Mandarin comes to Darwin: How a Language Adapts to an Australian Situation

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Abstract

This is a pilot study of how Mandarin speakers adjust their speech to suit the new environment they find upon coming to live in Australia, or more specifically Darwin. It is based largely on seven hours of recorded dinnertime conversation among Mandarin speakers who have lived in Australia for less than four years. As one might expect, these speakers tend to resort to English for referring to Australian places and institutions, sometimes for concepts one might expect to be expressed in Chinese, such as 'fence'. Anecdotal and interview data brings out such other aspects as Southeast Asian influences on the Mandarin spoken in Darwin, while an analysis of a bilingual Chinese-English publication from the Perth area shows how Australian concepts are rendered into Chinese in print.

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Introduction

The idea for this project arose from experiences the second author had after moving from China to Darwin in late 2007. One was hearing a Mandarin-speaking friend refer to the age of an adult with a Mandarin expression usually used for children, as will be discussed later. When asked about it the friend replied that this was how people spoke Mandarin in Darwin. Another was when another friend used the English word food in a Mandarin conversation because she could not think of a Mandarin equivalent appropriate to the particular context.
This raised the question of what other ways the Mandarin spoken in Darwin might differ from that spoken in China. That there should be some differences is not surprising since Darwin represents quite a different environment from China, so that new expressions may be needed. This can happen quite rapidly. For example, when the first author lived in Ethiopia during 1970-72 he quickly followed other local English speakers in adopting such Amharic words as *zebbenya* 'house boy' and *bunna bèt* 'coffee house' into his English, since the closest English equivalents do not capture the Amharic concepts well; the so-called 'coffee houses' need not serve coffee, for example.

Such phenomena have been well known since Haugen's (1953) classic work on *The Norwegian language in America*. For Australia Clyne (e.g. 1991) has discussed examples from migrant languages, such as how Italian *fattoria* 'farm' has come to mean 'factory' in Australia. For Chinese, however, a search of the literature found very little on how Mandarin is spoken outside of China. There is some on how Mandarin is spoken in Singapore (Chen 1982, Lock 1989, and Zhou 2002, 2007), Thailand (Xu 2002, 2009) or Asia more generally (Li 2005). A thesis by Chi (1992) dealt with the linguistic accommodation of mainland Chinese in urban America, while work by Yu (2005, 2006) deals with Chinese in New Zealand. There is also more general literature on the maintenance of Chinese in Australia, notably by Wu (1995) and Clyne and Kipp (1999).
As a pilot project to investigate this we simply recorded a dozen lunch and dinnertime conversations among Mandarin speakers who had lived in Australia for less than four years, to see how they might differ from the Mandarin we hear spoken in China. This data was recorded in Darwin, hence the title of this paper. We also interviewed some of the speakers involved and supplemented the data with informal observations. For simplicity we did not attempt to deal with the wider range of Chinese backgrounds (e.g. from Timor, Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong) and Chinese varieties (e.g. Cantonese, Hakka, and Hokkien) found in the local Chinese community, as elsewhere in Australia. For comparative purposes, however, we also analysed a bilingual publication produced in Perth for a community that is not entirely Mandarin speaking.

Some Background

In earlier decades our present concerns might have been viewed as being on that periphery of linguistics known as sociolinguistics. Increasingly, however, Langacker’s (1987, p. 57) view of language as ‘a constantly evolving set of cognitive routines that are shaped, maintained, and modified by language use’ appears to have been adopted by construction approaches to grammar more generally (see e.g. Tomasello 2003, Diessel 2004). From that point of view, adapting to Australian circumstances is something that Mandarin (through its speakers) does as a language, not something that happens to it due to outside social factors.
The ways languages tend to adjust to new situations in general are well known. While it can involve grammatical change, it is most noticeably through innovations in vocabulary through borrowing, calquing, semantic extension, and other creation of new expressions. While borrowed words can retain their foreign pronunciations, as when an English speaker uses a German pronunciation of the name of the composer Bach, they are often adjusted to the phonology of the borrowing language. For example, Mandarin speakers have considerable experience in rendering foreign names into Mandarin pronunciations (see e.g. Feng 2004), as in the case of such personal names as 杰克 Jiékè ‘Jack’ and 麦克 Mâîkè ‘Michael’ and such placenames as 达尔文 Dârwên for ‘Darwin’.

