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Language choice in urban China: A linguistic capital perspective from large-scale census data

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ABSTRACT

The standardization of the national language has been a long-standing policy in China. Although many studies describe this policy, few have examined its significance using large-scale census data. To explore the socio-economic factors associated with this language policy, this study utilizes data from the 2016 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). We investigated the choice of residents between Putonghua and local dialects during interviews in 1,233 cities and examined its association with 10 socioeconomic factors. The findings reveal that: (1) language choice correlates with immigrants' length of residence; (2) Putonghua use is positively associated with higher socio-economic status; and (3) dialect use correlates with greater neighborhood intimacy. These results illuminate the patterns of language use among urban residents and the complex socio-economic factors involved, shedding light on the implications of the decades-long promotion of Putonghua. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the feasibility of using probit regression models with large-scale census data for multifactorial exploration.

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Introduction

A significant trend in recent language policy research is the focus on the localization of top-down national policies, examining how different stakeholders negotiate their language choice in specific contexts (Shohamy, 2006). China's national language policy provides a compelling case study in this regard. For decades, the policy has aimed to promote a standardized language (Putonghua) to serve the goals of national unity and modernization. Key measures have included the establishment of Putonghua as the medium of instruction, the requirement of proficiency tests for public sector roles, and its widespread use in broadcasting. Major milestones include the initial national promotion in 1956, the inclusion of Putonghua in the 1982 PRC Constitution, and the passage of the National Common Language Law in 2000 (Guo, 2004). These policies, while successful in standardizing linguistic practices, have complex socio-cultural implications. While they have promoted the status of Putonghua, granting it high socio-economic value as linguistic capital, some of them have also faced criticism for marginalizing local dialects and minority languages that have deep cultural significance.

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To understand the socio-economic implications of these policies, this study adopts the framework of linguistic capital. Originating from Bourdieu (1989), this concept posits that a prestigious language possesses ‘symbolic power’ (Bourdieu, 1997), which allows social elites to create a difference between themselves and the general population, reinforcing social inequalities. In the Chinese context, the capitalization of Putonghua and the corresponding marginalization of local dialects could be evident. The ability to speak Putonghua provides access to more social resources and economic opportunities, leading to a language shift between generations, and many young urban citizens now speak only Putonghua.

The recent large-scale urbanization in China provides a good context for studying this dynamic. New urban immigrants, individuals from rural areas or smaller towns, offer valuable insight into this process. Their linguistic behavior reflects a negotiation process that balances their native dialects of their homeland with the dominant urban lingua franca. Studying the language choices highlights the role of linguistic capital in navigating socio-economic and cultural transitions in urban settings. This study uses large-scale household census data to examine the interaction between policy-driven linguistic hierarchies and individual language choices and their impact on socioeconomic outcomes.

Literature review

Language choice

Language choice (in some literature also named code choice) refers to the choice of a particular language or dialect by a multilingual individual or group within a specific social context. As a cornerstone concept in sociolinguistics, it explores the intricate process by which speakers, consciously or unconsciously, choose one linguistic code over another (Spolsky, 2008). This decision is guided by a complex interplay of personal motivations and social pressures. Key factors influencing this choice include the construction of identity, linguistic capital, educational purposes, underlying power dynamics, and other social economical factors.

Theoretical approaches to language choice

The theoretical landscape of language choice is primarily shaped by three influential perspectives: sociolinguistic theories of identity, Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital, and the more recent framework of translanguaging. Each offers a different lens for understanding why speakers make the language choice.

A foundational approach views language choice as an act of identity (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), a perspective that has historically been debated from two different angles: the macro-societal and the micro-individual. The macrolevel, or ‘top-down,’ view posits that an individual’s linguistic behavior largely reflects preexisting group patterns determined by broad social categories like class, ethnicity, or gender (e.g. Labov, 1989, p. 52). However, this perspective has been criticized for its potential determinism, as it can overlook the agency and creativity of the individual speaker. In response, a ‘bottom-up’ approach emerged, emphasizing that identity is not a static

label, but is actively constructed and negotiated through social interaction (Eckert, 1988). From this microlevel point of view, identity is seen as local, fluid, and dynamically performed through moment-to-moment linguistic choices, such as code switching (Aldrich & Nelson, 1984; Myers-Scotton, 1993; Rampton, 1995).

A second framework is provided by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social practice, particularly the concept of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1989). This approach posits that languages and dialects function as symbolic resources within a social 'market.' Proficiency in a high-status, 'legitimate' linguistic form constitutes valuable capital that can be exchanged for social recognition, educational opportunities, and economic advancement.

