Teaching a Language in Transformation: Chinese in Globalisation

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In this paper, we focus on the changing conditions and contexts of Chinese as a language of complementary education in The Netherlands. Complementary education is community-organized schooling additional to mainstream education in weekends or evenings (see Blackledge and Creese, 2010; Francis, Archer and Mau, 2009). Our discussion here draws on data of recent ethnographic fieldwork in and around a Chinese school in Eindhoven. We will focus here on what ‘Chinese’ means in a changing, globalizing world and what it means to teach this language. Our argument is that Chinese is a language in transformation, a moving target for learners as well as teachers. But first we need to sketch the context.

A very brief history of Chinese in the Netherlands

The Chinese are one of the oldest established immigrant communities in the Netherlands. Their number currently amounts to between 77,000 and 150,000 (CBS, 2010; Wolf, 2011). The first Chinese in the Netherlands arrived as seamen around the turn of the century and gradually settled in the Amsterdam and Rotterdam harbor districts where they developed Chinatowns. The majority came from Wenzhou and Qingtian districts in Zhejiang province on the east coast and Bo On in Guangdong on the south coast.

A second wave of Chinese migrating to the Netherlands, after the Second World War (1950-1970), settled in these Chinatowns as well as in other cities, towns and villages throughout the country, typically finding employment in the Chinese (take-away) restaurant business. They often had complex (family) migration trajectories via Hong Kong, Vietnam, Java, Sumatra, Suriname and other regions, which is also reflected in their linguistic repertoires.

During the Mao Era (1949-1976), a series of reforms in the Chinese language were introduced in the People’s Republic of China, including the introduction of a new, simplified Chinese character writing system and a new romanisation system (“pinyin”) – reforms that were not followed in Hong Kong and Taiwan (where traditional characters continued to be used). In this period, migration from and to, or foreign contact, including business, with the People’s Republic was by and large impossible. The Chinese variety of the mainland, Mandarin or Putonghua, played only a marginal role in the Chinese diasporas until sometime after the Economic Reforms of 1978. Because migration from and contacts with Hong Kong (and Taiwan) remained possible all along this period, the Hong Kong Chinese, together with the earlier migrated Guangdong Chinese – both Cantonese-speaking – became the largest group of Chinese immigrants in the Netherlands. Together they represented some seventy percent of the Dutch Chinese around 1990 (CBS, 2010:6). Until then, Cantonese was the dominant language of the Dutch Chinese diaspora. It was this language that was taught and learned in Chinese schools until the 1990s.

After 1978 and increasingly noticeably in the 1990s and 2000s, the composition of the Chinese community in the Netherlands began to change due to political and economic changes in mainland China. More and more PRC citizens (mainly students and knowledge migrants) found and still find their way into the Netherlands. These new Chinese migrants have an important economic, cultural and sociolinguistic impact on the whole Chinese presence in the Netherlands. They now come from all over China (literally from any province) and bring with them a variety of home languages (“fangyan” or dialects), but more importantly also a common Chinese language (Putonghua) that has become the normative spoken standard in the PRC in the last decades (see Dong, 2010). As a result, from the 2000s onwards increasingly Mandarin (Putonghua) is recognized as “the Chinese language” in the Netherlands diaspora. As part of this development, Chinese schools in the Netherlands today have almost entirely shifted to teaching Mandarin (Putonghua) and simplified characters, where this was Cantonese and traditional characters when most schools were founded in the 1970s.

Now that we have sketched the changing context of Chinese in the Netherlands, we are ready to answer the question what it means to teach and learn “Chinese” amidst these transformations.


**Jessie's story**

Intuitively, many people see the school teacher as the all-knowing repository and mediator of knowledge, as a stable figure whose input would always be directed towards the focus of the class activities and the curriculum knowledge he or she is supposed to transfer. In the context of our research, however, we came to see the teachers as a highly heterogeneous, "unstable" group of people. The reason for this is twofold. First, the teachers themselves have a complex repertoire and a complex sociolinguistic biography, involving sometimes dramatic and traumatizing language shift during certain phases of their lives. As a consequence, language teachers themselves are, in actual fact, language learners. The second reason is that teachers from the PRC often arrive with a teaching style and a set of language-ideological assumptions that are at odds with those of the learners in the diaspora. This potentially results in mutual frustration and in incidents over class activities and interpretations of tasks.