Mandarin has also used calquing, or loan translation, as in 北领地 Běi Língdì as a literal translation of ‘Northern Territory’ and 摇滚 yáogùn, literally ‘shake roll’, for ‘rock and roll’. Such forms as 星巴克 Xīngbàkè for ‘Starbucks’ (coffee shop) involve both translation (xīng for ‘star’) and approximating the pronunciation (bākè for bucks).

A third way of creating new vocabulary is to use an existing word in a new meaning. This is how Mandarin 电 diàn came to mean ‘electricity’, although it is no longer used alone in its original meaning of ‘lightning’. A
fourth way is to create new compounds or phrases, as in 飞机 feijī (literally ‘fly(ing) machine’) for ‘aeroplane’.

The Conversational Data

Data on how Mandarin is spoken in Darwin was gathered systematically by recording twelve lunch and dinnertime conversations between June and October 2011. While the recordings totalled seven hours, most were short, ranging from about 14 to 33 minutes each; much of the time is found in the last session, a birthday party lasting 2 hours and 40 minutes.

There were six Mandarin-speaking participants, represented by the following abbreviations (with F for ‘female’ and M for ‘male’):

F1: A mainland Chinese woman in her fifties who had lived in Australia less than four years after visits for periods of several months twice earlier.

F2 and M1: A married couple in their twenties who had come to Australia from mainland China less than two years earlier.

F3: A mainland Chinese woman in her twenties who had come to Australia less than two years earlier after completing university study in Malaysia.

F4 and F5: Two Taiwanese women in their twenties who had been in Australia for about four years.

The English-speaking first author was also present, but any interaction that seemed to involve him has been ignored in this analysis. Usually this consisted of interaction in English or basic Mandarin with other participants,
with other participants exchanging unaffected Mandarin with each other. The only noticeable effect on how Mandarin was spoken came near the end of the first hour of the birthday party during a fifteen-minute discussion of the twelve animals associated with years of birth, when the English terms for such animals as the monkey were sometimes carried over into the Mandarin discussion.

Within the English sections there was also some evidence that F2 maintained some awareness that the conversations were being recorded. About five minutes into one recording she noted that she had forgot about the recording, while well into another she commented that 'Today's recording is very funny'. However, there is nothing in the non-English sections to suggest that they were influenced by either the recorder or the presence of the first author. Indeed, the sessions other than the birthday party showed little evidence of the Mandarin being affected by the Australian location at all: only zero to ten expressions seemed noteworthy in each case. Only for the much longer birthday party were more numerous expressions noted, and three-quarters of these came in the last half hour of the party, when there is little or no evidence of the English speaker's presence.

Findings from the Conversational Data

The portions of the conversational data not involving the English speaker were analysed by listening for expressions that seemed unlikely to heard in such conversations in China, and which thus could represent adjustments to the Australian situation. Most such expressions involved the
use of English within the Mandarin discussion, although two exceptions will be noted in the following discussion.

For names of people, places and businesses, twenty different English proper nouns were heard in the Mandarin in six of the conversations. These included *Lady Gaga* and seven other non-Chinese personal names, often repeated; three represented the normal way of referring to Chinese people in preference or in addition to their Chinese names. Other English proper nouns used included *Australia* and the names of three Darwin suburbs (*Casuarina, Wagaman, Wanguri*), ACBC [for Australia China Business Council] and two other business names (*Body Shop, Portman*[s]), and five other names (*Aries* [the zodiac sign], *Facebook, iPhone, Parliament*, and *Parliament House*).

The above was in spite of there being common Mandarin equivalents of some of the personal names, as well as for *Australia, iPhone* and *Facebook*. Indeed, in one recording speaker F3 expressed amusement about how her father in China used Mandarin pronunciations for the names *Casuarina* (*Kāqiúlingnà*) and *Monica* (*Mòlikà*). At the same time, we have observed such a practice from a more recently arrived Mandarin speaker, who tends to use *Măding* for someone named Martin. We did not hear any such renditions of personal names in the recordings, although we did here Mandarin pronunciations of the widely known placenames *Ādéláidé* ‘Adelaide’ and *Bălídào* ‘Bali Island’.

