Exploring a Mainland Chinese Undergraduate's Linguistic Identity Trajectory in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The internationalisation of higher education witnesses the increasing student mobility across borders and the emergence of more and more EMI universities worldwide, which may simultaneously offer opportunities to and pose challenges on cross-border students' language experiences and identities. The intra-state cross-border context of mainland Chinese students pursuing higher education in Hong Kong is a unique one, given the close ties between the two sides and Hong Kong's multilingual ecology. However, not enough attention seems to have been given to these students' linguistic experiences, especially in terms of how their linguistic identities evolve across time and space.

Therefore, this case study aims to delve into the linguistic identity trajectory of a mainland Chinese undergraduate studying in Hong Kong, with specific emphasis on how and why her linguistic self-identifications might be multiple, dynamic, contesting and contextually situated. Purposefully selecting the participant, the study adopts Photo-Elicitation Interviews to elicit her narratives from visual materials. Her detailed and unique language use stories exhibit a conversion from contradictory and competing multiple linguistic identities to a core and relatively stable multilingual identity. Moreover, by identifying the contributing factors, this study argues that individuals' linguistic identities reside in an organic system of language ideology, power relation and community, with the complex interplay between factors contributing to the constant evolution of linguistic identities.

Keywords: linguistic identity, multilingualism, mainland Chinese student, Hong Kong, language ideology, power relation, community

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Research Aims

Higher education is increasingly internationalised in this globalised world (Cai, 2021). On the one hand, this trend is manifested in the increased student mobility (Gu, 2021), and on the other, in the changes in language situation, that is, the emergence of more and more multilingual universities worldwide and the preference for English medium instruction (EMI) exhibited by universities in non-English-speaking areas (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Consequently, this trend may simultaneously offer opportunities to and impose challenges on international students regarding language and identity (Gu, 2021; Ou & Gu, 2021).

Among various studies into the language experiences of cross-border higher education students, the intra-state context of mainland Chinese students studying in Hong Kong seems to be unique and worth investigating, given the close ties between the two sides and Hong Kong's multilingual environment. First, Xu (2018, p. 1128) considers the relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong as a 'transborder context', with both sides unified politically, historically, culturally and/or ethnically, but divergent in ideology, language and society. The disjunction, therefore, impacts mainland Chinese students' learning experiences in Hong Kong (Xu, 2017, 2018). The second uniqueness lies in Hong Kong's linguistic environment that has been widely discussed, which features the co-existence of Cantonese, English, and Putonghua (Benson, 1997; Lai, 2001; Li, 2017; Poon, 2010). It is illustrated in both government language policies and actual practices, and exhibited in both the macroscopic setting of local society and the microscopic setting within universities: As for language planning, 'biliteracy and trilingualism' is the government's language policy, aimed at training citizens to be 'truly biliterate (written English and Chinese) and trilingual (spoken English, Cantonese and Putonghua)' (Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2015, p.

1). This generally aligns with the practical language phenomenon in Hong Kong society. Dominant in Hong Kong, Cantonese is not only significant in almost all society sectors, but also widely used by local people in daily life (Gao, 2007; Gu, 2011). The co-official language English, by contrast, possesses a high social status and is regarded as 'a critical symbol of Hong Kong's international image and as an important asset in respect of individuals' professional and social advancement' (Gu, 2011, p. 17). English is also important in different sectors, including business and education, and it serves as the major medium of instruction in higher education (Li, 2017; Poon, 2019). Finally, with the increasingly close bonds between Hong Kong and mainland China since the handover in 1997, Putonghua is attached to unprecedented significance in most sectors of Hong Kong society (Bacon-Shone & Bolton, 2008).

Hong Kong's diverse and fluid linguistic ecology, however, might pose challenges to students from mainland China, where Putonghua is the official language extensively used in society sectors formally and informally, and is the medium of instruction in educational institutions (Du & Jackson, 2018; Sung, 2020a). Therefore, there exists in Hong Kong a disjunction between mainland Chinese students' mother tongue (Putonghua), the medium of instruction in higher education (English), and the dominant language in the wider community (Cantonese), making it of significance to scrutinise their identities concerning each of the three mainstream language varieties.

1.2 Literature Review

This section will critically discuss existing work related to the research field of language and identity on the one hand and to the research context of mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong on the other. By summarising their achievements and identifying their gaps, the current study is designed and expected to innovatively supplement current work.

With the social turn in SLA and since Norton published the groundbreaking work concerning language learning and identity (Norton, 2000; Peirce, 1995), researchers in SLA have been contributing a lot to this issue (e.g., Besser & Chik, 2014; Bui, 2020; Busch, 2010, 2012; Dressler, 2014; Peng & Patterson, 2022; Sung, 2021a, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Teng, 2019), both theoretically and methodologically. Their methods, findings, and limitations have also inspired the current study.

Theoretically, most studies mainly focused on the key conceptualisation of identity as a site of struggle while touching upon such concepts as motivation, language ideology, practised community, and imagined community. Language ideology, defined by Silverstein (1979, p. 193) as 'sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure or use', may lead individuals to assign values to different languages, and mediate the relationships between language practices and identity negotiation (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Silverstein, 1979). Another concept needing explaining might be imagined community, referring to 'groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination' (Norton, 2013, p. 8). Echoing the poststructuralist view of identity as a dynamic and continuous narrative (Block, 2009), imagined community concerns future expectations and opens possibilities for a wider range of individuals' possible selves that are spatiotemporally changeable (Kanno, 2008; Wenger, 1999).

