

The Journal of Chinese Sociolinguistics

中國社會語言學

2005年第2期
(總第5期)

ACS

Patterns of Language Choice in the Chinese Second Generation in Italy

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to provide a description of language choice among Chinese second generation immigrants in Rome, Italy. During eight months of fieldwork among young Chinese students in Italy, consisting of participant observations in an Italian public school, I have found that the three language varieties (Putonghua, dialect, Italian) were available in the speakers' repertoire. In order to better investigate the impressions gathered from the observations, I submitted a 55-item questionnaire to 78 young students of a school of Putonghua for children of immigrants in Rome. The questions covered issues related to the subjects' linguistic repertoire, language use throughout domains, social networking, ethnolinguistic group enclosure and code-switching. Findings suggest that the speakers deem the Chinese dialect to be the first language they acquired, but they consider Italian to be the language best mastered and most used in their daily communication. Putonghua appears to have a role as the ethnically marked code of peer interaction.

Key Words bilingualism; language choice; Chinese migration; second generation

1. Introduction

As the Chinese immigrant community settles down in Italy, a new generation formed by individuals who were born in Italy or arrived at an early age develops a language usage that differs both from their parents and their Italian peers. Such a so-called "second generation" alternates the three linguistic varieties that constitute their repertoire – Italian, Putonghua (PTH) and one of the Chinese dialects – in their daily speech. The selection of one variety over the others available in their repertoire appears not to be casual, but to follow a pattern. Language choice, as Romaine (1984: 37) points out, is rule governed: "people are constrained by the expressive resources available in the language(s) to which they have access and by the conventions which apply to their use". Sociolinguistics provides many tools to unfold the mechanisms that lead to language choice in multilingual settings, of which the most used being domain analysis (Fishman, 1965) and network analysis (Milroy, 1980). Following the analyses, I designed a 55-question questionnaire, which was then submitted to 78 students of Chinese origin in a community school of PTH in Rome. The

questions focus on five areas: linguistic repertoire and language dominance, language use throughout domains, social networking, ethnolinguistic group enclosure and code-switching. The results presented here deal mainly with the areas of linguistic repertoire and dominance. For repertoire I mean the sum of varieties available to the speakers, the norms that rule their use and the relationship among them, as defined in Gumperz (1977: 51). The dominant variety in the repertoire is then identified by its relation with the other varieties (Berruto, 1995: 253); the findings show how the dominant variety in the subjects' repertoire changes according to the point of view we adopt to consider their language use.

I will sketch a brief portrait of the linguistic background of the Chinese community in Italy, then move to describe the methodology and subjects of the survey, and finally discuss the findings about the repertoire and language dominance of the respondents.

2. The Chinese in Italy

It is only in the past decades that Italy has been developing more effective and sophisticated policies dealing with immigration: the very first law dealing with the phenomenon was issued in 1986 (Law n.943), but it was only with the Law n.40, in 1998, that the Italian government really proposed a detailed program for the regulation of the foreign presence in the country. The main reason for this delay is the fact that Italy had been characterized as a country with a strong emigration tradition until the early '70s. The late recognition of the immigration phenomenon led to a stereotype of the growing migrated population in Italy as clandestine and hard to portray. When the numbers finally urged the institutions to deepen the knowledge of the migrated groups (in the late '90s), these groups had already settled down in Italy for a period long enough to give birth to a new generation. As a result of this situation, the issue of the second generation in Italy has started being debated only a few years ago. It is only in the recent years that the Italian literature started inquiring about the concept of the second generation and, only then, different variables started being taken into account, according to different approaches. In the present work the term 'second generation' will be used in a very comprehensive meaning to refer to all the individuals whose parents are Chinese immigrants and who attend/ed at least part of the mandatory course of studies in Italy, from kindergarten to high school.

When I started researching about language use among the Chinese second generation in Italy in 2002, there was no scientific work available yet on the matter.¹ I approached this segment of the migrated community, carrying out a preliminary 8 months of fieldwork in a public Italian school in Rome that had a high percentage of students of Chinese origin.² I used a methodology known as "shadowing" (Scravi, 1991; Scravi, 1996; Scravi, 2000) which consists in following a limited number of subjects in their daily life, and taking part in their daily experiences for a prolonged time. In my case, I focused on two Chinese girls aged 13 and 15, taking part in their family, school, and friendship routines. In the period of time devoted to the fieldwork I got to meet a fair number of Chinese youngsters³ and, through the observations, I found out that their language repertoire includes three distinct varieties: Italian, PTH and one of the Chinese dialects.