Sixty-two English expressions were used to relate to university study,
particularly in the field of business. A few were heard in the following exchange in one of the shorter recordings, given is somewhat abbreviated form here:

F3: Nǐ bā financial nà bèn shū dài guò qu. Hái yǒu ma? Did you bring that financial book? [Do you] still have it?

...

F2: Nǐ kànkan Accounting Principle[s] jiù xíng. Have a look at Accounting Principles; it's OK.

F3: Accounting Principle[s] méiyǒu zuì hòu de budget nèi yī būfen ya. Accounting Principles doesn't have that budget part.

F2: Dàn yǒu cash flow... [part omitted] Jiù déi kàn But it has cash flow... You should look

Accounting Principle[s] nèi fēn miàn yǒu investment nèi yī háng. at the investment part of Accounting Principles.

Sixty such expressions (including some of the above) were heard in the last half hour of the birthday party, as in the following extract:

F2: Nǐ nèi ge certificate ná le méiyǒu? Did you get that certificate?


F5: Nǐ shénme shì hou jiāo ma? When are you submitting them?

F2: ...zhī yǒu liǎng ge lìbài. Ránhòu wǒ jiù gèn tā shēngqīng extension. ...only have two weeks. Then I'll apply to him/her for an extension.

F5: Tā extension yào gěi nǐ liǎng ge lìbài. Dōu shì kǎoshǐ zhōu. He/She should give you two weeks extension. They’re both exam weeks.

Other expressions heard on this part of recording included one verb (in Lǎoshī zài consider tā de fěnshù 'The teacher is considering her grade.') and one adjective (in general gānìniàn 'general conception'). Other nouns or noun
phrases included accounting, accounting principle, accounting theory, activities, activity, auditing, B Com [Bachelor of Commerce], bachelor [degree], bookkeeper, bookkeeping, break even points, business combination, business letter, computer, computer face, credit, domestic, email, finance, first name, highlight, ID, international student, introduction, last name, law, legislation, liquidation, local, management, master, Master of Accounting, MYOB [accounting software], note, open book [exam], OV [apparently an error for CV, i.e. curriculum vitae], placement, portfolio, presentation, reference, report, slides, speaker, speaking, TAFE, taxation, VET [pronounced both as a single syllable and spelled out], vocational education, [Microsoft] Word [file], and the letter grades AC [Assessment Continuing], C [Credit], F [Fail], and PC [Pass Conceded]. Other recordings include the adjective international by itself and mention of the university's Chinese corner.

A second topic for which some English was used was discussing jobs.

One example was heard in the birthday party:

F4: Nèi ge city de gōngzuò, tā dāyìng wǒ qù zuò. That city job, he agreed that I go do it.

F3: Housekeeping de nèi ge ma? That's for housekeeping?

F2: Bú shì, shì cleaning de nèi ge. No, it's for cleaning.

Another was heard in another recording:

F2: Xiànzài [English name] láoshī qù zuò housekeeping qù le. Now teacher [name] is going to do housekeeping.

F1: Tā gōngzuò le, shì ba. She's working, isn't she.
F2: Zuò housekeeping.
    She's doing housekeeping.

F1: Zài hotel, s[hi] ba.
    In a hotel, isn't it.

F2: Néi ge nü de yè shi housekeeper.
    That woman is also a housekeeper.

F1: Nǎ ge?
    Which one?

F2: Jiù shì nèi ge; sì wǔ qī nèi ge; tā yǒu ge érzi.
    That one, that 457 [visa holder]; she has a son.

The last utterance illustrates a different way of dealing with things Australian, namely rendering the Australian 457 visa as the Mandarin numbers sì wǔ qī '4-5-7'.