Through these notions, SLA researchers were able to discuss how language users dynamically negotiate identities through the complex interplay between external social structures and their internal beliefs and agency. Of particular relevance to current research is Teng's (2019) multiple case study into the identities and investment of three Chinese college students majoring in English. Addressing the monolingual context of English learning as the study was, it delved into the 'identity flux within and across various communities' (p. 43), and emphasised the dynamic and ongoing nature of identity. It also argued for four factors included in the learner identity by drawing upon the concepts of ideology, community affordance, agency, and practised community and imagined community, which inspired me to delve into linguistic identity through similar lenses.

Studies that responded to the internationalisation of higher education and looked into the identity construction of international students had exhibited similar preference for the above-mentioned conceptual lenses. A methodologically unique example would be Peng and Patterson's (2022) quantitative study situated in the United States, which found that both the negative correlation between international students' ethnic identities and their self-perceived English ability and the positive correlation between their sense of belonging to the USA and their self-perceived English ability were mediated by the students' motivation for learning English. By contrast, qualitative studies conducted by Bui (2020), Umino and Benson (2016), and Young (2015) all put specific emphasis on the concept of community, either immediate or imagined, when investigating the identity negotiation of international students. For instance, Umino and Benson's (2016) case study delved into the Japanese-mediated interaction of an Indonesian student studying in Japan, which showed a trend from peripheral

participation in the communities of international students to central participation in his self-created community. Despite a different research context from that of the current study, Umino and Benson's 4-year longitudinal study that adopted an innovative photo-elicitation method had exposed the current study to the possibility of examining continuing identity trajectory with a multimodal approach. Additionally, regarding the specific context of higher education in Hong Kong, Sung's recent work addressed intensively the language experiences and/or identity construction of different groups of international students in Hong Kong (2021a, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c), emphasising the situated, varied, and dynamic nature of identity by drawing upon such mediating factors as language ideologies and agency.

Enlightening as these studies were,the majority of them investigated social or national identities instead of the specific notion of linguistic identity, and relied largely on traditional data such as interviews. However, there did exist research that adopted innovative tools to look into the language-identity nexus: Language Portrait Silhouette (LPS), for instance, was used by Dressler (2014, p. 42) to inquire into multilingual children's linguistic identity. Through multimodal analysis, the study summarised the three elements of these children's linguistic identity as 'expertise' (knowledge), 'affiliation' (attachment), and 'inheritance' (family connection). Busch (2010, 2012) extended the use of LPS and applied it to both children and adults. Furthermore, adopting the method of photo-elicitation, an exploratory study conducted with English-learning pupils in Hong Kong examined their language narratives as L2 speakers and contributed both theoretically and methodologically to the field of linguistic identity (Besser & Chik, 2014).

In conclusion, drawing on various concepts and employing innovative methods, previous work has enlightened the current study to delve into the issue of linguistic identity through a comprehensive lens of (a) struggles of language learners experiencing power relations and exercising individual agency, (b) individuals' beliefs about languages, and (c) communities where language practices take place. Despite the achievements, limitations do exist, as it seems not enough attention has been given to the continuously developing trajectory of identity until recent years, although many researchers have noticed the dynamic nature of identity. Adopting a poststructuralist approach that emphasises the on-going nature of the language-identity nexus, therefore, the present study aims to complement existing research by seeking a longitudinal understanding of how a mainland Chinese undergraduate's linguistic identities evolve across time and space.

Unlike the widely-discussed topic of the 'language-identity nexus', the specific context of mainland Chinese students' struggles as language users in Hong Kong had not been given enough attention until recent years (e.g., Du & Jackson, 2018; Gao, 2007, 2010a; Gu, 2013; Li et al., 2016). While early studies into this context mainly focused on these students' language learning motivations and strategies, in recent years, Sung's work has put specific emphasis on their language experiences and identity negotiation in Hong Kong, including English, Cantonese, and multilingual practices (e.g., Sung, 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021b). Drawing on Norton's (2000, 2013) conceptualisations of identity and investment and Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment, Sung noticed how the intertwining of identity, ideology and capital largely influenced mainland Chinese students' investment in Cantonese practising in Hong Kong (2020a). In terms of English, Sung (2018, 2021b) particularly explored these students' participation and identity negotiation, and emphasised that the process was mediated by the competition between contextual conditions and agentic actions. Work on these students' multilingual practices was particularly relevant to the present study, as it detailedly illustrated the language ideologies and practices of the mainland Chinese students concerning each of the three languages in question, and recognised the co-existence of and competition among the three languages (Sung, 2020b, 2020c).

Although the above context-specific studies connected language use to different concepts such as strategy, motivation, investment and ideology, they all emphasised how mainland Chinese undergraduates struggled linguistically in Hong Kong, especially because of the usually unequal social structure. However, it is again a pity that little seems to be discussed about these students' identity trajectories. It is also noticeable that most researchers have been limiting their focus to the educational setting alone, exploring in-class and/or out-of-class language practices within university. As discussed before, not only does Hong Kong's linguistic complexity lie in the microscopic university context, but also in the macroscopic wider society, and the two contexts seem intertwined and inseparable. Therefore, an empirical study considering not only the educational setting but also students' contact with the Cantonese-dominant local community might be helpful. The current study, aware of the lack of attention to the dynamic development of linguistic identities and the local community context, aims to gain more holistic insights into the issue under investigation.

