

**DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CHINESE FOOCHOW
UNDERGRADUATES' LANGUAGE DURING CASUAL
CONVERSATION**

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The work described in this Final Year Project, entitled
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ABSTRACT

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CHINESE FOOCHOW UNDERGRADUATES' LANGUAGE DURING CASUAL CONVERSATION

Diana Toh Kah Yien

This ethnographic research investigates the Chinese Foochow undergraduates' language during casual spoken discourse based on three research objectives: 1) the languages used by Chinese Foochow undergraduates during casual conversation, 2) the linguistic (structural) features found in Chinese Foochow undergraduates' casual conversation and the reasons for such features and 3) the particles that constitute Chinese Foochow undergraduates' conversational style and the reasons for using them. The participants, who were self-selected among peers and friends, were three female Sarawak (Sibu) Foochows aged 23 and 24. Their L1 is Foochow and all three are current undergraduates of University of Malaysia Sarawak. This study draws on data drawn from four natural conversations where two instruments, namely tape-recordings of conversation and participant observation are used. The results indicate that the Foochow speakers have extensive verbal repertoire as they can speak five languages and thus, have flexibility in their language choice. This consequently leads to code-switching phenomenon where all five languages are perused at certain levels, ranging from word to sentence level. The study reports four main factors that cause code-switching: 1) principle of economy, 2) effect of learning, 3) group membership and same social network indicator and 4) reiteration. The results too, show the use of repetitive structures which are specific to Mandarin. The rationale for the use of repetitive structures in such casual spoken discourse is to demonstrate a common identity. The results also reveal that the casual spoken discourse comprises of a large number of particles which are categorised into either Mandarin or Foochow. These particles are generally sentence- or clause-final and at occasion they are found at the mid of sentence or clause. They serve various communicative or pragmatic functions in the discourse. The study provides information for both laymen and linguists on how the Foochow speakers use language and their socio-cultural background to encode and decode meaning in their casual spoken discourse.

ABSTRAK

ANALISIS WACANA BAHASA MAHASISWA-MAHASISWA FOOCHOW CINA SEMASA PERBUALAN BIASA

Diana Toh Kah Yien

Kajian etnografis ini menyiasat bahasa para mahasiswa Foochow Cina semasa wacana percakapan seharian berdasarkan ketiga-tiga objektif penyelidikan: 1) bahasa yang digunakan oleh mahasiswa-mahasiswa Foochow Cina semasa perbualan biasa, 2) ciri-ciri linguistik (struktur) yang ditemui dalam perbualan biasa mahasiswa-mahasiswa Foochow Cina dan sebab-sebab untuk ciri-ciri seumpama ini dan 3) partikel-partikel yang membentuk gaya perbualan mahasiswa-mahasiswa Foochow Cina dan sebab-sebab untuk menggunakan mereka. Peserta-peserta kajian adalah terdiri daripada tiga perempuan Sarawak (Sibu) Foochow yang berumur 23 dan 24 tahun dan terpilih di antara teman-teman sebaya dan rakan-rakan. Bahasa ibunda bagi para peserta adalah Foochow dan mereka ialah mahasiswa-mahasiswa di Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Kajian ini memanfaatkan data daripada empat perbualan semula jadi di mana dua instrumen, yakni pita perakaman perbualan dan pemerhatian ikut serta digunakan. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa peserta Foochow mempunyai koleksi bahasa yang luas kerana mereka boleh bertutur dalam lima bahasa dan oleh itu, fleksibel dalam pemilihan bahasa. Akibatnya fenomena peralihan bahasa berlaku di mana kelima-lima bahasa digunakan pada tahap tertentu, iaitu dari tahap perkataan kepada tahap ayat. Kajian ini melaporkan empat faktor utama yang menyebabkan peralihan bahasa: 1) prinsip ekonomi, 2) kesan pengajian, 3) penunjuk bagi keahlian kumpulan dan rangkaian sosial sama dan 4) pengulangan. Keputusan kajian juga menunjukkan penggunaan struktur-struktur berulang yang khusus untuk Mandarin. Tujuan untuk penggunaan struktur-struktur berulang ini dalam wacana lisan adalah untuk memperagakan satu identity yang sama. Keputusan kajian turut mendedahkan bahawa wacana lisan mengandungi satu kumpulan partikel yang besar dan dikategorikan kepada Mandarin dan Foochow. Partikel-partikel ini secara umumnya ialah partikel akhir ayat atau partikel akhir fasal dan sekali-sekala mereka diposisikan di pertengahan ayat atau fasal. Partikel-partikel ini mempunyai pelbagai fungsi komunikatif atau pragmatik dalam wacana. Kajian ini menyediakan maklumat-maklumat bagi golongan biasa dan ahli bahasa tentang bagaimana Foochow Cina menggunakan bahasa dan latar belakang sosio-budaya mereka untuk mengkodkan dan nyahkod makna dalam wacana lisan mereka.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter is going to cover the background of the relevant study, statement of the problem, research objectives as well as research questions, definition of key terms, significance of the study and scope of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

