

Audiences' Perspective of Code-switching Phenomenon in Recent Cantopop

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Abstract: Current research on code-switching is limited to spoken language, advertising, and literature. This research analyzes the phenomenon of Chinese-English code-switching in Cantonese pop songs in the field of sociolinguistics and adopts the quantitative approach to explore audiences' attitudes towards the phenomenon of code-switching in Cantopop, the reasons for their attitudes and relative social attributes. It is conducted by means of questionnaires. Based on the data collected, the majority of audiences take a positive attitude toward the Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop, especially in young adults. Music popularity and rhythm sensations play a decisive role in the audience's choice of code-switching, while the level of education does not influence their choice too much. It is expected the trend of code-switching between Chinese and English will continue in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Keywords: Code-switching; Cantonese; Cantopop; Language; Sociolinguistics; Quantitative research

1. Introduction

English and Cantonese are popular and often used by people on social media or when they speak. The phenomenon of bilingualism and multilingualism causes code-switching to appear, which has been studied at length in multiple contexts at both individual and societal levels. Code-switching refers to the systematic use of two or more languages or varieties of the same language during the oral or written discourse. As can be seen from the concept, mixed Chinese and English lyric is also a form of code-switching. However, according to research, I found that studies on code-switching have often been restricted to spoken language, advertising, and literature, but rarely to songs. However, code-switching in conversation is very different from the one hand in music (Bentahila and Davies, 2002; Sarkars & Winer, 2005).

The modern 'Cantopop' that we are familiar with emerged in Hong Kong in the mid-1970s. In recent years, as various music styles like hip-hop and jazz, continue to develop and mature, western pop music elements are being incorporated into Cantonese pop music, and the phenomenon of Chinese-English code-switching is appearing more frequently in Cantonese pop lyrics. In addition, an important purpose of lyrical expression is to make the audiences feel the emotion or attitude hidden by the singers or songwriters. Audiences are the important participants whose feelings and opinions should be known to the singer and songwriters.

Based on the background and existing studies in this field, research questions can be conducted as follows:

- 1.1 What is the current attitude of audiences towards the Chinese-English code-switching phenomenon in Cantopop?
- 1.2 What are the reasons that may cause code-switching phenomenon between Chinese and English in Cantopop?
- 1.3 Which social attributes of audiences are associated with the code-switching phenomenon between Chinese and English in Cantopop?

Through the study, the researcher wishes to demonstrate that the code-switching of in Cantopop is not necessarily negative and hope the research will provide some insight for songwriters and singers. This research fills in some gaps and offers a beneficial comparison for other similar studies in exploring the use of code-switching in English-Chinese or other varieties of language in different contexts. It is also expected to help bilingual families educate their children on how to use language properly, as well as second language teaching in school classes, because the target of pop songs is teenagers or young adults. Thus,

to help in better understanding of code-switching, the analysis of code-switching in Cantonese songs must be done.

2. Literature Review

Defined as switching between different codes in the course of a single interaction, code-switching can largely be categorized into two levels: (1) inter-sentential level, which means alternation between two or more codes across sentences; (2) intra-switching level, which means alternation between two or more codes within an utterance. In Cantopop, code-switching is mostly intra-sentential, taking the form of English single words or phrases being inserted into Cantonese-framed utterances which conform to Cantonese grammar (Chan, 1993;1998; Gibbons, 1987; Leung, 2001). In other words, Cantonese usually acts as the “matrix language” (Myers-Scotton, 2002). It is noteworthy that Cantopop is the genre of popular songs in Hong Kong whose lyrics are written in standard modern Chinese but sung in Cantonese (Chu and Leung, 2013). Therefore, the focus of our study is on the code-switching of Chinese and English, instead of Cantonese and English.