1.3 Theoretical Background

Poststructuralists conceptualise identity as multiple, dynamic, contradictory, socially constructed, and a site of

struggle (Norton, 2013; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In line with this 'default epistemological stance' (Block, 2006, p. 34), Norton's widely accepted definition views identity as 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (2013, p. 4). The multiple and dynamic nature of identity is of particular relevance to the study's research aim, as it not only enables the investigation into the multiple realisations of mainland Chinese undergraduates' identities concerning English, Cantonese and Putonghua, but also acknowledges potential self-transformation in their identities (Fisher et al., 2020; Sung, 2021a). Furthermore, emphasis on identity as a site of struggle inspired the study to take into account the complex interplay between individual agency and social power relations: viewing identity as socially and relational embedded, poststructuralists acknowledge the role of the often unequal power relations in identity negotiation (Norton, 2013; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). However, this does not deny the potential of individuals' agency to reframe the imbalanced relationships and strive for their ideal identities (Norton & McKinney, 2011; Sealey & Carter, 2001). In short, through the lens of power relation, the poststructuralist perspective allows a deeper exploration of how mainland Chinese students' linguistic identities are shaped by the interplay between their human agency and the multilingual society.

1.4 Research Questions

Among various parts of individuals' identity, linguistic identity refers to identifications concerning each language in their linguistic repertoire (Fisher et al., 2020). Aware that both identity and language learning is socially structured and spatiotemporally changeable, SLA researchers tend to closely connect these two notions, arguing for the indivisible structure of 'language-identity nexus' (Joseph, 2004, p. 12; Norton, 2000). That is, language is both constitutive of and constituted by identity, and identity is both the source and the result of language. As thus, this study places emphasis on the notion of linguistic identity, aiming to examine how a mainland Chinese undergraduate makes sense of herself as a speaker of English, Cantonese and Putonghua in Hong Kong. Based on the literature review and the theoretical foundation, two research questions are put forward to guide the current inquiry:

1) What is the pattern of the mainland Chinese student's linguistic identity trajectory through her undergraduate study in Hong Kong?

2) What are the individual and social contributing factors resulting in the development of her linguistic identities?

2. Method

2.1 Research Paradigm and Research Design

In order for the in-depth investigation of how a mainland Chinese student makes sense of her unique, complex, and constantly changing language experiences throughout her undergraduate study in Hong Kong, the current study adopted constructivism as the epistemological paradigm and decided on a qualitative case study as the research design.

Operationalising reality as 'multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature', constructivists argue that reality originates from individuals' personal viewpoints and is thus subjective and varied (Adom & Ankrah, 2016; Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). This philosophical paradigm, therefore, resonates with the current study by allowing the acquisition of an emic point of view by inviting the participant to interpret their subjective understanding of the world. What is in line with both the philosophical stance of constructivism and the research aim of the present study is the qualitative case study design, as researchers adopting this strategy of inquiry usually believe that 'knowledge is constructed rather than discovered' and emphasise the role of participants' personal experiences and subjective perspectives in understanding the issues in question (Adom & Ankrah, 2016; Stake, 1995, p. 99). According to Stake (1995), case study researchers play the role as interpreters as well as reporters of interpretations, responsible for presenting the constructed reality that is observed. Therefore, a case study design allows the present study to achieve a thick and holistic description of not only the participant's language use experiences in Hong Kong, but also her subjective feelings and thoughts regarding who she is as a language user (Duff, 2018; Yin, 2009).

2.2 Research Context

As mentioned before, the study is situated in multilingual Hong Kong, including both the university setting and the wider local community. As the macroscopic linguistic ecology in Hong Kong has been detailed previously, this section will briefly introduce the context of the specific university under investigation.

The participant of the current study comes from an EMI public university in Hong Kong, where specific

requirements for the English subject scores in the National University Entrance Examination (NUEE, also known as Chinese Gaokao) are set for mainland Chinese students pursuing undergraduates. That means only students achieving at least 120/150 are able to attend the university. All students are required to use English in academic situations but are allowed free choices of languages out of class. With an international vision, the university encourages undergraduates to take part in various overseas activities such as summer study tours. As for accommodation, all non-local undergraduate students live in university residence halls for the first two years, but if they want to renew the on-campus accommodation after that, they need to participate in as many hall returning activities as possible, which are principally organised by the local Hong Kong students. Failing to 'return to residence' means that non-local students need to seek off-campus accommodation themselves. In short, through diverse academic and daily practices throughout undergraduate study, it is common for mainland Chinese students to be involved in various communities where different language varieties occupy a dominant position.

2.3 Participant and Sampling

In line with the case study research design, the participant for the study was selected purposefully so as to reach out to not a representative sample but to an informationally rich case (Patton, 2014). Specifically, it was a mainland Chinese student with nuanced reflection of his or her language experiences and well-informed insights into his or her linguistic identities that was targeted at. As one of the mainland Chinese undergraduates who graduate from this university myself, I recruited the participant by distributing letters of information and background questionnaires online on my social platforms and inviting my undergraduate acquaintances to help forward the information. All potential participants, therefore, were expected to meet the following demographic and linguistic requirements:

1) Being born and raised, and finishing all pre-university education in mainland China;

2) Studying or having studied at the university under investigation as a full-time undergraduate student;

3) Speaking Putonghua as mother tongue;

4) Entering the university through the NUEE (or Gaokao) scheme of mainland China with an adequate score in the English subject;

5) Having little Cantonese proficiency before pursuing higher education in Hong Kong.

