Perceptions of 'Glocalizing' Trilingual Practices in Hong Kong Corporate Communication (CC) Context: In-Depth Interviews with Local Bilingual CC Majors

Patrick Pak Kei Ng [1] and Cindy Sing Bik Ngai[1 +]

[1] The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Abstract. As a critical response to the challenges of globalization, a contending view from the 'glocalization' camp piques the intellectual interest to examine processes of divergent local practices amid convergent global forces in local economies transacting with the global markets (Chan & Ma, 2002; Wu, 2008). 'Glocalization' (Robertson, 1995) in language and professional communication practices explains why Anglo-Chinese bilingualism (including the main lingua franca dialect, Cantonese) remains resilient in the post-colonial Hong Kong corporate communication profession given dual influences of Anglo-style internationalism and heavy Chinese investments.

This article reports findings from an in-depth interview study with seven local bilingual corporate communication (BCC) majors in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, which seeks to gauge the participants' perceptions of both common and variant interlingual functions and strategies (e.g. code-switching at discoursal level and code-mixing at lexical level) deployed by private and public corporate practitioners. Key findings have reaffirmed the perceived prevalence of glocalization practices among local BCC trainees operating in a global business hub as Hong Kong. In turn, this conclusion helps explain why it is commonplace practice for Hong Kong Chinese corporate communicators to integrate bilingual or trilingual skills via code-switching and code-mixing strategies in post-handover Hong Kong and Greater China contexts.

Keywords: Trilingual Practices, Corporate Communication, Glocalization, Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Bracing for a new era of rapid globalization in tandem with growing demand for localized practices (Chan & Ma, 2002; Wu, 2008), post- British colonial Hong Kong SAR, China, in its self-positioning as a 'world-class' city has a vested advantage of deploying 'glocalizing' (Robertson, 1995) cross-language and inter-cultural communication practices for leveraging between longstanding international and predominant Mainland Chinese business transactions across the border. This conception of 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1995; see also Wu, 2008) underpins an inquiry into how bi-or inter-lingualism and professional communication practices work against the setting of business globalization, particularly important in the post-colonial Hong Kong corporate communication profession.

A local-bred professional communicator in Hong Kong is thus expected to perform, with strong language skills, successfully myriads of corporate communication functions in international environments, which hinge upon a proper understanding of crucial socio-cultural-linguistic variables, inter alias, language, social organization, contexts and face-saving, and concepts of authority (Goodman, 2004). This armory of bilingual skill repertoire for coping with a 'glocalizing' corporate communication environment as Hong Kong is a pre-requisite (Thomason, 2001). Enactment of verbal communicative acts by the bilingual corporate communicator (BCC) in a 'glocal' context can be construed as interacting interlingually for strategic communicative purposes, using various strategies of contact-induced diglossic conditions, in the course of conveying identical messages of distinct constituencies or audiences within and outside their regions (So, 1989 & 1998).

To date, few literature is available on a linkage between linguistic glocalization and bilingual and interlingual corporate communication practices, despite thereotical works on the issue of interlinguality

---

[+] Patrick Pak Kei Ng. Tel.: + 85227667437; fax: +85223340185.
E-mail address: ctpat@polyu.edu.hk.

(Gumperz, 1982; Milroy & Muysken, 1995; Wu & Hui, 1997 & 2000) in some East-West contexts. It remains to be seen just how prevalent and varied in kinds in terms of interlingual functions and strategies, vis-à-vis cultural norms of target constituencies (both individuals as well as public and private corporations with local, international and Mainland Chinese backgrounds), deployed by bilingual corporate communicators in Hong Kong and the Greater China contexts.

2. Methodology: Focus group interviews with pre-service local bilingual CC Majors

In order to understand the interconnections between interlingual strategies and cross-cultural norms of spoken corporate communication activities in Greater China contexts, the authors obtained an internal research grant[1] from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2006. The focus group interview questions were formulated to collect respondents' views on the extent of agreement with the notion of linguistic glocalization among local pre-service CC majors: i.e. 'General Views on Trilingual Communication Practices in Corporate Hong Kong & Greater China'. One interview session took place on May 11, 2007 on campus. The data collection for the focus group interview study involves a small sample of pre-service trilingual (viz. Cantonese—the major dialect spoken by Hong Kongers, English—one of the key official and workplace language, and Putonghua—the national dialect of China) corporate communication majors drawn from this government-funded university. The interview data were then coded into English for analysis and results reporting. A group of seven undergraduate students[2] with a specialization in bilingual corporate communication was invited. The interview investigation stems from a university-funded project[3]. The participants consisted of six are female and one male, approximately aged between 20 and 25. They were voluntarily recruited on two criteria[4].