Unlike Chinese communities settled in other European countries, such as France, Holland or

the UK, where the migration waves proceeded from different areas of China, the Italian community shows a remarkable homogeneity in the geographical origin (Campani, 1994: 20). Until the early '90s the entire community settled in Italy was composed of individuals from the Zhejiang province (Cologna, 2002b: 22); it is only in the past decade that two new waves of migration, heading from Fujian and Liaoning, hit the country. Today, the situation still presents a strong dominance of the Zhejiang presence, constituting at least 80% of the Chinese in Italy.⁴

As shown in previous studies on language use among first generation Chinese in Italy (Ceccagno, 2003a; Ceccagno, 2003b) and from fieldwork among their children (Pedone, 2004a; Pedone, 2004b), dialects, along with PTH, are spoken virtually throughout all the members of the community. Due to the common origin of the migrated individuals, most of the dialectal varieties spoken in Italy belongs to the Wu group, while only relatively few people speak the Min and Beifang varieties (Banfi, 2004: 52).

Even if the dialects used in the community mainly belong to the same groups, the speakers often claim that the communication might become hard even for those who come from rather close villages. At present there are not specific studies aimed to assess the objective level of mutual intelligibility among the different speeches of the Chinese in Italy; this is why we can only rely on the occasional comments of the speakers themselves (Ceccagno, 2003b: 30; Ceccagno, 2002).⁵ On the basis of this situation, the several varieties mentioned above have been considered as functioning as one distinct option in the repertoire, all united under the general label 'dialect'.

3. The survey

The questionnaire, submitted both in Italian and Chinese in October 2004, was structured on the basis of the preliminary findings of the study. The fieldwork, in fact, gave me an educated idea of what constituted the repertoire of the youngsters, what kind of social situations represented their domains and who took part in their social network. With this information in mind, I moved on to design a questionnaire that was as specific as possible. It contained both open and close-ended questions. Data discussed in this article come only from close-ended, multiple-choice questions. A number of similar works were particularly useful in formulating the questions, such as Martinovic-Zic's (1998) article about language choice among adult bilingual migrants in the USA, Chini's (2004) work on language use among immigrants in Italy and a number of studies carried out through surveys on various aspects of the Chinese community in Italy (Ceccagno, 2003a; Ceccagno, 2003b; Cologna, 2002a).

The respondents were students of an afternoon school of PTH that was entirely managed by first generation Chinese. The school was located in a neighborhood in Rome called Esquilino which is characterized by a high concentration of Chinese shops, restaurants and enterprises.

The total number of respondents was 86, but I only took into consideration 78 respondents, excluding from the analysis the subjects that were younger than 9 years old. I fixed the age limit from 9 to 17 years old following Chini (2004); this way I could narrow down the number of subjects to those who share similar life experiences, while keeping a still representative sample. Most of the subjects were born between 1990 and 1992 (41%) and were at the time between 12 and

14 years old; less represented is the group of younger subjects (33.3%), born between 1993 and 1995, who were 9 to 11 years old at the time. The least represented group (25.6%), which still forms about one fourth of the total number, is made up of the older subjects, born between 1988 and 1989, aged 15 to 17 years old (Table 1). Overall, the sample proved to be rather balanced in covering the entire range of age analyzed. As for gender, there is a slight male dominance in the sample (53.8%).

Table 1

Birth Year	Number	Percent
1987-1989	20	25.6
1990-1992	32	41.0
1993-1995	26	33.3
Total	78	99.9

Almost half of the subjects were born in Italy (46.2%), while, of the subjects who arrived to Italy at a later stage, the most part (64.3%) arrived from 4 to 7 years before the research took place (Table 2).

Table 2

Years in Italy	Number	Percent
0-3	9	21.4
4-7	27	64.3
8-11	6	14.3
Total	42	100.0

The reason for the high percentage of subjects that arrived from 4 to 7 years before the survey took place is probably that a peak rate of migration was recorded around 1998 (that is 6 years before that date), following the radical changes in Italian migration laws (the mentioned Law 40/1998). This hypothesis is confirmed by data related to the number of students of Chinese origin in the Italian public school as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Year	Number of Students of Chinese Origin
1997-1998	4187
1998-1999	6148

Source: Italian Ministry of Public Instruction

When moving to an analysis of the age of arrival in Italy (Table 4), we notice that only a minority arrived at a pre-school age (11.9%). Many Chinese in Italy post-pone the time of reunion with their children until they are eligible for public school. To provide them with at least some L1 background (Maddii, 1992; Pedone, 2004b).

Finally, as concerns the place of origin of the families, the whole sample comes from the

Zhejiang province, with a major percentage of subjects (48.7%) originally from the Wenzhou area.