Specifically, in the background questionnaires, I asked about potential participants' personalised information such as place of origin, year of study, undergraduate major, self-reported proficiency in English, Cantonese and Putonghua both before coming to Hong Kong and at present, social networks in Hong Kong, future academic/professional planning, and willingness and availability to participate in the study. After preliminary screening based on the information collected from 31 returned questionnaires, I contacted four potential participants and had an informal conversation with each of them, which helped me to select the very one final participant, Veronica. During the conversations, I gained more detailed background information concerning their undergraduate experiences in Hong Kong (e.g., participation in overseas programmes and hall returning activities), checked their suitability and availability to be interviewed, and established a good relationship with them in the process.

Reasons for deciding on Veronica included that 1) she had just finished her undergraduate study at the university, meaning that she might exhibit a relatively complete identity trajectory throughout undergraduate study; 2) she reported huge improvement in Cantonese proficiency from illiterate to proficient, indicating a possibly obvious change in linguistic identities, and 3) she readily agreed to participate in the study by providing relevant visual materials and being interviewed, and exhibited considerable enthusiasm for sharing her language use stories in Hong Kong. Veronica's undergraduate experiences are briefly summarised as follows:

Majoring in linguistics at university, Veronica self-reported as a Putonghua native speaker and a highly proficient English speaker. Although having little knowledge of Cantonese upon entering university, at the time of inquiry she could speak Cantonese fluently. In terms of social network, Veronica made a lot of mainland Chinese, Hong Kong, and international friends during undergraduate study. When the second year at university ended, she participated in an university-organised overseas study tour and spent most of the time with Cantonese-speaking fellow students. Finishing undergraduate study in 2021, Veronica continued to pursue a Master's degree at another university in Hong Kong and planned to stay in Hong Kong in the future.

2.4 Data Collection

To gain comprehensive and in-depth insights of the individual case, data from multiple sources were collected,

including interviews, background questionnaires, and relevant documents such as university language policies and course syllabi. The most significant data were the participant's narratives elicited from the two rounds of Photo-Elicitation Interviews (PEI) and one round of semi-structured interview. Inspired by Stake (2013), who considered 'probe-based' interviews utilising multimodal materials more effective in eliciting participants' comments and explanations, the study conducted photo-elicitation interviews (PEI), especially the participant-generated ones (Guillemin & Drew, 2010), as the data collection tool. By inserting visual materials into the interviews as prompts, PEI introduced a new dimension of information, allowed the evocation and deep understanding of the participants' emotions, beliefs, memories and experiences otherwise difficult to elicit (Bignante, 2010; Harper, 2002; Shaw, 2021), and contributed to enhanced participant memories (Collier, 1957). Therefore, to achieve a nuanced emic understanding of the participant's complex and probably tacit linguistic identities, inviting her to narrate language experiences based on photos might be methodologically effective and enlightening. Moreover, inviting the participant to provide visual materials might reduce the power and status differentials between the researcher and the researched, and empower the participant to take ownership of the research process through the elicited narration (Shaw, 2021; Van Auken et al., 2010), which aligned with the constructivist view of the co-construction of reality between the researcher and the participant.

After gaining informed consent from the participant, I had an informal conversation with her a week before the first round of interview, during which I detailedly explained the key concept of linguistic identity and the role of visual data, and then invited her to prepare photos that she thought were representative or impressive enough to elicit her language use stories. In particular, I expressed my wish to receive photos that could generate her free and rich narratives during the interviews (Carlsson, 2001; Raby et al., 2018), no matter when they were taken. I received 6 visual images from the participant with a brief introduction to when, where, and of whom/what the images were taken. All photos were previously-taken of static situations, such as scenery and people, which were related to typical situations or critical events during the participant's undergraduate study. Despite the lack of dynamic videos, these images were still expected to serve as a basis for interviews and enrich the understanding of participant's experiences (Bolton et al., 2001).

After the visual materials were received, three rounds of online interviews were conducted with the participant, each lasting approximately 40 minutes. In order for the participant to better express herself, the interviews were carried out in Putonghua. With the participant's informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded for later verbatim transcription and analysis.

The first two interviews were photo-elicited, during which I displayed the participant-provided visual images and invited her to explain the photos as she wished and detailedly narrate her related language experiences (Raby et al., 2018). With the topic of linguistic identity trajectory in mind, the participant chose to narrate her stories in chronological order. As participants in intensive life-story interviews should be viewed as 'narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own' (Chase, 2005, p. 660), the participant was given sufficient freedom to share her experiences, emotion, and beliefs. It also turned out that the participant was not strictly confined by the visual materials: as the narration unfolded, she constantly injected extemporised events and experiences that were related to none of the images, contributing to accounts of 'sufficient depth and breadth' (Seidman, 2006, p. 142). Although I tried to guide the interview processes as little as possible, whenever appropriate, I would draw attention of the participant to her tacit subjective interpretations by asking about her feelings, thoughts, reactions, and how she wished to be perceived and treated by other people (Henry & Fetters, 2012). To minimise misunderstanding, I also regularly organised the participant's remarks and offered my tentative interpretations, which were responded with her confirmation, correction or supplementary comment. The elicited narratives, to sum up, enabled the observation of the participant's tacit mind and yielded her detailed and holistic language use stories, with an emphasis on how she uniquely interpreted her multiple and dynamic linguistic identities (Kvale, 1994).