Another context in which occasional English words were heard was in discussing food. F1 used the English word cappuccino, perhaps because she was not used to drinking it in China, and F2 may have referred to a birthday cake as cream one for a similar reason. There is less reason for F1 to have said meat in meat hāixiān 'meat (and) seafood', and for F2 to say menu and the half English kāfēi break 'coffee break'; F2's comment on the latter was that she just couldn't think of the Mandarin expressions at the time. Perhaps oddly she also used half in saying Měi ge rén dōu chī le half 'Each person will eat half [a piece of cake]'.

One of the Taiwanese women at the birthday party used the English word party. We also heard party used repeatedly in a Mandarin conversation in Perth in November 2012, and when we asked one speaker about it, she
suggested that it was used because the party was larger than the Mandarin equivalent thora would suggest.

There is probably a similar explanation for the use of English fence in discussing a house for sale on one of the shorter recordings: such Mandarin expressions as liba 'hedge, fence' or zhālan 'railings, fence' would not do a good job or representing the sort of fence one might expect to find around an Australian house. Also heard in this discussion was lower 400, in reference to the price. Other contexts in which an occasional English word was heard were in discussing cars (manual) and their insurance (comprehensive).

On occasion whole English sentences were heard. Some were quotes of what someone had said or might have said, such as Please drive forward, thanks (as in a fast food drive-through), and Are you sure? and Are you ready? Yes. as said by teacher and student.

An hour and a half into the birthday party F2 gave an account of meeting another Chinese student that includes the quoted comments Tā shuō [i.e. he said], Not good at all, Ni juède wò shì good de ma? ‘Do you think I'm good (i.e. doing OK)?’, and Anyway, good luck to your study.. One of the quotes from the other student also contains a rather odd Mandarin expression xīngqīdì, essentially a literal translation of ‘week(day)-end’, instead of the normal zhōumò for ‘weekend’. It’s unclear whether this might represent a mannerism of the quoted speaker or just an attempt at humour.
F2 was also twice heard to use English OK and once exactly as responses. On a few occasions she also seemed to use English simply for effect (as metaphorical code switching), most clearly at the party when she asked her husband Lāogōng [husband], do you have any Coke? Other possible instances include her saying they are different and, in reference to learning more, feels good, you know. F1 seems to have chosen English for a similar reason in restating her méitiān dōu yào tán liànài ‘everyday [she] has to be in love’ as méitiān dōu yào fall in love.

Thus the use of English expressions was the usual way of dealing with the Australian situation, with the two exceptions noted. The examples may seem many, but they actually tended to be scattered through the recordings rather sparsely except where university study or work was the topic of conversation.

Data from Interviews and Informal Observation

Informal observation tends to confirm the tendency to use English words to express Australian concepts, such as PR (i.e. permanent residence) and negative gearing. However, anecdotal data and interviews did identify some other ways. The strangest was a treatment of certain English words as if they were separable compound verbs in Mandarin, as reported for one particular Mandarin speaker who had lived in Australia for some twenty years. A friend of hers provided two examples, based on the English words shopping and party. Both words were separated into two parts by the completion particle le and jī cì ‘how many times’; below the parts of the English words are
shown (in bold face) in their usual spelling, but with tone marks added.

\textit{shō- le ji ċi -pping}? ‘How many times did (you) go shopping?’

\textit{pār- le ji ċi -tỹ}? ‘How many times did (you) party?’

Two examples of calquing or translation were mentioned in the conversational data, namely using \textit{sì wū qī ‘4-5-7’} to refer to the Australian 457 visa and the odd expression \textit{xīngqǐdǐ}, literally ‘week(day)-end’, instead of \textit{zhōumò} ‘weekend’. F2 gave two other examples in an interview. One was \textit{Hóng Gōngjī}, a literal translation of the name of the fast food outlet Red Rooster, which is apparently unknown in China (unlike such other outlets as \textit{Máidāngláo ‘MacDonalds’}, whose Chinese name is well established). Another was \textit{hóng lóu}, literally ‘red building’, used in reference to a classroom building known as ‘Red 6’ on the colour-coded campus of Charles Darwin University; this is reminiscent of the title of the Chinese classic \textit{Hóng Lóu Měng ‘A Dream of Red Mansions’}.

