respondents expressed an inner desire to have their children being able to speak Chinese, but admitted that the pressure of such from the community was no longer there, at least not in Auckland. In another word, the community as a whole has somehow giving up hope on the children to maintain Chinese language. This is scary. Less than 10 years away from Roberts’ survey in the late 80s, the desire to educate the next generation in Chinese seemed to be stronger both by the parents and the community.

The reasons for this Auckland phenomenon maybe complex, but the size of Auckland and the wider spread of the community, which had been suggested to be the reasons for lack of interactions between members of a community by many researchers, could well have contributed to the children’s not attending language maintenance schools. Holmes (et al 1993) lists ‘residential contiguity’ as one of the eight biggest factors which help minorities maintain their languages. She notes that by living close by, “the number of opportunities to use the ethnic language increases” (p16), and it becomes, for example, simply “easier to decide where to locate churches and community halls... sports clubs ... and language classes” (p16).

Attitudes towards Chinese language education

Roberts’ study found that most of her respondents had a positive attitude towards the community-run schools, but some worried it takes too much of the children’s time. There was reservation about the idea of having the Chinese language programs within the school system.

Interestingly, with the Chinese language officially adopted into the New Zealand school curriculum in 1995, the Auckland respondents had not shown much enthusiasm on the issues. 36% (25.5% in Wellington) of respondents did not think Chinese language should be in the school system. This is mainly because they disillusioned the Maori Kihanga Reo experience and believed
that no groups should be singled out for special treatment, and partly because they worried it would take up too much of their children’s school time.

As for the question of whether it was important to keep Chinese as a living language in New Zealand, 100% of the respondents said ‘yes’, but one was quick to point out that only if it is done within the community. He hated to see that Chinese language is imposed upon all Kiwis like the Maori did. When asked if it was important for the New Zealand Chinese to see themselves as part of a Chinese-New Zealand community, we got again an ‘all agree’ answer. Most of them did not want to be a completely Kiwi, nor a purely unassimilated Chinese. Most of them also thought that it is desirable to keep the Chinese culture and identity alive even if the community is no longer Chinese speaking. However, half of them did acknowledge that it was hard or even impossible to do without the language.

Conclusion

Roberts’ findings for the Wellington respondents mostly also apply to the Auckland respondents, especially with respect to the patterns of language childhood use, the attendance of language maintenance schools and its correlation with their proficiency levels today. However, the Auckland respondents’ Cantonese use today is slightly less than that of the Wellington respondents. For example, they are using less and less to their children and they do not seem to gather together as a community as much as the Wellington Chinese do. As for the children, one significant finding has been that all but one of the Auckland children do not go to language maintenance schools whereas more than two thirds of the children in Wellington did go to these schools. The Auckland parents simply do not feel strongly enough to send their children to Chinese language maintenance school. Consequently, their children’s Chinese language skills are next to none.

On issues such as Chinese language being taught in the school system, Chinese culture and identity, etc., the Auckland respondents have overall less positive attitudes then the Wellington respondents. Even after major struggles and the acceptance in the wider society of Chinese language being written into the school curriculum, the Auckland respondents appear to be largely unaffected. Although most of them agree that Chinese language and culture should be kept alive in New Zealand, they do not seem to be prepared to play a major role in making this come about.
References


New Zealand Dept of Statistics. various. *New Zealand Census*. 