The third round was semi-structured, with an interview protocol inspired by the poststructuralist theoretical framework and the preliminary themes emerging from previous rounds of interviews. The participant was first invited to give a quick review of her undergraduate language experiences and identities to reduce misunderstandings, and then asked questions concerning key themes such as social network, imagined community, power relation, etc. In the process, the researcher and the researched collaboratively completed the integrative review of the participant's linguistic identity trajectories, and identified important contributing factors.

2.5 Data Analysis

In the present study, data analysis was conducted inductively in tandem with data collection using Thematic

Analysis, during which the pattern of the linguistic identity trajectory and the themes of the contributing factors that emerged from the data were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Harding, 2018). The interview recordings were firstly transcribed verbatim and entered into the software Nvivo, where the Thematic Analysis was conducted. Then, through multiple readings of the transcripts, I immersed myself in the data and gained a holistic glimpse into the participant's narratives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Based mainly on the participant's narratives while taking the theoretical framework into consideration, I tried to delve into and illustrate the uniqueness and complexity of the participant's linguistic identity trajectories in Hong Kong, along with corresponding influencing factors. The process was, according to Stake, 'noting its particular situation and how the context influences the experience' (2013, p. 39).

2.6 Trustworthiness

To address the issue of trustworthiness, the present study referred to Shenton's (2004) strategies for enhancing credibility, transferability, dependendability, and confirmability. In specific, the following four strategies were adopted: triangulation, member checking, thick description, and recognising the role of the researcher throughout the research process.

By collecting data from multiple sources, producing detailed descriptions of the case, and inviting the participant to comment on the tentative interpretations during the interviews and review the report draft when it was finished, credibility of the study was enhanced. These strategies allowed the identification of different realities, enabled the participant to check the accuracy of the findings, and helped readers to evaluate the authenticity (Shenton, 2004; Stake, 2013). Thick description providing abundant contextual information also contributed to increased transferability, as it allowed the readers to decide to what extent the findings could be applied to a wider population or to other conditions (Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2009). Dependability relied on the detailed report of the research process, which allowed the work to be repeated by future researchers and invited the readers to evaluate to which extent the research practices were proper (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, I tried to provide as in-depth coverage as possible concerning the research process. Finally, aware that 'the intrusion of the researcher's biases is inevitable' (Shenton, 2004, p. 72), I paid special attention to my role as a researcher and tried my best to empower my participant and co-construct the realities with her.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed in the present study. First, the letter of information was handed out to and informed consent was obtained from the participant before the data collection stage, and the participant's right to withdraw from the research at any time was emphasised. Secondly, as personal narratives about language use stories may inevitably involve information that is highly personal, private and intimate (Cohen et al., 2013), great significance was attached to the address of confidentiality. Before and during data collection, I explicitly and repeatedly informed the participant that she was free not to provide visual materials or narrate personal stories if she felt uncomfortable. All personal information was treated anonymously in data analysis and result presentation, and the drafts of the research report were regularly updated with the participant, so as to avoid any unwanted disclosure of information.

3. Findings

In what follows, the participant Veronica's unique and chequered language histories will be retold, which consists of four main temporal stages. As the stories unfold, it can be seen how Veronica has gradually evolved from relying on English to regarding herself as a comfortable multilingual speaker, and how her linguistic self-identifications were shaped by language ideology, imagined community, and the interplay between power relations and human agency. Entering university believing that Putonghua was not welcomed in Hong Kong, Veronica relied heavily on English to conceal her Putonghua nativeness. Later, the wish to stay in Hong Kong after graduation led her to invest diligently in Cantonese learning. Despite being treated unfairly several times, she resolutely defended her identity as a legitimate Cantonese speaker in Hong Kong. Now, regarding languages as nothing more than communication tools, Veronica comfortably embraces the three languages in her repertoire, all of which she is proficient in.

3.1 'I Hided My Putonghua Nativeness'

Entering university with anticipation of Hong Kong citizens' possible prejudice against and hostility towards mainlanders, Veronica was 'worried', 'afraid' and 'nervous' when using Putonghua. Thinking that Hong Kong society 'was not tolerant towards Putonghua speakers', she 'spared no effort to avoid speaking Putonghua' with local people in order not to be 'recognised as a mainlander' and thus be 'treated unfairly' or even 'discriminated against'.

Instead, she relied on her self-reported excellent command of English and constructed a powerful identity as an English speaker. Opposite to her belief that Putonghua was a devalued language, she noticed that English 'was the official language in Hong Kong' and 'enjoyed a high social status'. Therefore, she resorted to English, expecting that it would bring her 'respect and fair treatment'. Her absolute preference for English was even retained in communication with staff in local restaurants, although she 'clearly knew they were more fluent in Putonghua than in English'. This indicated that she would rather sacrifice communication efficiency for hiding her Putonghua identity.

As for Cantonese, by contrast, Veronica rarely mentioned it when recalling her Year 1 experiences, as she 'did not know Cantonese at all', showing that Cantonese was not yet included into Veronica's language repertoire. In conclusion, situated in the anticipated anti-mainlandisation discourse and viewing English as a superior lingua franca, Veronica decided to disguise instead of defending her Putonghua identity and relied heavily on her English identity. At the same time, she took for granted her lack of Cantonese proficiency and self-identified as a struggling bilingual speaker of English and Putonghua rather than a trilingual speaker.

3.2 'Future Planning Motivated me to Learn Cantonese'

Turning into a sophomore, Veronica decided to stay in Hong Kong after graduation. Therefore, she gave priority to Cantonese learning, hoping that mastering Cantonese may help her 'land a job', 'show respect for the local culture', and be 'really integrated into Hong Kong society'. Apart from the utilitarian and integrative desires, her emerging preference for Cantonese could also be attributed to her changed attitude towards English, which she thought was 'too formal, alienating, and not convenient':

> First, communication needs to be **high-efficient**. Since English is the mother tongue for neither of us, **why bother** to use it? Secondly, don't you think it strange that we **Chinese, in this Chinese society**, keep using English?

