

A Survey on the Language Life of Migrant Children in Foshan City of China

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Abstract: A questionnaire survey was conducted on 745 migrant children grades 4-9 in foshan city of China in order to explore the language life and the relationship among language use, linguistic capability and language attitude of migrant children. The results show that the language ability of migrant children from strong to weak is Mandarin, Homeland dialect and Cantonese. The results show that Mandarin is the main language code used by the students, followed by Homeland dialect and Cantonese. In the field of family, the language use of migrant children from strong to weak is Mandarin, Homeland dialect and Cantonese. In the field of school and life, the use of Mandarin had an absolute advantage, and other language codes coexist but occupy a marginal position. It is found that there is a statistically positive correlation among the students' language ability and their language attitude. Improving Cantonese ability of the students can help them better integrate into city and get rid of their identity dilemma to a certain extent.

Keywords: migrant children; language life; language use; linguistic capability; language attitude

1. Introduction

Data from the seventh national census in 2020 showed that China's migrant population was 376 million including 19.99 million children in compulsory education ^[1]. Government Work Report calls on taking greater strides towards equity in education for migrant children.

Migrant Children refers to children 6-14 (or 7-15) years old who has lived with their parents or other guardians in the migrant place more than half a year ^[2]. China's research on migrant children began in the 1990s, and the early studies mainly focused on the living conditions or educational status of migrant children. When entering the 20th century, researchers conducted comprehensive studies on migrant children from the perspectives of psychology, pedagogy, sociology and other disciplines. Abundant research results have been obtained.

For migrant children, the main problems they face are the change of life and learning environment, the poor communication of dialects, cultural conflicts and so on. One of the first problems is the use of language. In school, they need to communicate with teachers and students in Mandarin ; in social situations, they need to adapt to the city dialect environment and integrate into the city culture; and at home, they need to use their hometown to dialect communicate with their families. Each language has some language items which can reflect the social characteristics of the speaker or the listener and the relationship between them (Hudson, 2000; Montaruli, Bourhis & Azurmendi, 2011) ^{[3][4]}. There is a closely logical relationship between language and identity, and language influences people's identity construction (Gentil & Séror 2014) ^[5]. If migrant children want to adapt to urban life, they must first solve the problem of language communication, and make great changes in language behavior. Language integration has become the basis of social integration of the migrant population. The family language attitude, the language choice and language ability of migrant children are closely related to their identification of urban language ^[6]. Language life has also become a new perspective to study the inheritance of urban dialect and urban integration of migrant population and migrant children.

Language life includes the use of language in different types of domain, linguistic capability, and language attitude ^[7]. By understanding the relationship between the language choice and language ability, we can indirectly understand the family's language values, life attitude and cultural identity ^{[8][9]}.

The language choice of migrant children in different occasions and their use of language in the family field reflect their identity and their integration with the city. Liong (2018) ^[10] found that the language and culture of the city implemented the isolation of migrant children; Zhang (2015) ^[11] found that the choice of language in different contexts influenced the identity of migrant children; Gong (2020) ^[12] found local dialect can help reduce migrant children psychological distance, enhance their urban identity; and help them integrate into urban social relations.

To sum up, migrant children have been a concerned group in the past two decades, and the problem of identity are rarely studied in terms of linguistics, especially in terms of family language life. In this study, the investigation and analysis of language use and language attitude were conducted in migrant children of Foshan city. Which not only to enlighten the correlation of language ecology, language usage and language identity in eastern China, but also to promote the harmonious development of migrant children's social integration and urban identity.

2. Research methods

2.1 Participants

The participants came from a migrant primary school and a middle school for migrant children in Foshan city in Guangdong province, China. A total of 800 questionnaires were distributed to various classes. After excluding blank and invalid questionnaires and missing data, 745 valid questionnaires (93.1%) were counted. Subjects who returned valid questionnaires comprised 430 male students (57.7%), 315 female students (42.3%). There were 152 students in Grade 4, 159 in Grade 5, 110 in Grade 6, 86 in Grade 7, 102 in Grade 8, and 134 in Grade 9. The age range of the students was 7 to 13 years old, with a mean age of 10.56 years (SD=2.11).