More recently, the theory of translanguaging has offered a paradigm shift, challenging the very notion of choosing between discrete, bounded languages (Li, 2018). This perspective argues that multilingual speakers draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire as a single, integrated system. For example, research in bilingual children shows that the fluid mixing of linguistic characteristics is a natural and common practice, rather than an exception (Bonacina & Gafaranga, 2011; Dubiner, 2021; Jordens et al., 2018). While translanguaging highlights the fluid and agentive nature of individual language use, it also acknowledges that these practices are situated within and constrained by powerful macrolevel forces. The choices speakers make – even fluid ones – are inevitably influenced by national language policies, educational systems, and the hegemonic status of global languages like English (Li & Kelly-Holmes, 2021; McGlynn & Martin, 2009).

Methodologies

Methodologically, the study of language choice has shifted from structuralism towards post-structuralism (Li & Moyer, 2008, p. 14). Structuralist (or Labovian) studies used quantitative methods to identify correlations between social and linguistic variables. Later research has used large-scale census data to explore relationships between sociocultural factors and language choice or attitudes (Rubino, 2021; Taqavi & Rezaei, 2021). Although these quantitative methods reveal broad patterns, they can oversimplify reality and may lack theoretical explanations for individual contexts. Consequently, post-structuralist studies have often employed in-depth ethnographic work to investigate contextuality and reflectivity. This turn reveals that language choice is not a fixed pattern, but a flexible and individual process of identity construction (Fuller, 2007). However, there is a scarcity of research using large-scale census data to explore the link between language and socioeconomic factors in the highly mobile context of urban China.

Our study

Research question

This exploratory study examines the relevance of socioeconomic factors to the language choices of new urban immigrants, using large-scale statistical data. We address two questions:

- (1) Do the language choices of multilingual urban immigrants between a standard variant (Putonghua) and a local dialect follow a discernible pattern?

- (2) What socioeconomic factors are associated with this choice and how can these associations be interpreted?

Adopting a Labovian approach, this study quantitatively analyzes the social determinants of language choice. We employ a Linear Probit Model (LPM), a multivariate statistical method that frames language choice as a probabilistic action (Aldrich & Nelson, 1984). This allows controlling for extraneous factors to discern the relative significance of each determinant, offering an advantage over traditional correlational analyzes.

Mathematical model

We model an individual's probabilistic selection between Putonghua and a dialect as a function of various social determinants. Multiple regression and LPM are applied to assess the factors that influence language choice and Putonghua fluency.

$$\Pr(Y = 1 | SV_i, SV_i^2, X) = \Phi[\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 SV_i + \alpha_2 SV_i^2 + \beta X + \theta_i]$$

$$\text{proficiency}_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 SV_i + \alpha_2 SV_i^2 + \beta X + \theta_i + \varepsilon_i$$

In this model, Pr represents the probability of language choice, and SV refers to different social variants. Φ is the cumulative distribution function of the standard normal distribution. α_0, α_1 , and α_2 are the parameters to be estimated. SV_i and SV_i^2 are the years since the migration and its square, respectively. Vector X represents the control variables and θ_i describes the fixed effect of the province.

Data collection

Data were derived from 2016 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), a national, large-scale, and multidisciplinary social survey project conducted by Peking University (Institute of Social Science Survey, Peking University, 2022). Our data set was extracted from the CFPS. Based on our previous review of the literature and theoretical assumptions, 10 variables related to language choice were selected, as defined in Table 1.

In total, there were 36,892 samples in the database. The first step of data screening involved selecting immigrant samples from the population; only those who reported a migration to urban areas were included. The second step involved excluding samples that lacked data on language use or relevant socioeconomic variables. We then selected samples that contained complete linguistic and socioeconomic data, resulting in a total of 1,233 valid samples for the study. Descriptive statistics were calculated for 10 variables for these selected samples, with the results presented in Table 2.

Our sample describes the migrant population during China's urbanization, with an average migration duration of 7.85 years and an average age of 36. It includes individuals from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, offering valuable insights into linguistic capital within the context of rapid urbanization over the past decade.

Research process

This study analyzes data from 1,233 subjects to investigate the correlation between language choice and 11 socioeconomic factors. Key variables include the migrant's

Table 1. Variable definitions.