Veronica's rhetorical questions displayed her beliefs that language is both a communication tool and a representation of one's ethnic identity, and that English, which was 'inferior' to Cantonese in both senses, seemed no longer appropriate in daily communication. Hence, hoping to realise the imagined identity as an 'insider' in Hong Kong and getting 'tired of' the exotic English, she proactively invested in Cantonese learning by making local friends and immersing herself into the local community. By doing so, she made great progress in Cantonese and self-identified as an eager Cantonese learner.

3.3 'Being Laughed at Was Devastating, But I Managed to Recover'

The overseas study tour in the sophomore summer vacation, during which she was laughed at by a group of Cantonese native speakers, had greatly threatened Veronica's linguistic self-identifications. However, her determination to become an insider in Hong Kong was so powerful that it stimulated her agentic responses to resume investment in Cantonese. Finally, she reconstructed the identity as a comfortable Cantonese user.

At the beginning of the study tour, Veronica 'happily' joined a group of Hong Kong students to work on projects, as she believed that the '24/7 immersive Cantonese environment' would be 'beneficial to practising Cantonese' and that access into the local social network was 'necessary for integration into Hong Kong'. However, the pleasure ended abruptly when she once stuttered when speaking Cantonese and was responded by a riot of laughter. Her self-esteem and motivation to practise Cantonese were largely damaged, and she admitted feeling 'wronged' because all her 'efforts to learn and use Cantonese were only responded with the locals' laughter and rejection'. Therefore, with her investment and competence in Cantonese denied by the native speakers, Veronica 'isolated' herself for several days, no longer daring and willing to speak Cantonese.

Despite the devastating threat to her self-identification as a competent Cantonese learner, Veronica kept telling herself that 'you have to master Cantonese anyway to be truly integrated into Hong Kong'. Therefore, she became more 'thick-skinned' and 'bit the bullet' to continue learning and practising the language, which illustrated the power of her imagined future in resisting marginalisation. Towards the end of Year 3, Veronica suddenly found herself able to engage in barrier-free communication with Cantonese native speakers, and realised that she had unconsciously evolved from an eager learner of Cantonese to a relaxed and competent user.

3.4 'I Became a Comfortable Multilingual User'

Throughout the fourth year of undergraduate study, Veronica gradually regarded languages as 'nothing but communication tools' and used Cantonese, English and Putonghua in an increasingly flexible way, although she still preferred Cantonese. Undesirable positioning imposed by Cantonese native speakers did happen occasionally, but she always exercised agency to defend her impaired 'audibility' (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

As she became increasingly proficient in all the three languages, Veronica stated that 'which language to use is totally up to my interlocutors, and it is OK for me to use any language as long as we could mutually understand', but she still admitted her preference for Cantonese, as it was 'the most convenient' language variety. Despite the sustained preference, Veronica's attitude towards Cantonese had actually changed: instead of overemphasising her inevitable accent, she cared 'more about the overall texture of conversations' and whether the interlocutors could understand her. The above changes illustrated her successful identity negotiation, as she no longer minded her Putonghua nativeness or rejected the use of English, nor did she persist in speaking 'standard' Cantonese and confining herself to the identity as an insufficient Cantonese learner. Instead, she reclaimed herself as a well-rounded and legitimate multilingual speaker, who comfortably used languages as tools to boost communication efficiency.

Despite the ideal self-identification, Veronica did experience threats when excluded by the locals from the legitimate Cantonese-speaking group. For instance, when proactively speaking Cantonese but responded 'deliberately and sourly' by a restaurant staff member in Putonghua, Veronica felt 'offended and angry', wondering 'why he didn't respect my language choice when I respect his?'. In response, she persisted in speaking Cantonese to defend her right to speech. Another time, a local Cantonese-speaking classmate criticised her 'terrible Cantonese', which 'literally riled' her:

> How dare he deny all my efforts in Cantonese learning and position me as a deficient beginner? I was **confident in my Cantonese proficiency**, so I **refused to accept his unreasonable identification** and asked him for an explanation.

These incidents exemplified how Veronica resisted Cantonese native speakers' unreasonable non-acceptance and confirmedly defended her self-identification as a legitimate and proficient Cantonese user.

In conclusion, looking back on the arduous process, we could see how Veronica's linguistic identity development was driven by language beliefs of others and herself, by her future expectations, and also by unfair treatment which she bravely resisted. Although exceedingly relying on English at first, she gradually embraced multiple languages and resolutely defended her right to speak Cantonese.

4. Discussion

Based on the findings of Veronica's linguistic identity trajectory and referring to relevant literature and theoretical notions, this section will discuss the mechanism of how the identified contributing factors might influence individuals' linguistic identity development. The main argument of this article is that one's multiple linguistic identities seem to reside in an organic system of Language Ideology, Power Relations, and Community. As the three themes and the elements within each theme interact and compete with each other, a core and integrative multilingual identity seems to evolve gradually from individuals' multiple, dynamic and intertwined linguistic identities concerning different languages.