3. Result

What follows is a summary of the participants' responses to the focus group interview questions[5] regarding their general views on trilingual corporate communication practices vis-à-vis cross-cultural norms in Hong Kong and Greater China.

3.1. Question 1 sought the participants' views on the practices for the corporate communicators to integrate bilingual/ trilingual skills in HK and Greater China.

All seven participants felt that while the practice of integrated trilingual skills (i.e. code-switching and code-mixing the three spoken languages) in corporate communication may not be necessarily frequent, they agreed that bilingual communication is an increasingly norm where English is a must and Putonghua a bonus. But they added that it all depends on the specific work contexts in which the integration of language codes for communication occurs. One participant pinpointed the shifting *de facto* dominance of Cantonese-English bilingualism in the corporate Hong Kong, as exemplified the choice of bilingual codes in public corporate functions in accordance with the cultural norms of the target stakeholders. One other participant observed (from her internship) a different scenario, whereby she once worked for a European bank serving foreigners, Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong people. The predominant spoken languages there were English and Putonghua and rarely did she hear a Cantonese conversation in the bank. In fact, English appeared to be the

---

[1]The project served as a pilot study seeking to identify, analyze and taxonomize common and variant interlingual functions and strategies deployed by private and public corporate practitioners, amidst respective cultural norms, in performing language-mediated communication activities within Greater China, chiefly Hong Kong and Mainland China.
[2] These students were in their second year of study in a B.A. (Hons.) in Language Studies for the Professions offered jointly by the English Department and Chinese & Bilingual Studies Department of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in May, 2007. All of them have taken a compulsory subject entitled, *Bilingualism, Globalization and Corporate Communication,* in the fall of 2006 and a couple of electives such as, *Bilingual Workshop for Corporate Communication I*, and *Bilingual Workshop for Verbal and Non-verbal Interaction* at the time of the focus group interview.
[3] The project is a pilot study entitled, Analyzing Interlingual Functions and Strategies vis-à-vis Cross-Cultural Norms of Spoken Corporate Communication Activities in Greater China
[4] : One, they are local citizens of Chinese nationalities, functionally fluent in both English and Putonghua. Two, they had all been exposed to basic corporate communication theories and practices offered through classroom input as well as field practice sharing from professional CC practitioners
[5] The findings to the second-tier questions will be reported in future publications with a view of cross-referencing such insights with those of in-service practitioners from second round data collection to be conducted

preferred, or "*universal*", language even when handling the Mainland Chinese clients. Interestingly, one other participant observed from her summer job that Mainlanders in Hong Kong may actually welcome speaking to the locals in Cantonese for the sake of practicing the spoken language more so than Hong Kong people. Yet, another interviewee felt adamantly that Putonghua is increasingly important for Hong Kongers in dealing with Mainlanders.

3.2. Question 2 sought the participants' views on whether such integrated bilingual/trilingual communication (BC) practices in Corporate HK & Greater China contexts are different from translation skills they have come across before.

Overall, all seven participants agreed that BC is distinct from translation skills in the workplace. It was suggested that fundamentally translation is concerned more with clearly conveying a message with reference to the syntactical and rhetorical structures from a source text to a target text, whereas BC practitioners in the corporate context are said to require more in-depth understanding of underlying factors of the target recipients, such as culture, speech genre, environment, etc, rather than linguistic accuracy of the message itself, and consequently more flexible in rendering the communicated messages distinct from the source text.

Question 2a sought the participants' views on the extent to which the same message needs to be adapted in different language codes in order to be presented to audience of different language backgrounds, i.e. Cantonese/Putonghua monolinguals, English monolinguals or Cantonese/Putonghua-English bilinguals. Some participants suggested that it would depend on the social status of the target recipients of the message and partial language code switch is preferred for maintaining group rapport and politeness. Others cautioned that language code switching targeting a specific audience must not be done at the expense of communication efficacy in message delivery.