2.2 Measure

Language life questionnaire

The self-written family language life questionnaire was used, which included three aspects: basic situation of language use, the situation of language use, and language attitude. The basic situation of language use consists of two questions, mainly examining the category of language acquisition and language ability. The situation of language use consists of 14 questions which examines the use of Mandarin, Cantonese and native dialect for migrant children in the three fields of family, school and public field. The language attitude survey consists of five questions, which examines the language attitude of migrant children from three dimensions of emotion, function and social status.

2.3 Data analyses

Before subjects filled in the questionnaire, the examiner explained the study aim and emphasized that responses would be anonymous and that the scores are neither good or bad. The subjects were asked to complete the questionnaires independently and to provide their honest responses. After the data collection was complete, SPSS 22.0 was used for data analyses

3. Results

3.1 The language acquisition of migrant children

As for the language acquisition of migrant children, our question is: which words did you learn first at home when you were a child? The results show that there are 320 migrant children first to acquire mandarin, 301 migrant children first to acquire Cantonese, and 126 migrant children first to acquire native dialect. It could be seen that, Mandarin and Cantonese played an important role in the first language acquisition of migrant children, while the proportion of native dialect acquisition was not very high.

3.2 The language proficiency of migrant children

The questionnaire required the migrant children to evaluate their language abilities of Mandarin, Cantonese and native dialect with a 5-point Likert scale, 1 indicates very good, and 5 indicates very bad.

As showed in Table1. The proportion of migrant children Mandarin which much higher than the second language, indicating that migrant children's Mandarin ability was undoubtedly the strongest. The proportion of self-reported very good in Cantonese was the lowest, only 3.5%.It can be seen that most migrant children lacked confidence in their Cantonese language. The survey results also confirm that the Cantonese communication among migrant children was relatively weak. The sum of self-reported Mandarin, native dialect and Cantonese levels reaching good or very good was up to 87.6%, 51.7% and 22.3%, respectively. The proportion of self-reported very poor in Cantonese was higher than that other language. In general, Mandarin was the best language they mastered, followed by the native dialect and Cantonese in turn.In fact, many schoolchildren do not speak Cantonese at all, which, as the most vulnerable language, is severely marginalized.

Table 1: Linguistic capability of migrant children(N=745)

Linguistic capability Language code	Very bad	bad	normal	good	Very good
Cantonese	192(25.8%)	154(20.4%)	235(31.5%)	140(18.8%)	26(3.5%)
Mandarin	2(0.3%)	8(1.1%)	82(11.0%)	238(31.9%)	415(55.7%)
Homeland dialect	80(10.7%)	96(12.9%)	184(24.7%)	179(24.0%)	206(27.7%)

3.3 The Language use of migrant children

We conducted a questionnaire survey on the language use of migrant children in the family field, in the school field and in the public field. The codes involved include Mandarin, Cantonese and native dialect. In each situation, migrant children could choose a code according to their own situation.

It could be seen from table 2 that Mandarin, Cantonese and native dialect was used to different degrees in the family field. The most common language that migrant children used at home were Mandarin, followed by homeland dialect and Cantonese. The most commonly spoken language of migrant children's families was homeland dialect, followed by Mandarin and Cantonese. It showed that the original families of migrant children did not speak the Cantonese dialect, which was one of the reasons for the poor Cantonese communication of some schoolchildren.

In the family field, the frequency of language use was gradually changed due to the generational change: Migrant children talked with their grandparents in homeland dialect, followed by Mandarin and finally Cantonese; Migrant children talked with their parents in Mandarin, followed by homeland dialect and finally Cantonese; Migrant children talked with their brothers and sisters in Mandarin, followed by homeland dialect and finally Cantonese. To sum up, it can be seen that migrant children more used Mandarin and native dialect when talked with people of different generations at home, while Cantonese was the least. As the communicative object became younger, the rate of using the family language decreased.