4.1 Language Ideology

As mentioned in the review of literature, language ideologies play a significant role in mediating the way individuals assess the value of languages and perceive language practices (Grenfell, 2011; Sung, 2021a). As beliefs about languages vary over time and space, different forms of language capital are prone to appreciation or devaluation (Darvin & Norton, 2016), leading the way in which language users utilise or strive for different linguistic capital and negotiate their identities (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). The findings of the study have resonated with the theoretical arguments, displaying that both external societal discourses and internal beliefs about languages will mediate one's construction and negotiation of linguistic identities.

In the context of mainland Chinese students pursuing higher education in Hong Kong, as exhibited in the findings, it is the societal anti-mainlandisation discourse that prominently mediates the participant's linguistic identities, especially at the beginning of her undergraduate study. This discourse at a social level, against the backdrop of recurrent conflicts between mainland China and Hong Kong, tends to be perceived and accepted by the participant, who might therefore devalue her mainlander identity along with Putonghua nativeness (Sung, 2020a; Xu, 2015; Yuen & Chung, 2018).

The external discourse usually collaborates or competes with individuals' internal language beliefs, thus resulting in more complex and probably contradictory identifications. From the findings, we could see that the participant's practices and identities regarding different language varieties are largely influenced by her beliefs about 'language as identity' and 'language for efficiency'.

In the current study, the ideology of language as identity is mainly manifested in the initial avoidance of Putonghua and the externalisation of English. At first, as the participant relates Putonghua closely with her

ascriptive identity as a native mainlander (Blommaert, 2005), this internal language belief seems to collaborate with the external anti-mainlandisation discourse and devalue Putonghua as a 'marked' language choice in Hong Kong. Therefore, the participant tends to disguise her Putonghua nativeness. As for English, the participant first exhibits her preference for and reliance on this foreign language, which aligns with Sung's findings that mainland Chinese students' dominant ideology about English is regarding it as a lingua franca 'at the top of the hierarchy' in Hong Kong society (Sung, 2020b, p. 12). Later, however, by devaluing English as 'a language of an Other' incongruent with her Chineseness in this Chinese society (Park, 2009, p. 26), the participant tends to resist its use in daily life.

While connecting language to identity often results in competence and tension among identities regarding different language varieties, the ideology of language for efficiency mainly comes with the emergence of a comfortable and holistic multilingual identity. With excellent command of English and Putonghua and increased proficiency in Cantonese, the participant becomes increasingly capable of flexibly mobilising the three kinds of language resources, and comes to regard language more as a communication tool 'without clear boundaries' than rigidly link certain languages to certain contexts and identities (Sung, 2021a). That is, she self-identifies as a legitimate speaker of all the three languages in question, and is able to flexibly use the most appropriate and efficient language(s) in a certain context. Another manifestation of this ideology, as mentioned in the findings, is the eroded standard language ideology regarding Cantonese. Instead of suffering from self-deprecation as a deficient Cantonese learner with overemphasis on accent (Marshall, 2010), the participant gradually focuses more on the intelligibility of her speech.

To conclude, with the complex interplay between external and internal language ideologies, individuals' linguistic identities tend to be multiple, unstable and contradictory, before a relatively stable core multilingual identity emerges.

4.2 Power Relation

It is through a relational lens that individuals' identities could be comprehended (Norton, 2013). Entering the Cantonese-dominant Hong Kong society, the participant possesses 'different socially structured resources and competences' from native speakers of Cantonese, and is situated in 'a position of reduced power' (Norton, 2013, p.4; Sung, 2021b, p. 395). Therefore, the participant usually finds her legitimate identity regarding Cantonese under threat when communicating with native speakers, especially when the Cantonese-speaking interlocutors who behave aggressively.

Initially, the participant suffers from a feeling of 'linguistic insecurity' and is inclined to passively accept the marginalisation by keeping silent, so as to avoid humiliation (Duff, 2002; Labov, 1966). In extreme cases the participant might even suffer from devastatingly damaged self-esteem and give up investment in the target language.

Later, however, the participant tries to exercise agency by investing more heavily in Cantonese and claim her 'right to speech' and 'power to impose reception' in Cantonese-mediated communication, thus positioning herself on an 'inbound trajectory' towards fuller participation and stronger self-identifications (Norton, 2013, p. 48; Wenger, 1999). When the participant's Cantonese self-identifications are strong enough, she might also immediately reject the undesired positioning imposed by the interlocutors and robustly defend their desired self-identifications.

In summary, although unequal power relations seem inevitable in L2-mediated communication, they may interact with individuals' human agency to different degrees, thus resulting in a progressive identity negotiation process from initial passive acceptance to later proactive resistance.

4.3 Community

The last prominent influencing factor emerging from the study is the community where the participant is situated, including both the tangible ones that are immediately accessible and the imagined ones related to the envisioned future (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Often representing different sets of interlocutors, language norms, and ideologies, these complicated, interrelated, and overlapping communities are where the participants negotiate different participation forms and linguistic identities (Gao, 2010b; Ricento, 2005; Sung, 2021b). In this study, the power of tangible and imagined communities is mainly manifested in the development of the participant's Cantonese identity.

In the local student community during the overseas study tour and the wider local community in Hong Kong society, the participant struggles a lot for the negotiation of her Cantonese identity and demonstrates a trajectory from initial peripheral to later fuller participation. These Cantonese-speaking communities provide for the

participant an immersive Cantonese-speaking environment in which she can intensively engage in authentic Cantonese-mediated practices, thus positively contributing to the participant's identity negotiation.