Variable	Definition	Abbreviation
Language choice	'Language choice in the interview' recorded by the interviewer's observation, Putonghua 1, dialect 0	language
Proficiency in Putonghua	'Proficiency in Putonghua' recorded by the interviewer's observation, from poor to good, scored from 1 to 7	proficiency
Years since migration	Difference between year of interview, and answer to the question 'Since when did you not live in your place of residence?'	myear
Age	Age of respondent	cfps_age
Gender	Gender of respondent, male 1, female 0	cfps_gender
Political profile	Answer to the question 'Are you a member of the Communist Party of China?', yes 1, no 0	poli
Marital status	Respondent's current marital status, 'married' 1, 'unmarried' 2, 'widowed or divorced' 3	marri
Education	The highest level of education completed by the respondent, 'junior high school and below' 1, 'high school and college' 2, 'Bachelor's degree or higher' 3	edu
Household ISEI	Non-agricultural households 1, agricultural households 0 International Socio-Economic Status Index (ISEI) generated from respondents' occupations	household code_isei
Neighborhood intimacy	Answers to the question 'Overall, how do you feel about the neighborhood relation in which you live?', scored from 1 to 5 from poor to good	NI

year of entry into the city, reflecting evolving national language policies, and the International Socioeconomic Index (ISEI), which serves as a proxy for linguistic capital. We also incorporate the unique Chinese social factor of household registration (*hukou*) to account for the developmental divergence between rural and urban origins.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of variables ($N = 1233$).

Variable	Category/Range	N	Mean/Percent
Language choice	Putonghua	955	77.52%
	Dialects	277	22.48%
Proficiency in Putonghua	[1,7]	1233	5.98 (SD = 1.38)
Years since migration	[0,61]	1233	7.85 (SD = 8.62)
Age	[16,90]	1233	35.97 (SD = 14.15)
Gender	Male	522	42.34%
	Women	711	57.66%
Political orientation	CPC member	145	11.77%
	Non-CPC member	1087	88.23%
Marital status	Married	984	79.81%
	Unmarried	188	15.25%
	Widowed and divorced	61	4.95%
Education	Lower secondary and below	441	46.27%
	High school and college	341	35.78%
	Bachelor's degree or higher	171	17.94%
Household	Non-agricultural household	578	46.88%
	Agricultural household	655	53.12%
Living area	Urban	848	69.91%
	Rural	365	30.09%
ISEI	[20,88]	1233	44.13 (SD = 15.92)
Neighborhood intimacy	[1,5]	1233	3.69 (SD = 0.85)

Findings

Language choice affected by years since migration

We first examine Years Since Migration, building on the classical treatment of time in sociolinguistics (Eckert, 1997; Woolard, 2011). While it might be assumed that longer residency correlates with greater Putonghua adoption, our findings, controlling for gender, age, marital status, political affiliation, and education, reveal a non-linear, quadratic relationship. The results indicate inflection points at 13.11 years for usage and 14.73 years for proficiency. This suggests that for migrants arriving after circa 2002–2003, length of residency correlates with increased Putonghua use, whereas for earlier arrivals, the trend is reversed.

As Table 3 indicates, the coefficient for *myear* is positive and the coefficient for *myear2* (the squared term) is negative across all models, regardless of whether control variables are included.

This finding could have several explanations. The Identity Construction Hypothesis posits that new immigrants use Putonghua to integrate, reverting to dialects after this process is complete. The socioeconomic hypothesis suggests that language choice is driven by immediate economic benefits. Finally, the Generational Policy Hypothesis proposes that cohorts migrating before 2003 were exposed to different language policies during their schooling. Despite this temporal variation, the migrant group is otherwise consistent in its language choices in other demographic variables. To empirically test these hypotheses, we proceeded with a further analysis.

Socio-economic rewards from language choice

To test our hypotheses, particularly the second concerning economic rewards, we analyzed the relationship between language use and the International Socio-Economic Index (ISEI).

Table 3. Correlation between years since migration and language use.

Variables	(1) Language	(2) Language	(3) Proficiency	(4) Proficiency
<i>myear</i>	0.0279* [0.0149]	0.0551*** [0.0210]	0.0273** [0.0131]	0.0383*** [0.0144]
<i>myear2</i>	−0.0010** [0.0004]	−0.0021*** [0.0007]	−0.0012*** [0.0003]	−0.0013*** [0.0004]
<i>Controls</i>	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>cfps_gender</i>		0.3990** [0.1552]		0.1934 [0.1210]
<i>cfps_age</i>		−0.0142** [0.0060]		−0.0229*** [0.0050]
<i>2.marri</i>		0.0040 [0.2094]		−0.1155 [0.1681]
<i>3.marri</i>		0.7554*** [0.3684]		0.1323 [0.2746]
<i>poli</i>		−0.1547 [0.2237]		−0.0651 [0.1803]
<i>2.edu</i>		0.2113 [0.1495]		0.4527*** [0.1281]
<i>3.edu</i>		0.3785* [0.2225]		0.5024*** [0.1670]
Observations	716	484	778	597
<i>R</i> -squared	0.1969	0.2234	0.1210	0.2213
Prov	YES	YES	YES	YES

Note: Standard errors in brackets. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

The results in Table 4 reveal that for immigrants who arrived between 2002 and 2016, the use and proficiency of Putonghua have a significant positive effect on their ISEI scores, both with and without control variables. This finding supports our second hypothesis: new immigrants appear to gain greater socioeconomic rewards by speaking Putonghua in the short term.