Table 4

Age at Arrival	Number	Percent
3-5 years old	5	11.9
6-8 years old	20	47.6
9-11 years old	17	40.5
Total	42	100.0

4. Language repertoire and dominance

When confronted with the direct question "what is your L1?", the largest portion of the respondents (62.8%) chose the answer corresponding to the dialect (Table 5).

Table 5

L1	Number	Percent
Italian	8	10.3
PTH	20	25.6
Dialect	49	62.8
Other	1	1.3
Total	78	100.0

It is clear that the answer is strongly influenced by the definition provided in the question, which I read "i.e. the first language you spoke when you were little". The answer 'Italian' was chosen by only 10.3% of the respondents. As several studies prove (Ceccagno, 2003a; Ceccagno, 2003b; Cologna, 2002b; Cologna, Breveglieri, 2003), the proficiency in Italian for first generation Chinese immigrants is particularly low (even when compared with other ethnic groups) and there is no doubt that this has an impact on the options chosen as L1 by the subjects, according to the definition suggested.

While the diachronic perspective shows how Chinese (in its standard and dialectal varieties) is the first language acquired by the subjects, the situation is reversed when they are asked which is the language they feel they speak better. Being forced to ground the question on self-evaluation, I deemed it more useful to investigate the linguistic competence of the three codes in comparison, rather than look for absolute values that would have become hard to interpret. Therefore, the subjects were first asked which language they felt they speak more fluently between Italian and Chinese, then the same question was asked for PTH and dialect (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6

Language of Highest Fluency (Self-evaluation)	Number	Percent %
Italian	41	52.6
Chinese	15	19.2
Balanced fluency	22	28.2
Total	78	100.0

As indicated in Table 6, over half of the respondents think they speak Italian better than Chinese, even though it is not the language they learned from the family, and over a fourth of them answers that they speak both Italian and Chinese with the same fluency. While the results clearly suggest that Italian is strongly perceived as the best spoken variety in the repertoire, in interpreting these answers we also have to keep in mind some specific implications of the personal linguistic history of the subjects, which might have exacerbated the results. In the first place we have to remember that most of the subjects did not have the chance to study PTH in the Chinese school system, so their knowledge of the language is not comparable to that of their peers in China: since their contact with the relatives who stayed in China is continuous and extensive, they are forced to face the comparison with the native-like fluency in PTH on a quite regular basis. Moreover, the partial or complete lack of acquisition of the Chinese writing system for all those subjects who grew up in Italy might also have contributed to their perception of a low proficiency in the language. Even though, throughout the entire questionnaire, the dialect was referred to as a "language". It is possible that the common idea of a dialect not being a prestigious variety could have played a role in the self evaluation of the subjects' speech; in other words, they might have been discouraged from choosing what they considered a dialect to represent the variety that is best mastered.

Table 7

Language of Highest Fluency (Self-evaluation)	Number	Percent
PTH	27	34.6
Dialect	24	30.8
Balanced competence	26	33.3
No answer	1	1.3
Total	78	100.0

When we analyze in detail the perceived competence in the two Chinese varieties, dialect and PTH, we find an almost complete symmetry among the answers offered (Table 7): in other words no specific trend seems to emerge in the comparison of competence in PTH and dialect.

After defining the dominant variety, the dialect, from the diachronic point of view and comparing it to the (perceived) linguistic competence in Italian, we can now move on to define the dominant variety with regard to frequency of usage; that is, the variety that is used the most by the subjects on a daily basis (Table 8).

Table 8

Frequency of Usage	Number	Percent
Speak more Italian than Chinese	37	47.4
Speak as much Chinese as Italian	19	24.4
Speak more Chinese than Italian	15	19.2
Almost never speak Italian	5	6.4
No answer	2	2.6
Total	78	100.0

Here as well, the information was asked in relation with the other variables and not in absolute terms; in this way I avoided quantified answers such as "I speak ... hours of Italian every day", which would have been hard to interpret by the respondents. The results show a clear correspondence between the percentages representing the relative fluency of the languages (Table 6) and their frequency of usage (Table 8); therefore, Italian appears to be the most frequently used variety in daily interaction. To ensure that such a finding was not only motivated by the daily communication with teachers and Italian classmates, but that, instead, it is extended outside the school domain, I asked the subjects whether Italian is also used with interlocutors of Chinese origin (Table 9).

Table 9

How often do You Use Italian to Speak with Chinese People?	Number	Percent
Everyday	30	38.5
Often	19	24.4
Sometimes	19	24.4
Rarely	7	9.0
No answer	3	3.8
Total	78	100.1

More than 60% of the respondents stated that they use Italian every day (38.5%) or often (24.4%) to communicate with people of Chinese origin, preferring such variety to the other two Chinese varieties available in the repertoire. We register a strong dominance of dialect (42.3%) over PTH (19.2%) in frequency of use (Table 10).