There are a variety of studies concerning code-switching in songs, which contributes to the field of code-switching as well as the production of this research. A study on the general understanding of the functions of Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop mentioned that Hong Kong Chinese who can speak English usually use Chinese-English code-switching for those expressions whose meaning cannot be fully conveyed in Cantonese and this study selected Cantopop from the 1970s to 2003 as the research object (Chan, 2009). The study on Chinese-English code-switching has been existing for a long time and one interesting point is whether there are any changes in people’s attitudes towards Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop. As the government of the Hong Kong SAR adopted a *laissez-faire* approach from 1974 in education, schools and institutions had the right to choose English or Chinese as a medium of instruction. However, shortly before 1998, Chinese as a medium of instruction was made compulsory for F1-F3 due to the Sino-British Declaration in Beijing. Zhao (2007) believes that, under the setting of frequent international communication and the increasing status of English, young audiences of pop music follow the vogue and expect to hear certain English sentences that are popularly used in daily life, and “the Chinese-English code-switching has been frequently adopted in pop music and gradually accepted as a vogue”. That is, the code-switching phenomenon in the lyrics is a popular choice brought about by the progress of the times and was still popular in the past few years. Linguistic and cultural or social factors have the equivalent position to explain code-switching behaviors (Fu, 2018). However, the function of English in Cantopop is beyond the symbol of Western culture (Chan, 2009). In a study on the same topic, the author argues that linguistic factors, economic factors, and social factors cause the code-switching in Cantopop, and “it is expected the trend of code-switching of Chinese and English will continue in Hong Kong” (2013). The study comprehensively analyzed why code-switching appears in Cantopop, but its analysis perspective is macroscopical. Therefore, this research indicates some social attributes may be relevant to audiences’ choices to listen to Chinese-Cantonese code-switching Cantopop and social attributes of audiences are included in this research. Moreover, there is a study on the phenomenon of lyrics of pop songs in various countries or areas, such as Indonesia, and mainland China. Since the previous studies are more likely to concentrate on the motivations, social functions, or other perspectives to explain the phenomenon of Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop, this research is conducted from the audiences’ perspective in a bid to provide a new topic in this field.

3. Methodology

For three research questions raised above, quantitative research was adopted. The three research questions explore the status quo and the causes of the phenomenon, and the factors included are fixed. Questionnaires can be used to collect data extensively, and clear and intuitive data can support the expected point of view. Compared with other studies, the same type of study also uses quantitative research as the main research method.

To improve the validity of the data, the study was framed among Hong Kong Cantopop released after 2017 and people who have listened to them. The research object are audiences who have listened to Cantonese music, and they have to answer the questionnaire truthfully from their perspective. The researcher distributed online questionnaires through social networks, and anyone who had listened Cantopop can fill out the questionnaire. The questionnaire has 11 questions, all of which are choice questions, distributed in two online questionnaires: Wenjuanxing and Google Forms. From 19:30 on April 10, 2022 to 11:00 on April 12, 2022, a total of 167 samples were recovered, of which 154 were valid samples.

Four of the questionnaire items were used to collect the basic attributes of the respondents: gender, age, English proficiency, and education level. The remaining seven questions involve respondents’ attitudes towards the code-switching phenomenon in lyrics, the reasons for their attitudes, and the form of code-switching preferred by respondents as listeners.

4. Findings and Discussions

On the basis of data collection and data analysis, three findings that can be concluded are shown in the following. First, the majority of audiences take a positive attitude towards the Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop. Second, music popularity and rhythm sensations are two outstanding factors to influence the audiences' choices for listening to Chinese-English code-switching Cantopop. Third, the audiences' command of English and education are related to the Chinese-English code-switching phenomenon in Cantopop.

The attitudes towards code-switching are relevant to different elements, for example, personality, language learning history and current linguistic practices, as well as some sociobiographical variables (Dewaele & Wei, 2014). As there are various attitudes toward code-switching, the general attitude of audiences is the key point in this research. The first research question is related to the current attitude of audiences towards Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop and the quantitative statistics are shown in Table 1. Five options that can be divided into 'positive attitude' and 'negative attitude' are presented in the following. Note that 'Dislike' and 'Not like' are considered 'negative attitudes' while 'Love' and 'Like' options are viewed as a positive attitudes' in order to make a concise and intuitive result. About 58% of the participants in this research hold an average attitude towards Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop and there is around 27% of the participants take a positive attitude towards Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop and the figure for negative attitude is about 15%.