Neighborhood intimacy and language choice

The theory of negotiable identity posits that language choice is a personal and local act. Multilingual speakers may choose languages to be perceived as included in a host culture. To investigate this assumption, we examined the relationship between neighborhood intimacy and language choice.

As Table 5 shows, for migrants who arrived more than 14 years ago (before 2002), those who reported greater use of dialects also reported better neighborhood intimacy. This effect was not observed for the more recent immigrants. This result aligns with the common perception that dialects are closely tied to identity, while standard languages such as Putonghua often lack such social significance in the building of local communities.

Hukou and language choice

Given that urbanization is a theoretical driver of immigrants' language choices, this section examines these choices across different household registration (*hukou*) populations. The *hukou* system, which categorizes citizens into agricultural (rural) and non-agricultural (urban) households, is a key mechanism for managing population migration in China. In our study, agricultural household samples represent migration from rural to urban areas, while non-agricultural samples represent migration from other, often smaller, cities. This comparison aims to determine if there is an urban-rural difference, and more specifically, whether these language choices are confined to the rural-origin population or represent a general trend.

Table 6 indicates that *hukou* type is not a primary determinant of language choice. Both agricultural and non-agricultural households show similar trends, albeit with slight differences in the inflection points. Migrants with non-agricultural *hukou* show an earlier inflection (12.74 years for choice & 11.23 for proficiency) than those with agricultural *hukou* (14.13 years & 18.62 years).

Discussion

The diachronic inflection point of language proficiency

Our study reveals a significant shift in the language choices of urban migrants, with 2003 emerging as the year of inflection. For those arriving after this year, Putonghua proficiency increases with residency length. For those who came before, it declines. This finding underscores the enduring influence of urbanization and the national language policy, especially the 2000 National Common Language Law which was fully implemented in schools around this time. As an increasing number of migrants enter urban employment, they sought a lingua franca, with Putonghua fulfilling this role. In

Table 4. Correlation between language use and socio-economic status.

	Dependent Var: code_isei							
	Language Choice				Proficiency			
	(1) my < 14	(2) my >= 14	(3) my < 14	(4) my >= 14	(5) my < 14	(6) my >= 14	(7) my < 14	(8) my >= 14
language	5.7936*** [1.8364]	3.4777 [3.7290]	3.4148* [1.8651]	2.2470 [5.5446]	2.1992*** [0.5792]	1.5516 [1.1377]	1.3862** [0.5805]	0.9124 [1.6240]
proficiency								
Controls	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	511	138	409	99	462	129	367	93
R-squared	0.0925	0.2138	0.3519	0.3926	0.0850	0.2303	0.3471	0.4016
Prov	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Note: Standard errors in brackets. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 5. Correlation between language use and neighborhood intimacy.

Variables	(1) NI (myear<14)	(2) NI (myear> = 14)	(3) NI (myear<14)	(4) NI (myear> = 14)
language	−0.0395 [0.0832]	−0.3052* [0.1559]	−0.0291 [0.0989]	−0.4302* [0.2261]
Controls	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	668	181	534	124
R-squared	0.0309	0.1640	0.0609	0.2882
Prov	YES	YES	YES	YES

Note: Standard errors in brackets. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 6. Estimated urban–rural differences in language choice.

Variables	(5) Language (Agri)	(6) Language (Non-Agri)	(7) Proficiency (Agri)	(8) Proficiency (Non-Agri)
myear	0.0535* [0.0320]	0.0622* [0.0332]	0.0247 [0.0189]	0.0484* [0.0261]
myear2	−0.0021** [0.0009]	−0.0022* [0.0012]	−0.0011** [0.0005]	−0.0013** [0.0006]
Observations	229	238	347	250
R-squared	0.2534	0.2074	0.2477	0.2483
Prov	YES	YES	YES	YES

this context, middle-aged urban migrant reports a higher proficiency in Putonghua compared to their younger and older counterparts. Similar results were found in a German study, which concluded that standard German is used more frequently in conversation among middle-aged groups, while younger and older speakers prefer more dialect (Siebenhaar, 2006). We would tend to interpret this as the effect of an identity shift due to urbanization. The earlier generation of citizens (before 2002) did not have widespread access to Putonghua due to the national policy promoting its use not being extensively implemented during their education years. Consequently, this group lacked the necessary resources to utilize Putonghua proficiently.