For an illustration of this complex language shift, consider the following fragment from an interview we conducted in 2011 with first generation Chinese migrant Jessie, a logistics manager for a local company and a voluntary teacher at the Chinese school in Eindhoven from 1999 to 2003. We asked Jessie to reflect on her language life.

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**Jessie**

I moved to Guangzhou with my parents at age 7 because of my parents’ job.

**JLi**

Okay, so you started your primary school in Guangzhou. Did the teachers use Putonghua or Cantonese at school?

**Jessie**

In our primary school, the teaching was in Mandarin, but pupils communicated among each other in Cantonese. I couldn’t understand when I just arrived there. Guangdong people also watched Hong Kong TV channels, they didn’t watch mainland channels. But in the class, even though the teacher’s Putonghua wasn’t that fluent, but they did use Putonghua, except for subjects like gymnastics. I could barely understand the teacher’s Cantonese style Putonghua. I was a migrant in Guangdong.

So you had to learn Cantonese?

**JLi**

It was very scary when I just moved to Guangdong. You could only hear Cantonese on the street. School and home were the only two places where you could speak some Putonghua. If you got lost on the street and couldn’t speak Cantonese, then you were not able to find your way home. So it was very scary if you were just a little kid. So I had to learn Cantonese very hard, by watching TV as well. At that time, I was also very shy to speak, because once you opened your mouth, you had an accent in your Cantonese, so people laughed at you, so I dared not to speak and had autism until I went to secondary school, because there no one knew that I was a migrant. And I found in the secondary school not so many people spoke Cantonese anymore.

**Jessie**

Just all of a sudden people stopped speaking Cantonese?

I went to a key secondary school and people didn’t speak Cantonese at these schools, even among each other. I had a feeling, if people couldn’t speak Putonghua well, then they didn’t have much education, especially for those who had experience with school exams. If your Putonghua is not very good, you won’t be able to pass all the exams. So you can judge one’s educational level from their language use. But once
Jessie talks about three moments of language shift in her childhood and adolescence: a first at the age of seven when she moved to the Cantonese-speaking city of Guangzhou with her parents and had to learn Cantonese in order to survive in the school; a second, still in Guangzhou, when she went to a Putonghua-medium secondary school and found herself with an advantage again; and a third, also in Guangzhou, when she got into the university where Cantonese became more important again. The interviewer then asks Jessie to talk about her experiences as a teacher after migrating to the Netherlands.

Okay, now let’s go back to the Chinese in the Netherlands. You had been teaching Chinese in the Chinese school in Eindhoven?

Yes, I taught Cantonese for four years since 1999.

There is no Cantonese class anymore in the Chinese school.

Yes, should have done that earlier.

So the teaching materials were provided by Taiwan.

Yes, We also celebrated the Taiwanese national day on the 10th of October by going to the Taiwanese embassy to have a meal there.

Things have changed in the last decade.

Yes, my students were all of Guangdong and Hong Kong origin. But now the students are from all over China. I didn’t have experience with the textbooks provided by Hong Kong. What I experienced is the teaching material provided by Taiwan couldn’t be used to teach Cantonese, because some pronunciations in these textbooks couldn’t be pronounced in Cantonese. For instance, rhymes in the Mandarin poetry don’t have the same effect in Cantonese. So it was very painful for me to teach Cantonese pronunciation while using the Taiwanese textbooks and teaching simplified character writing at that time.