F2 also gave examples of two other types in this interview. One was a rare rendering ‘Aboriginal (person)’ in terms of sound as \textit{Ābāo or Ābō}, instead of using the more common \textit{Tūrĕn}, a short version of \textit{tūzhúrĕn} ‘original inhabitants’. The other was to extend the meaning of Mandarin \textit{gāngkōu} ‘port’ to refer to a particular wharf on the Darwin waterfront known locally as \textit{the wharf}, although the English expression was also commonly used.

Finally, as noted in the introduction, certain features of Mandarin as spoken in Southeast Asia (e.g. Malaysia and Singapore) can be heard in
Darwin, even from at least a few speakers from mainland China. One is the use of ̀ji `how much/many` in asking the age of a person of any age. In standard Mandarin, ̀ji is used only for smaller numbers, generally under ten, so that one would ask Nǐ ̀ji suì le? `How old are you?’ only of a child. In Southeast Asia and Darwin, however, some Mandarin speakers also use it for adults instead of the more standard Nǐ duō dà le? This and the following usage has been heard from at least one speaker from Mainland China who has lived in Australia for nearly twenty years.

The second Southeast Asian characteristic is the use of the verb yōu ‘have’ to create something akin to the present perfect in English, as in:

Jīntiān nǐ yōu qù chāoshì mǎi dōngxi ma?
today you have go supermarket buy things QUES
Have you been to the supermarket for shopping today?

In standard Mandarin the same question would be expressed by using the completion marker le, and the question could be formed with either ma or mèiyǒu at the end, thus:

Jīntiān nǐ qù chāoshì mǎi dōngxi le mèiyǒu?
or Jīntiān nǐ qù chāoshì mǎi dōngxi le ma?

This usage can occasionally be heard not only from the older Mandarin speaker mentioned above, but also from the much younger F3, who spent several years studying in Malaysia, and sometimes from her close friend F2.

**Written Chinese in Perth**

For comparison we also looked briefly into how Chinese is written in Australia. Since there are no regular Chinese publications in Darwin, we
analysed a bilingual issue of the *Chung Wah Magazine* (Issue 2, September 2011), which seems to have been written in Perth. This need not cater just to Mandarin speakers, and some of the Chinese names given in the English portion were clearly not Mandarin. At the same time the Chinese portion did use simplified Chinese characters of the sort used in mainland China, rather than the more traditional characters often seen on signs in Perth’s Chinatown.

To analyse this bilingual publication, we first looked at the English version to identify expressions that related to Australia. We ignored names with Chinese equivalents likely to be known in mainland China, including place names found in Chinese atlases (e.g. *Perth, Port Hedland, Swan River*) and the names of universities and Australian national officials of the time (e.g. the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who due to his fluency in Chinese has a widely-used Chinese name 陆克文 *Lù Kèwén*). Also ignored was Elvis Presley and his song ‘If I can dream’, for which the Chinese version gave both English and Chinese expressions.

Of the remaining 62 Australian-related names, six were simply left out of the Chinese version, although some of them had been rendered in English or Chinese elsewhere: these included *Balcatta Cultural Centre, Hamilton Hill, Karrakatta cemetery, Linda Jalvin, Northbridge,* and *Rossmoyne.* For just thirteen place and business names, English spellings were retained in Chinese: these included *Canning Vale, [City of] Cockburn, Karrakatta [cemetery], Leeming, Morley, Nedlands, Peppermint Grove, Oasis Resort, Rossmoyne, SUPA Golf, Suntech Power, Swan Valley,* and *Victoria Park.*
Some local place names were rendered into Chinese, perhaps due to their familiarity to the Chinese community in Perth. These included the location of Perth’s Chinatown, Northbridge, which was rendered literally as 北桥 Běiqiáo; James Street, rendered through variations on (北桥)詹姆斯(大)街 (Běiqiáo) Zhānmǔsī (Dàjiè) ‘(Northbridge) James (Large) Street’; St. George’s Terrace, rendered as 珀斯市圣乔治大街 Pòsīshì Shèng Qiáozhī Dàjīè, literally ‘Perth Saint George Street’, and the suburb of 博思活 Bósīhuó ‘Burswood’.