Linguistic capital of a lingua franca in urbanization

Our study empirically demonstrates a situation of linguistic capital within the context of urbanization in China. According to Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital, it is a form of exchangeable value. During the urbanization process, Putonghua possesses evident linguistic capital. By speaking Putonghua, residents can better integrate into urban life, secure better job opportunities and promotions, and receive greater economic rewards, which is reflected in the positive correlation between Putonghua proficiency and ISEI. This indicates that the national language policy has been effective in establishing Putonghua as a high-value linguistic capital, which aligns with the state's goal of using a common language to promote economic integration. This process is particularly salient because urbanization serves as a domain where linguistic capital can emerge and develop. In urban areas where the service industry is the primary sector, the need for human interaction is far more frequent than in agricultural societies.

Neighborhood intimacy and language choice

Expanding on the concept of linguistic capital, which elucidates not only the economic resources that language can exchange but also its potential for social value, we examined

neighborhood intimacy. Our data indicate that the social value of Putonghua is not pronounced, whereas the dialects confirm the hypothesis that it is linked to social value. We attribute this difference to the tendency of speakers to select dialects to construct identity recognition within neighborhoods. This suggests that while promotion policy has succeeded in the public and economic spheres, it has not completely displaced dialects in the private sphere. This functional differentiation, rather than complete replacement, offers a nuanced view of the policy outcomes. This finding reflects the complex and fluid nature of identity in modern society, where Putonghua is often associated with professional identity, while dialects fulfill a more familial and community-oriented function. This aligns with numerous studies on family language planning. Some similar studies indicated that individuals and social groups in a language community can negotiate the Putonghua Policy through the use of dialects (Huang, 2018).

Methodology implications

This study demonstrates the methodological utility and feasibility of applying the linear probability model (LPM), which prioritizes variables of theoretical import while incorporating other factors as controls. This probabilistic framework offers a precise representation of the dynamics of language choice. In contrast to simple correlation analysis, LPM facilitates robust variable control within a comprehensive analytical framework.

Compared with qualitative methods such as ethnography, LPM in large-scale census data presents several advantages. It enables the efficient analysis of larger sample sizes and a wider array of census variables. The model also demonstrates high flexibility, permitting straightforward adjustments to variables and refinements of different theoretical frameworks. Consequently, the findings could be validated, generalized, or reproduced.

Despite these strengths, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was characterized by an uneven age distribution, with a preponderance of younger immigrants. This resulted in the statistical significance of an age demographic in Section 4.3 being marginal ($p < 0.1$). Second, key variables, including neighborhood intimacy and language proficiency, were based on interviewer ratings, which are susceptible to subjective bias. Meanwhile, the Putonghua fluency assessment was conducted by multiple researchers, introducing the potential for inconsistent measurement standards between participants. Finally, on a broader methodological level, while the LPM offers quantitative rigor, it cannot provide the in-depth contextualized research of language ideology and practices in different ‘domains’ as Fishman (1972) proposed.

Conclusion

Our study provides a comprehensive analysis of the intricate relationship between language choice and socioeconomic factors among urban migrants in China. The findings examined the pivotal role of Putonghua as a lingua franca, which not only facilitates citizen integration into urban society, but also correlates with a higher socioeconomic status. The data reveal a notable inflection point in language proficiency and choice around the year 2003, suggesting a generational shift influenced by national language policy and urbanization. The success of the policy is evident in Putonghua’s establishment as a high-value linguistic capital for economic mobility.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the complex interplay between language, identity, and social integration. Although Putonghua emerges as a key to economic and social mobility, dialects retain their significance in fostering neighborhood intimacy and maintaining cultural identities, indicating functional differentiation in language use. The linear probit model applied in this research offers a robust methodological approach to dissect the multifaceted factors influencing language choice, thereby enriching our understanding of linguistic capital in the context of China's rapid urbanization. Future studies could further explore the longitudinal impact of language policies on intergenerational language shifts and explore the complex ways in which language choices are influenced by evolving socioeconomic landscapes.

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Data availability statement

The data used in this study is available from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) Public Data repository, which can be accessed via the following website: <https://www.iss.pku.edu.cn/cfps/en/data/public/index.htm>

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