Question 2b sought the participants' views on the extent to which the same message needs to be adapted in different language codes in order to be presented to audience of different cultural backgrounds, e.g. Hong Kong Chinese, Mainland Chinese, British, Americans, Australians, other Asians such as Singaporeans, Koreans, Japanese, etc. All the participants suggested that one should have some knowledge of the target audience's cultural background lest the use of mixed codes or code-switching may offend the latter unnecessarily. Intriguingly, one participant resisted the idea of wholesale language code-switching to accommodate the cultural background of the target audience on the rationale that one needs also to preserve his or her own cultural identity in communication.

Question 2c sought the participants' views on the extent to which the same message needs to be adapted in different language codes in order to be presented to audience/stakeholders of distinct corporate cultural backgrounds, e.g. a governmental agency, NGOs, profitable organizations, internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, etc. All the participants agreed with this assertion in principle, but it was counter-reasoned that several factors may affect the practices of code-switching and code-mixing the same message to such diverse corporate audience: they are, resilience of corporate identity, ease of use in day-to-day operations, length of corporate historical background. One participant suggested that corporations with strong corporate identity or sometimes national identity may prescribe more rigid language code choices on the top-layered organizational level of communication. Another participant noted that language code-switching and mixing occur more frequently in corporate staff's private conversations or private companies instead of governmental institutions. Conversely, staff engaged in less company-oriented operations may tend to communicate in more code-switching or code-mixing.

4. Conclusion

Overall speaking, the focus group interview findings from the seven student participants have confirmed the presupposed trend of 'glocalization' in corporate communication settings. Regarding perceptions of conscious deployment of interlingual strategies in both mixed monolingual and multilingual stakeholder communications, several observations linked to socio-cultural-political norm factors, e.g. power, prestige, tradition and importantly identity, can be generalized.

The participants' largely confirmatory views have therefore echoed the divergent-prone, *linguistic-'glocalization'* thesis that it behoves local bilingual corporate communication practitioners to tap into the

niche economic self-positioning of Hong Kong SAR by deploying 'glocalizing' *cross*-language (Chinese-English and Cantonese-English-Putonghua code mixing and switching) and *inter*-cultural (Sino-Western) communication practices for leveraging between longstanding international and predominant Mainland Chinese business transactions, despite the formidably convergent forces of business globalization at work that appears to favor monolingual English-only practices. The proverbial axiom, *when in Rome acts as Romans*, thus strikes an accord with the local bilingual trainee corporate communicators in the culturally and linguistically hybridized Hong Kong!

5. References

[1] J. M. Chan and E. Ma. Transculturating modernity: A reinterpretation of cultural globalization. In J. M. Chan and B. T. McIntyre (eds.). *Search of Boundaries: Communication, Nation-states and Cultural Identities.* Wesport, CT: Ablex Publishing. 2002, pp. 3-18.

[2] M.B. Goodman. Today's corporate communication function. In S. Oliver (ed.). *Handbook of Corporate Communication and Public Relations.* London: Routledge. 2004, pp. 200-226.

[3] J. Gumperz. *Discourse Strategies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

[4] L. Milroy. and P. Muysken. *One Speaker, Two Languages: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives on Code-switching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

[5] R. Robertson. Glocalization: Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (eds.), *Global Modernities.* London: Sage. 1995, pp. 25-44.

[6] W.C. So. Implementing Mother-Tongue Education amidst Societal Transition from Diglossia to Triglossia in Hong Kong. *Language and Education.* 1989, **3**(1): 29-44.

[7] W.C. So. One Country, Two Cultures and Three Languages: Sociolinguistic Conditions and Language Education in Hong Kong. In B. Asker (ed.). *Teaching Language & Culture: Building Hong Kong on Education.* HK: Longman. 1998, pp. 152-177.

[8] S. Thomason. *Language Contact: An Introduction.* Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001.

[9] D. Wu. and H.M. Hui. Personage description in Hong Kong versus mainland Chinese entertainment news discourse. *Text.* 1997, **17**(4): 517-542.

[10] D. Wu. and H.M. Hui. Dialect or register variation?: Case studies of variation across Hong Kong and inland China news reporting. *ZhongguoYuwen.* 2000, **1**: 35-41.

[11] D. Wu. Glocalization and the Discourses of Cultural China: An Introduction. In D. Wu (ed.). *Discourses of Cultural China in the Globalizing Age.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. 2008, pp. 1-10.