Table 10

Frequency of Usage	Number	Percent
Speak more dialect than PTH	33	42.3
Speak as much dialect as PTH	18	23.1
Speak more PTH than dialect	15	19.2
Almost never speak dialect	10	12.8
No answer	2	2.6
Total	78	100.0

Such a result probably has to be interpreted through the analysis of language use in the different domains and with network analysis. In fact, dialect appears to be the favored variety in the family domain (where quite often it is actually the only option), while the limited peer interactions characteristic of this segment of the Chinese community (Ceccagno, 2004; Cologna, 2002b; Cologna, Breveglieri 2003; Pedone, 2004a; Pedone, 2004b), along with the extensive use of Italian in communicating with friends, all contribute to decrease the amount of usage of PTH in daily speech.

In sum, from the perspective of the frequency of use, Italian is once more the dominant variety, but here, contrary to the results for the competence perception in Table 6 and 7, the dialect is also

well represented.

The last of the questions in the repertoire area, namely "which is the language you speak most with your Chinese friends?" shows, finally, how the least dominant variety in the repertoire – PTH – is used (Table 11).

Table 11

Language Choice with Friends	Number	Percent
Italian	39	50.0
PTH	18	23.1
Dialect and PTH	14	17.9
Dialect	4	5.1
No answer	3	3.8
Total	78	99.9

As could be predicted on the basis of the previous answers, Italian is still the most dominant language in the exchanges with Chinese peers. What attracts attention, however, is that the use of dialect only is very limited here (5.1%). If we consider that the problem of mutual unintelligibility between dialects is heavier in the friendship network, which, unlike the family network is formed by individuals of different origins, we can partially justify the use of PTH as a *koinè*. At the same time, it is also possible to recognize a symbolic use of the PTH, favored only in peer communication: such a variety, in fact, comes to represent a code in contraposition with the family one, from which the adolescents might want to detach for several reasons. Meanwhile, this code is still ethnically marked and becomes a vehicle of amplification of in-group belonging, still very strong in the second as in the first generation of Chinese immigrants.

In conclusion, there is an alternation in the roles played by the linguistic varieties spoken by the Chinese second generation adolescents in Italy, suggesting a dynamic definition of what constitutes their *we-code* and *they-code*. The subjects in the analysis recognize dialect as their L1, meaning here the first language they acquired. Nevertheless, they feel that today they are more competent in Italian, which is also the variety that occurs more frequently in their daily speech, followed by dialect and, to a much lower extent, by PTH. The latter, instead, proves to be mainly the language of in-group friendship, as opposed to both dialect and Italian.

Notes

1. It was only in 2004 that Ceccagno published the first book about the Chinese second generation in Italy (Ceccagno, 2004), referring mostly to the situation of Prato, a town in Tuscany characterized by a strong concentration of Chinese textile industries.
2. The results of this part of the research were later included in a report about second generation immigrants in Italy sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Welfare, (Pedone, 2004b).
3. The two girls were part of a junior high school class with 13 students of Chinese origin. I also met their siblings, cousins and friends from the school of PTH they attended and their Chinese friends from the neighborhood.
4. This percentage is provided in Ceccagno (2003b) on the basis of a number of local surveys; in fact even if the Italian legislation requires that the immigrants specify their province of origin when they apply for the green

card, such data are neither made public or analyzed in the official national immigration annual studies.

5. During the fieldwork I inquired about the perceived mutual intelligibility of the different Chinese dialects to about 20 different speakers (both first and second generation Chinese), but the answers were often contradictory. I also noticed very little awareness about the status of the original dialectal varieties spoken: the informants would in fact mostly refer to their speech simply as their family speech (*jiachanghua*) or local speech (*difanghua*). On the difficulty met by speakers in defining their dialect and on the flexibility in the perception of mutual intelligibility with other dialects, see Romaine (1989: 28) and Fishman (1972).

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意大利第二代中国移民语言选择

瓦伦蒂娜·裴多娜

提要 本文介绍一项对意大利罗马市第二代中国移民的语言选择的调查研究。通过在一所公立学校长达八个月的参与观察,发现华人学生的语库一般包括三个语言变体:普通话、方言和意大利语。进一步的研究包括一个由55道问题组成的问卷调查。问卷发放给了罗马的一所华人移民的普通话学校的78名学生。调查结果表明,华人学生认为汉语方言是他们最先学会的语言,意大利语是他们目前使用最多的语言,而普通话则是具有一定民族认同作用的语言。

关键词 双语制; 语言选择; 华人移民; 第二代

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