Taken together, the transcript gives insight into Jessie’s experience of the transformations of Chinese. She underwent traumatic language change in her own lifetime: the forced transition towards Cantonese in her childhood left her intimidated and scared (“it was very scary when I just moved to Guangdong”; “I dared not to speak and had autism”). Community pressure marginalized her as a speaker of Putonghua and accented Cantonese. Yet, the school exam system pushed her peers towards intense efforts in Putonghua, because “if your Putonghua is not very good, you won’t be able to pass all the exams”. And then, when she started teaching after
migrating to the Netherlands as a graduate student, she saw herself confronted with the strong “polycentricity” of Chinese: Cantonese had to be taught using Taiwanese textbooks, raising linguistic and literacy issues that she found hard to manoeuvre, the more since the parents demanded the teaching of simplified script to their children (polycentricity refers to language having not one, but multiple centres to which speakers orient). Jessie’s teaching experience dated to a decade ago, probably the very early stage of the process of language shift to Putonghua we currently see in full force. Right now, she observes a conflict between old and new styles of teaching, due to the fact that the PRC sends teachers and teacher trainers to the West to streamline and/or “improve” Chinese teaching.

In the school we investigated, differences observed between “old” teachers and newer ones directly from the PRC were striking. While the older generation of teachers tended to have a rather relaxed and tolerant attitude during teaching sessions (and were themselves sometimes struggling with Putonghua), new arrivals from the PRC displayed an outspokenly “native” teaching style, with emphasis on rigour, discipline, and monological teaching. The point of these observations is that the “input” given by teachers during the Chinese classes is in itself a conflict-ridden and polycentric feature, not always without contradictions and contestation, and not always unambiguous in terms of learning. The teachers themselves bring along a baggage of complex sociolinguistic biographies, matching the complexity of those of their students.

Chinese as moving target
This brief discussion of teaching Chinese in the Netherlands points at a series of fundamental aspects about language teaching and language in general in the current globalised, superdiverse world.

Chinese, or any language for that matter, is not a fixed object or entity that people can learn to make use of but is dynamic, changing, contested, in transformation. Languages are moving targets. Chinese as a language has a long history of export and mobility, of being exported “to the world” by Chinese migrants from the late 19th Century until today. This has resulted in divergent configurations of language diversity overseas and at home, that are converging in the current wave of globalization characterized as superdiversity (cf. Blommaert and Rampton 2011). If we understand current globalization processes as the compression of time and space through increased flows of people, goods and images – migration, (mass) communication, imagination – facilitated through technologies, then we can understand how developments in the diaspora are reflecting in intricate ways developments in the PRC.

Researching Chinese language in the diaspora helps us look at “the world as one large, interactive system, composed of many complex subsystems” (Appadurai, 1996: 41) and at processes that are of a larger scale than nations and states. This leads us to the second point of our conclusion.

Chinese as a globalising language is fundamentally polycentric. This holds true for other languages as well (see e.g. the chapters in Clyne, 1992), but Chinese presents an extreme case. It is the national language of the world’s largest country in terms of population (1.3 billion) and a heritage language for many millions of diasporic Chinese worldwide. At the same time, we know that the label of Chinese is applied to the written variety of the language (the character-based script and literary language) as well as to a very wide range of regional and vernacular varieties that may be identified separately as Cantonese, Fujianese, Wenzhounese, Shanghainese, Hakka, Mandarin, etc. To say that Chinese is polycentric means that it has multiple centers that exercise varying degrees of influence on what constitutes the language. This polycentricity is inherently dynamic and changing. Over time, old centres are replaced by new ones. Where Guangdong, Hong Kong and Taipei once were the centres from where books and goods were imported in the diaspora, it is now increasingly Beijing that determines the destination of Chinese. This is an ongoing process, as Jessie’s story illustrates.

Finally, in superdiversity, language teachers have to deal with increasingly diverse audiences in their classrooms with increasingly diverse motivations and purposes to learn a language. Chinese schools are increasingly attracting non-Chinese learners that are interested in learning Mandarin as a foreign language because of its value on the local job market and the global economy (cf. Wang, 2011). This is true also for many second and third generation Chinese heritage children who are native speakers of Dutch and are learning Chinese in complementary education. This will again contribute to further transformations in language teaching and learning processes.
References