While place names were thus either retained in English or rendered in Chinese, personal names (and any associated titles) were always rendered into Chinese, quite unlike in the conversational data from Darwin. While Mandarin already has widely used equivalents of many of English personal names, some of the eleven surnames rendered could represent new creations. Note how the names are given in the normal English order, with surname last (rather than first as in Chinese), and with a raised dot (·) used to separate the personal name from the surname:

- Bob Cronin 鲍勃·柯南 Bāobó Kēnnán
- Diana Warnock 戴安娜·温纳克 Dài’ānnà Wēnnàkè
- Janet Davidson 吉奈特·戴维逊 Jīnàitài Dàiwéixùn
- Joshua Bloom 约哈·布卢姆 Yuēhā Bùlúmǔ
- Ray Halligan 雷·何利甘 Léi Hélìgān
- Samuel Huntington 塞谬尔·亨廷顿 Sàimiù’ēr Hēngtīngdùn

The remaining examples included a title as well as the name, although the titles are not always equivalent in the English and Chinese versions.
Mr Troy Buswell 
the former WA Premier Richard Court 
the Honorable Eric Ripper MLA 
the Honorable John Castrilli MLA 
the Lord Mayor of Perth Lisa Scaffidi

With regard to the names of two musical groups, that for ‘Front Row’ was given a literal translation of 前排 Qián Pái while ‘Nicholette & the Joes’ was rendered in terms of sounds (aside from 和 hé ‘and’) as 尼可尼和乔 Nikěnì hé Qiáo. Both names were enclosed in quotation marks, presumably to mark them as names. At the same time the ‘Australian Boomers Men’s Basketball Team’ was rendered into Chinese as simply 澳大利亚男篮 Āodǎlíyà Nánlán ‘Australia male-basket[ball]’, and a repetition of ‘Boomers’ was rendered as just 澳大利亚队 Āodǎlíyà duì ‘the Australian team’. The ‘West Perth Football Club’ was rendered as 西澳橄榄球俱乐部 Xī Āodǎlíyà Gānlánqiú Jùlèbù ‘West Australia Football Club’.

Twenty names of Australian institutions or events were rendered by fairly straightforward translation, if sometimes including representations of names. Examples involving names include 查尔斯酒店 Chā'ěrsī Jìudiàn ‘Charles Hotel’, 斯弗舞蹈学院 Sīfó Wūdǎo Xuéyuàn ‘Cipher Dance Academy’ and 中华巴克务中文学校 Zhōnghuá Bākèwù Zhōngwén Xuéxiào ‘[China] Parkwood Chinese School’. Other examples include similar renderings of the

Translation was also used for five expressions relating to certain Australian phenomena and given within quotation marks in both languages. These included 白澳政策 bái àozhèngcè ‘White Australian Policy’, 多元文化 duōyuán wénhuà ‘Multiculturalism’, 学习非英语语言 (LOTE) xuéxí fēiyǔyán ‘Learning of Language other than English (LOTE)’, 机会均等 jīhuì ‘Equal Opportunity’, and 反歧视 fǎnqíshì ‘Anti-discrimination’. These terms are understandable in China, whether or not precisely as they are understood in Australia.

One example was found where the Australian term was not translated directly, but a Chinese term was created instead. This was for the betting agency known as TAB, an acronym for Totalisator Agency Board. Not surprisingly there was no attempt to translate the acronym or what it stands for; instead the Chinese equivalent 賭马投注站 Dǔ Mà Tòuzhù Zhàn is literally something like ‘Bet (on) Horse Placing Station’. A Google search for this
expression displayed only 29 web pages, some of which were spurious (with the expression divided over two sentences) and some relating to off-track betting (OTB) in the US. The only two China-based sites listed included a review of an American movie and a news article on horse disease in Australia.

Conclusion

The data on spoken Mandarin in Darwin shows several ways in which the speakers adapt to the Australian situation, but clearly the most prevalent one is through incorporating English expressions into Mandarin. This should hardly be surprising, but at the same time it is quite different from what was found in the written Chinese from Perth, where much more of the English is rendered in Chinese. Whether this is due to the Perth readership having a longer history in Australia or simply to differences between speech and writing is not yet clear.
References