Table 2: The language use of migrant children in the family field, the school field and life field(N=745)

			Mandarin	Cantonese	Homeland dialect
family field	The most common language that migrant children used at home	Number(people)	410	116	219
		percent(%)	55.0	15.6	29.4
	The most common language that migrant children talked with family	Number(people)	226	172	347
		percent(%)	30.3	23.1	46.6
	The most common language that migrant children talked with grandparents .	Number(people)	184	120	441
		percent(%)	24.7	16.1	59.2
	The most common language that migrant children talked with parents .	Number(people)	420	122	203
		percent(%)	56.4	16.4	27.2
	The most common language that migrant children talked to brother or sister.	Number(people)	494	80	171
		percent(%)	66.3	10.7	23.0
school field	The most common language that migrant children talked to their teachers in school	Number(people)	734	4	4
		percent(%)	98.9	0.5	0.5
	The most common language that migrant children talked to their classmates in school	Number(people)	734	4	4
		percent(%)	98.9	0.5	0.5
public field	The most common language that migrant children talked to the staff in public places such as supermarkets and shopping malls	Number(people)	671	58	16
		percent(%)	90.1	7.8	2.1

It could be seen from table 2 that Mandarin most used by migrant children in the school field.

Mandarin was the most used when they talked to teachers and classmates. Both the Cantonese dialect and the native dialect were very little used in the school field. Perhaps the school was a formal public field, Mandarin was the official language within the school field, the proportion of Cantonese and Native dialect was very low.

It could be seen from Table 3, in the public field, Mandarin was the most used by migrant children, up to 90.1%, occupying an absolute advantage. Both the Cantonese dialect and the native dialect were very little used in public field.

3.4 The Language attitudes of migrant children

Language attitude is the subjective understanding of the value, role and status of different languages. It not only determines the use of language and the choice of language, but also reflects the change of the language identity of migrant children, and become the deep reason which affects the language choice and use of migrant children. This study adopts the form of liker five-level scale to examine the language attitude of migrant children from four dimensions: kind, mellifluous, usefulness and social influence. 1 was the lowest and 5 was the highest, and the average score of these four dimensions was taken as the mean of a language attitude. Among the four dimensions, Kind and Mellifluous were the subjective psychological feelings of language, which all belonged to the emotional identity dimension; Usefulness belonged to the practical dimension, which was the evaluation of language communicative function; social influence was the evaluation of the social status of language, which belonged to the dimension of the language social prestige

It could be seen from Table 3 that Mandarin had the highest scores in the four dimensions of Language attitude. This showed that migrant children had a good attitude towards Mandarin. They not only had a high emotional identity with Mandarin, but also had a high evaluation of their communicative function and social status. The score of homeland dialect in kind, mellifluous and usefulness was ranked second to Mandarin, and indicated that migrant children also had a strong emotional identity with homeland dialect, and it might be that the communication circle of migrant children and their families connected with homeland villagers. Cantonese had the lowest score in the three dimensions of kind, mellifluous and usefulness, and indicated that the overall evaluation of Cantonese by migrant children was low.

Table 3: The language attitude of migrant children(N=745)

Language code language attitude		Cantonese		Mandarin		Homeland dialect	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Emotional evaluation	Kind	3.30	1.23	4.28	0.75	4.17	0.98
	Mellifluous	3.55	1.13	4.30	0.77	4.05	0.96
Function evaluation	Usefulness	3.68	1.05	4.55	0.65	3.92	0.95
Social status evaluation	Social influence	3.22	1.26	3.75	1.45	3.11	1.29
Comprehensive mean		3.44±0.92		4.2±0.62		3.86±0.80	

3.5 The relationship between language ability and language attitudes of migrant children

Pearson correlation analysis of the variables involved in this study showed significant correlations among language ability, language ability and language attitudes (shown in table 4). Language use in family was positively correlated with language use in public, Homeland dialect level, Homeland dialect attitude, and Mandarin attitude, and negative correlation with Cantonese attitude; language use in school was positively correlated with language use in public, and negative correlation with Cantonese level; language use in public was negative correlation with Cantonese attitude and Cantonese level; Cantonese level was positively correlated with Homeland dialect level and Cantonese attitude; Mandarin level was positively correlated with Homeland dialect level, Homeland dialect attitude, and Mandarin attitude; Homeland dialect level was positively correlated with Homeland dialect attitude and Mandarin attitude; Cantonese attitude was positively correlated with Homeland dialect attitude and Mandarin attitude; Homeland dialect attitude was positively correlated with Mandarin attitude. This shows that there were strong correlation between the language abilities and their language attitudes. The stronger the language ability, the stronger the tendency to present a positive language attitude.