As socialised individuals, people spend much of their lives talking, or interacting, with other people. Interacting is not just a mechanical process of taking turns at producing sounds and words but a semantic activity which is a process of meaning making. Turn-taking in any interaction allows people to negotiate meanings about what they think is going on in the world, how they feel about it, and also how they feel about the people they interact with. Such process of exchanging meanings is functionally motivated: people interact with one another to accomplish a wide range of tasks. Very often talking to others is to accomplish quite specific, pragmatic tasks, such as buying and selling goods, finding out information, passing on knowledge, making appointments, applying

for jobs, and participating in practical activities. At other times, talking is simply for the sake of talking itself. Getting together with family and friends or colleagues over meals is just to “have a chat”. Such informal interactions are usually labelled casual conversations. It is argued that casual conversation is the type of talk in which people feel most relaxed, most spontaneous and most themselves, yet many fail to realise that such conversation is actually a critical site for the social construction of reality. Thus, this leads to a very common perception by those who participate in such talk that casual conversation is trivial and nothing happens during such conversation. However, linguists, mainly Suzanne Eggins and Diana Slade, who draw on a range of functional and semiotic approaches to language to provide a theoretical framework and analytical techniques to describe and explain how language enables speakers to initiate and sustain casual talk, prove that casual conversation is anything but trivial. In fact, casual conversation is argued to construct social reality, motivated by interpersonal goals. (Eggins & Slade, 1997)

Eggins and Slade (1997, p. 7) also point out that despite its centrality in daily lives, casual conversation has not received as much attention from linguists as written texts or formal spoken interactions. They (*ibid*, p. 23) further argue that though there is limited analytical attention towards casual conversation, conversation as a general label for spoken interactive discourse is quite the opposite and has been receiving boundless analytical attention from a variety of perspectives, with sociological, philosophical, linguistic and critical semiotic approaches all making important contributions towards understanding the nature of spoken discourse by describing aspects of how talk works.

In sociolinguistics, interactional sociolinguistics grounded in the work of the linguistic anthropologist John Gumperz, is centrally concerned with how people signal and interpret meaning in social interaction. Gumperz’s work provides an understanding of how people differently interpret contextualisation cues in a discourse and thus, produce and understand messages differently even though they may share grammatical knowledge of a language. (Schiffrin, 1994). This

perspective is believed to have the most salient explanatory value in the contexts of intercultural miscommunication in which unconscious cultural expectations and practices are not shared. However, Gumperz did not focus on the analysis of casual conversation. The most relevant empirical applications of his work to casual conversation include studies by Deborah Tannen and Deborah Schiffrin (Eggins & Slade, 1997).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

With a population of about 22 million and at least a hundred languages and dialects (i.e., varieties of language), Malaysia is a multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural country where Malay, Chinese, Indian and diversity indigenous people living alongside (de Run & Chin, 2006). Thus, it is foreseeable that Malaysian speakers are continuously faced with the options of making significant and meaningful language choices when interacting with people of different races or people from different dialect areas. It is assumed that these speakers have alternative linguistic means available to them when constructing their social and cultural experiences in the world (Zuraidah, 2003, p. 22).

To the researcher's knowledge, there has been little attempt to look into the conversational style of Malaysian speakers in terms of how they employ language as a source of meaning making and convey how they intend their talk to be understood. This study was a modest attempt to present the voices of Chinese Foochow undergraduates who are multilingual regarding their conversational style in daily informal interaction.