Powerful as various physical communities are, the invisible communities imagined by language users might have an equal and even more influential impact on linguistic identity construction. Specifically, as discussed before, it is through imagined communities that individuals are allowed a wider range of identity options that are less spatiotemporally constrained (Kanno, 2008; Wenger, 1999). In the present study, the power of imagined communities can be well illustrated by the participant's increased attention to and investment in the learning of Cantonese, the dominant language in Hong Kong society. Entering university with little future planning, the participant self-identifies as a sojourner in Hong Kong for whom mastering Cantonese is not necessary, hence paying limited attention to this language. Later, however, she connects the multilingual Hong Kong society with her future academic and professional planning 'through the power of imagination' (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241), and decides to invest in her imagined identity as a competent multilingual speaker. In view of the dominant position of Cantonese in Hong Kong, specific emphasis seems to be put by the participant on Cantonese, a necessary form of linguistic capital in the projected future that she has not yet acquired.

In conclusion, while tangible communities allow individuals to be immersively engaged in diverse language practices, the imagined ones are able to extend beyond 'here and now' and further enrich the range of their possible selves as language users. Therefore, it can be argued that the imagined communities are as strongly real as their tangible counterparts, and might be even more influential in mobilising individuals' agency to invest in linguistic capital that is expected to bring them a good return (Norton, 2013).

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary

Adopting a qualitative case study inquiry supplemented by visual methods, the study has made use of a mainland Chinese undergraduate's photo-elicited first-person narratives to achieve a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of her linguistic identities in relation to Cantonese, English and Putonghua throughout her undergraduate career. From a poststructuralist perspective, this study has focused on how the construction and negotiation of multiple and on-going linguistic identities are realised over time and space through the complicated interaction between social structures and human agency. The participant's linguistic identity trajectory exhibits a trend from the interaction and competition between multiple linguistic identities concerning different languages to the emergence of a core and relatively harmonious multilingual identity. Furthermore, it emerges from the analysis three themes that contribute to the development of one's linguistic identities: language ideology, power relations, and community. Through the interplay between different themes as well as between elements within each theme, we could see how a mainland Chinese undergraduate's linguistic identities might evolve in Hong Kong.

5.2 Contributions

The above summary has offered a glimpse into various contributions of the present study, in terms of methodology, theory, as well as practice.

Methodologically, the study has innovatively injected visual data and conducted photo-elicitation interviews, using visual images provided by the participant to elicit her language use narratives. By doing so, not only have these visual prompts contributed to the participant's enhanced memories, more feelingful interpretations and more tacit opinions, but also they have empowered the participant to guide the research process, thus leading to a more authentic understanding of her linguistic identity trajectory (Harper, 2002; Shaw, 2021; Stake, 2013).

The theoretical contributions of the present study lie in its complement to previous studies by adopting a temporal lens and expanding the research context. Aimed at gaining a holistic understanding of the dynamic development of a mainland Chinese undergraduate's linguistic identities, the study has to a certain degree filled the gap regarding identity trajectory in existing research. Also, focusing on the unique context of multilingual Hong Kong, the present study has moved beyond the widely-researched microscopic university setting and taken into account the wider local community and even the short-term overseas study setting. Apart from the extension in time and expansion in space, the study also argues for three main contributing factors for mainland Chinese undergraduates' linguistic identities in Hong Kong, which is expected to systematically display the mechanism of how linguistic identity trajectories are affected by language ideologies, power relations and communities.

Finally, the arduous processes of the participant's linguistic identity negotiation may also enlighten future practices. Drawing lessons from the reported struggles and achievements, hopefully the present study can raise awareness of the issue of linguistic identity among policy makers and students concerned. For instance, the local

government could take measures to strengthen the cross-straits ties between Hong Kong and mainland China, so as to reduce anti-mainlandisation discourse and help future undergraduates from mainland China establish comfortable identities as Putonghua native speakers. Furthermore, future mainland Chinese undergraduates may learn from the participant's successful experiences of linguistic identity reconstruction and exercise agency to resist the unequal social structure and strive for more comfortable linguistic identities.

5.3 Limitations and Implications

Despite the methodological, theoretical and practical contributions, the present study acknowledges its limitations, especially in the implementation of research methods.

First, due to the case study research design and the difficulty of reaching out to a wider range of mainland Chinese undergraduates outside the researcher's own social network, the scope of the project is narrow. Future research in this line might benefit from investigating more mainland Chinese undergraduates of different genders, speaking different Chinese dialects, having different English and Cantonese proficient, and studying at different universities in Hong Kong, so as to achieve a more diverse and complex understanding of the multiple realisations of their linguistic identity trajectories.

Moreover, due to space and time constraint, the project lasted for only 3 months and relied on retrospective narratives elicited from online interviews. This, due to inevitable bias of memory or the participant's probable tendency to lie about certain information, may fail to achieve a full and accurate understanding of the issue in question, even though the participant has narrated detailed language histories with the help of visual materials. It is therefore suggested that further research take the form of longitudinal studies and collect data from not only interviews but also real-time onsite observations and continuous informal chats with participants.

Finally, it seems the visual materials have played a limited role, because of the retrospective nature of the project. Without prior notice, the participant encounters difficulty selecting appropriate and representative pictures from previously-taken photos, and can only provide photos of static scenery and figures containing limited meaning. Therefore, conditions permitting, it might be helpful for future work to allow participants sufficient time to take new pictures tailored to the research topic. Doing so enables the participants to reflect on the meaning of the issue as soon as they start thinking about how to take pictures to express their opinions (Kolb, 2008), which is expected to make full use of the strategy of photo-elicitation interviews.

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