Table 4: The relationship among language use, linguistic capability and language attitude(N=745)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
language use in family	1								
language use in school	-.01	1							
language use in public	.17**	.15**	1						
Cantonese level	-.37**	-.09*	-.25**	1					
Mandarin level	.05	-.04	-.05	.07	1				
Homeland dialect level	.46**	-.06	-.01	.08*	.10**	1			
Cantonese attitude	-.19**	-.03	-.19**	.54**	.03	.05	1		
Homeland dialect attitude	.25**	.01	-.06	.03	.14**	.52**	.28**	1	
Mandarin attitude	.11**	.01	.01	-.05	.32**	.08*	.29**	.42**	1

4. Conclusions

4.1 Characteristics of migrant children's language life

Through the analysis of language acquisition, language mastery, language use and language attitude of migrant children in Foshan city, we obtained the following understanding.

Mandarin was the best language they mastered, followed by the native dialect and Cantonese in turn. The proportion of self-reported very good Cantonese level was the lowest. It showed that most migrant children lacked confidence in their Cantonese language, the survey results also confirmed from the side that the Cantonese communication among migrant children was not smoothly enough and relatively weak.

There were great differences in the language use of migrant children in the different field. In the family field, the most commonly spoken language for migrant children was Mandarin, followed by the native dialect and finally Cantonese. This may be because Mandarin was the most used language in kindergarten and school education in China, and it was also the official language in the school field. Parents of the migrant children came from different provinces and cities, and their used to communicate in Mandarin, so the migrant children grow up in the environment of Mandarin communication. It was also found that migrant children at home, with the different objects of conversation, the frequency of language use would be different, indicating that even at home, migrant children can flexibly transform various languages and adapt to the family environment. In the family field, the proportion of the use of hometown dialect was also relatively high, which was significantly higher than other occasions, indicating that hometown dialect is the link for migrant children to maintain their hometown, and carried their feelings towards their hometown. As could be seen from the language usage, Mandarin was the preferred communication tool for migrant children and their parents in occasions outside the family. With the popularization and urbanization, Mandarin had highlighted its social influence and widespread practicability. Therefore, migrant children were more inclined to use and rely on Mandarin to meet their daily communication, adapt to urban survival, and further build urban identity.

This study found that the migrant children had the highest attitude towards Mandarin, not only had a high degree of emotional identity with Mandarin, but also had a high evaluation of its communicative function and social status. Homeland dialect was the second place and Cantonese was the lowest. This may be related to the use of the language. It was generally believed that the high frequency of interaction between populations was directly proportional to the language identity, that was, the more frequent the verbal interaction, the better attitude towards their language. Migrant children used Mandarin with the highest frequency of using in the family, in life and school fields, so they had the highest evaluation of Mandarin. In the three areas, the frequency of Cantonese was the lowest, so the lowest. It showed that the teachers and classmates who interacted with the floating children were mainly in the school, and the scope of interaction was relatively narrow. Even in public places, Mandarin was used more, and the interactive language was relatively simple. In addition, Cantonese was difficult to learn and understand. If you did not spend time in learning, it was difficult to master. Moreover, these might also lead to the poor evaluation of Cantonese by migrant children.

4.2 The linguistics path of migrant children integrate into Foshan city

The poor communication of Cantonese was the main problem faced by the migrant children in Foshan city, which was also the main obstacle for the real integration of migrant children into urban society. The study found that there were significant negative relationship between the current situation of migrant children's language use in various fields and the Cantonese level and Cantonese attitude. This showed that the current situation of language use of migrant children hindered the acquisition and attitude of Cantonese. Previous studies had found that the ability of local dialects in migrant children could predict their physical identity and social belonging. If migrant children want to integrate into the city, they must improve their ability of Cantonese dialect. Migrant children, parents, schools and society should work together to improve the level of Cantonese. Migrant children themselves should attach great importance to speak and use Cantonese as much as possible in their daily life and study life. Parents should also create a good Cantonese environment for their children, encourage their children to use the Cantonese or take their children to participate in social practice. The government, schools and communities should adopt language policies, as well as language planning, to provide free training in Cantonese and free language improvement consultation for migrant children.

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