Thus, this study aimed to analyse Chinese Foochow undergraduates' language during casual spoken discourse.

1.3 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study included:

1. To identify the languages used by Chinese Foochow undergraduates during casual conversation.
2. To ascertain the linguistic (structural) features found in Chinese Foochow undergraduates' casual conversation and the reasons for such features.
3. To pinpoint the particles that make up Chinese Foochow undergraduates' conversational style and the reasons for using them

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the languages used by Chinese Foochow undergraduates during casual conversation?
2. What are the linguistic (structural) features found in casual conversation of Chinese Foochow undergraduates and the reasons for such features?
3. What are the particles that make up Chinese Foochow undergraduates' conversational style and the reasons for using them?

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

1.5.1 Discourse

Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1) claim that “the analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs”.

In this study, discourse involves not only understanding language itself, it is an inevitably important concept of understanding society and human responses to it.

1.5.2 Language

Gumperz (as cited in Schiffrin, 1994, p. 133) defines language as “a socially and culturally constructed symbol system that both reflects and creates macro-level social meaning and micro-level interpersonal meaning”.

The operational definition of language in this study is the system of communication used by the Chinese Foochow undergraduates to provide continual indices of who they are and what they want to communicate.

In this study, the languages used by Chinese Foochow undergraduates include Foochow, Mandarin, Malay, English and other Chinese dialects such as Hokkien.

1.5.3 Casual Conversation

According to Eggins and Slade (1997, p. 6), “[d]espite its sometimes aimless appearance and apparently trivial content, casual conversation is, in fact, a highly structured, functionally motivated, semantic activity”.

In this study, casual conversation is casual talk where the Chinese Foochow undergraduates do not take seriously but functions as a serious resource for constructing social reality.

1.5.4 Conversational Style

Tannen (1981, p. 456) states that “style is not something extra, added on like frosting on a cake. It is the stuff of which the linguistic cake is made: pitch, amplitude, intonation, voice quality, lexical and syntactic choice, rate of speech and turntaking, as well as what is said and how discourse cohesion is achieved”.

In this study, conversational style is defined as all the ways Chinese Foochow undergraduates employ all the subtle or not subtle linguistic and paralinguistic devices encoded in language and convey meaning in communication and as a result listeners form impressions not only of the message but also of the personality, attitudes and abilities of the speakers.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study provided information to laypersons that casual conversation is not trivial but a vital site for social construction of reality. Moreover, the findings contributed a greater insight to linguists on how conversationalists encode meaning in language and convey how they intend their talk to be understood.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study covered the analysis of spoken discourse, namely casual conversation where the language serves as a means for continual construction of social reality and also how conversationalists employ language as conventionalised strategies serving the needs for involvement or for independence.

Conversely, this study covered neither the analysis of any written discourse nor formal spoken discourse in which interactants are more conscious of their language use if compared to their attitude towards informal interaction.

1.8 Chapter Review

This study has covered the background of related study, statement of the problem, research objectives plus research questions, significance of the study, definition of key terms and scope of the study. All that have been covered in this chapter is important to link to the next chapter which is the literature review that requires the findings or research done by prominent scholars.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0 Chapter Preview

This chapter provides reviews on the concept of casual conversation, the theoretical concept of interactional sociolinguistics, the concept of contextualisation cues, the conceptions of code-switching and repetitive structures as contextualisation cues, the concept of conversational inference, and lastly the conception of conversational style.

2.1 Casual Conversation

Casual conversation is often seen as the kind of talk people engage in simply for the sake of talking itself (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Eggins and Slade (1997, p. 6) however, argue that casual conversation is a “highly structured, functionally motivated, semantic activity” in spite of its sometimes meaningless appearance and apparently insignificant content. Individuals are constantly motivated by interpersonal needs to ascertain who they are, how they relate to others, and what they think of the world is. In consequence casual conversation serves as a critical linguistic site for the negotiation of such key dimensions of

social identity as gender, generational location, sexuality, social class membership, ethnicity and sub-cultural and group affiliations. As linguists, Eggins and Slade's view of casual conversation antagonises that of sociological conversation analysts, namely Harvey Sacks and Emmanuel Schegloff, who ask "How do individuals do in conversation?" and recognise that conversation tells individuals something about their social life. Linguists, conversely, ask "How is language structured to enable us to do conversation?", and identify that conversation tells individuals something about the nature of language as a resource for doing social life (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Eggins and Slade (1997) further regard conversation as an exchange of meanings, as text, and distinguish its privileged role in the construction of social identities and interpersonal relations. Thus, their position is parallel with the work of the functional linguist, Michael Halliday (as cited in Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 7) who points out that:

"It is natural to conceive of text first and foremost as conversation: as the spontaneous interchange of meaning in ordinary, everyday interaction. It is in such context that reality is constructed, in the microsemiotic encounters of daily life."

Eggins and Slade's study of four close English speakers' conversation at a dinner party (1997) provides evidence that in casual conversation, language is first and foremost being used as a resource to negotiate social identity and interpersonal relations. Showing an excerpt of the mentioned conversation to groups of students, they discover that people outside the immediate context of the conversation but familiar with the overall cultural context are able to make accurate descriptions of the participants. This indicates that in the course of such apparently innocuous snippet of conversation, the conversational behaviours of the participants express dimensions of their social identities. As they take turns to talk, the interactants are enacting who they are.

Another observation of interaction among three English speakers who are colleagues, during coffee break proves that in casual conversation (Eggins &

Slade, 1997), language not only serves as a means of negotiation for social identity and interpersonal relations, but also is used to create and maintain solidarity and consensus among interactants. Participants in the interaction enact their social identity and construct interpersonal relationships with one another by exchanging negative opinions and pejorative evaluations about the behaviour of a person who is absent or in other word, arguing and gossiping in which Eggins and Slade (ibid) argue, are something one often does in casual talk.

Thus, Eggins and Slade (1997, p. 19) conclude that casual conversation is functionally and, initially at least negatively, talk which is not motivated by any clear pragmatic purpose. Eggins and Slade (1997) further classify casual conversation into two types. First is the talk involving participants who are close and familiar with each other, such as interaction among close friends at dinner party. This kind of talk frequently has a confrontational orientation and thus results in talk that is quite highly elliptical. In such situations, speakers generally take brief turns at talk, negotiating their challenges and disagreements through rapid speaker change. Whilst second is the talk that involves less intimate participants, for example, participants who are colleagues, conversing during coffee break. In such talk, there is an orientation towards consensus where the participants tend to explore consensus and solidarity in different ways. Such conversation is less interactive in contexts where the participants' social identities represent differences, such as gender, ethnicity and age, which have particular significance in the culture.

Eggins and Slade (1997) point out that though individuals' daily lives revolve around casual conversation, casual conversation has not received as much attention from linguists as written texts or formal spoken interactions. Due to its casualness, casual conversation is precisely the kind of talk least expected to be taped and transcribed and frozen in written form (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Eggins and Slade (1997, p. 7) add on that much of the work which has been done has been limited in two respects:

1. Analysis has frequently been fragmentary, dealing only with selected features of casual talk, such as turn-taking or the occurrence of particular of discourse units. The limitation is that such partial analysis cannot describe the ways in which patterns from different levels of language (such as word, clause and turn) interact to produce the meanings of casual talk.
2. Analysis has not sought to explore the connections between the 'social work' achieved through the micro-interactions of everyday life and the macro-social world within which conversations take place. It has not explored the critical contribution that casual conversation makes to our formation as social agents.

Despite the limited analytical attention to casual conversation as noted previously, conversation as a general label for spoken interactive discourse has been more fortunate. Conversation, in fact has been analysed from various perspectives, with sociological, philosophical, linguistic and critical semiotic approaches all making important contributions towards understanding the nature of spoken discourse (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 23).

Eggins and Slade's studies in casual conversation (1997) are solitarily among English speakers where only one language is used throughout interaction. However, their notion of casual conversation is seen as applicable in communities where speakers use more than one language, for instance, Chinese living in multilingual countries such as Malaysia, in their daily informal talk. Hence in the next section, the possible languages that Malaysian Chinese use throughout informal interaction will be reviewed by first focussing on Malaysian Chinese's verbal repertoire.