Table 1 Attitudes towards the Chinese-English code-switching phenomenon in Cantopop

第6题 What's your attitude towards the Chinese-English code-switching phenomenon in Cantopop? 你对于粤语流行歌曲内中英文语码转换现象的态度如何? [量表题]
本题平均分: 0

Option 选项	Subtotal 小计	Proportion 比例
Dislike 很不喜欢	6	3.89%
Not like 不喜欢	17	11.03%
Average 一般	89	57.79%
Like 喜欢	35	22.72%
Love 很喜欢	7	4.54%
Valid number of person-time 本题有效填写人次	154	

Though few studies pay close attention to Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop, there is a study associated with Cantonese-English code-switching in Cantopop television drama theme songs. It is worth mentioning that "certain meanings are conveyed by code-switching in lyrics of theme songs to concur with themes of corresponding television dramas" (Ng, 2020). However, the "No equivalent expression in Chinese" option has a lower proportion in Table 2 while the most outstanding options are "Music popularity", "Rhythm sensation" and "Personal preference" and each of them accounts for about 59%, 62%, and 28%. As for other options, the figure for 'More fashionable' is around 13% and it is the highest proportion among the remaining options.

Table 2 Factors may influence the audiences' choice of Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop

第10题 If the code-switching must be accepted, what are the factors that make you choose to listen to Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop? 基于哪些因素, 你会选择听有中英文语码转换现象的粤语流行歌曲? [多选题]

Option 选项	Subtotal 小计	Proportion 比例
Music popularity 音乐流行程度	91	59.09%
Rhythm sensation 更有节奏感	95	61.68%
Personal preference (Enjoy English) 个人喜好 (喜欢英语)	43	27.92%
Embodiment of identity E.g. Bilingual Family 身份体现 (比如: 双语家庭)	13	8.44%
More fashionable 更时尚	20	12.98%
Bilingualism in society 社会双语使用率、惯用性	1	0.64%
No equivalent expression in Chinese 用不能以中文表达的英文	1	0.64%
Other 其他	8	6.72%
Valid number of person-time 本题有效填写人次	154	

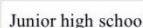
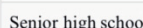

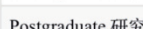
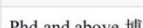
As the phenomenon of code-switching is a certain language use that depends on both linguistic and social contexts, we are interested in what social attributes of audiences may influence different trends toward Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop. Table 3 and Table 4 show the data that refers to “Command of English” and “Current level of education” because plenty of previous studies have conducted code-switching from different perspectives, for example, gender, age, identity, and culture. It is true that gender and age are contained in the questionnaire, but “Command of English” and “Current level of education” are more significant. According to the data in this research, audience’s command of English is lower than the average (about 31%), though the majority of audiences are undergraduates (about 86%). However, whether the audiences’ command of English is good or not and this has less effect on listening to Chinese-English code-switching Cantopop.

Table 3 Audiences’ command of English & Table 4: Audiences’ current level of education

第 3 题 How good is your command of English?你对英语的掌握程度如何? [量表题]
 本题平均分: 2.83

Option 选项	Subtotal 小计	Proportion 比例
Not good 不熟练	16	 10.38%
Below average 不太熟练	32	 20.77%
Average 一般	70	 45.45%
Proficient 熟练	32	 20.77%
Very proficient 非常熟练	4	 0.64%
Valid number of person-time 本题有效填写人次	154	

第 4 题 What is your current level of education? 你目前的受教育程度是? [单选题]

Option 选项	Subtotal 小计	Proportion 比例
Junior high school and below 初中及以下	2	 1.29%
Senior high school 高中	15	 9.74%
Undergraduate 本科	132	 85.71%
Postgraduate 研究生	5	 3.24%
Phd and above 博士及以上	0	 0%
Valid number of person-time 本题有效填写人次	154	

5. Conclusion

By and large, audiences are the recipients of the song, as well as the evaluators. Whether their feelings match of the songwriters and singers, or whether they like the lyrics, should be an important indicator. It is aimed to find out the attitudes of audiences toward the phenomenon and its influencing factors. Based on the research, the majority of audiences take a positive attitude toward the Chinese-English code-switching in Cantopop, especially in young adults. Music popularity and rhythm sensations play a decisive role in the audience's choice of code-switching, while the level of education does not influence their choice too much.

Since this research only investigates the types of code-switching and the causes based on relevant theories. The researchers suggest for other researchers who are interested in this field to analyze the impact of using code-switching or something else. The researcher also suggests that songwriters to pay more attention to the use of code-switching, the song audiences especially teenagers more selective in the content of music they hear.

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