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Is Chinese Mandarin becoming a Global Lingua Franca?

The Italian phrase *lingua franca*, whose literal meaning is “a Frankish language”, was originally used to refer to the hybrid language created and spoken in the Mediterranean area by seamen and merchants for communication. It consisted of a great deal of lexical items from Greek, Spanish, Arabic, Turkish and French (Kowner and Rosenhouse, 2008:4). Although initially a *lingua franca* was a language used to communicate between people who did not share a mother tongue, in this paper it should be understood as any system of communication providing mutual understanding. There have been different *lingua francas* all over the world throughout history: Vulgar Latin in the Mediterranean areas in ancient times, Aramaic in the Near East in the Persian Empire, Swahili in East Africa, as well as Greek, French or English.

The question that arises in this connection is the following: is there enough room for another potential global *lingua franca* to emerge? Is it possible, e.g. for Chinese Mandarin to challenge English as the world’s *lingua franca* of the international business? According to the statistics, China, had the world’s second largest nominal GDP after the

US, valued at \$5.88 trillion in 2010. In other words, “(...) China’s unparalleled expansion and increasing strength in global commerce is making Mandarin a language to contend with those wishing to conduct business internationally” (*warehouse*). Therefore, the question whether Chinese Mandarin has a potential to become a new lingua franca seems to be valid. To answer that question, it should be clarified what factors contribute to the development of a lingua franca. Crystal (1997:7) suggests that “(...) a language becomes an international language for one main reason: the political power of its people – especially the military power”. Looking back at the languages that achieved the status of lingua francas in the past, one has good grounds to state that the political and/or military power of the country did have an impact on the development of its language into a lingua franca. However, what is more often taken into consideration nowadays is, in the words of Jenkins (2009:229), “(...) the way markets are opened for the circulation of goods and services”. Drawing facts from the history of growth of previous lingua francas, it seems reasonable to claim that they are shaped by economic, as well as social, political, cultural, demographic and linguistic factors.

1. Economic and demographic factors

In terms of the number of native and non-native speakers, English is the most popular language in the world, with about 1.8 billion (*ethnologue*) speakers. The second place is occupied by Chinese Mandarin (*ethnologue*) with about 1.345 billion of such speakers. Hence, even just on the basis of sheer numbers, English can be regarded as a global lingua franca. However, in terms of the number of native speakers, it is Chinese Mandarin that is the most widely used (845 million speakers), whereas English is second with about 329 million native speakers. The question is whether Chinese Mandarin can dethrone English in terms of the number of overall speakers and when it will possibly happen?

To begin with, the demographics of the People's Republic of China can be characterized by a large population with a relatively small youth division. This is partially a result of the country’s one-child

policy introduced in 1980. Today, according to National Bureau of Statistics of China (*nbsc*) China's population is over 1.339 billion, the largest of any country in the world. However, China's population growth rate is only 0.47%, which ranks 156th in the world. Because of such a relatively small growth rate, and comparable fertility and mortality rates, the predictions are that from 2030 the population of China will be gradually decreasing and in 2080 it will be less than 1.0 billion (*u.s. census bureau, united nations*). This clearly shows that in the foreseeable future the number of native Chinese Mandarin speakers will not exceed that of English native and non-native speakers, due to a variety of socio-geographic, economic and political reasons. The predictions are that China will also lose the position of the most populous country in the world (Feng and Mason, 2005).

When it comes to the Chinese economy, the real GDP per capita rose four-fold between 1982 and 2000. This makes China one of the fastest-growing economies in the world in the last two decades (Feng and Mason 2005). As of the year 2010, Chinese GDP is \$5.88 trillion (nominal) and \$10.08 trillion (Purchasing Power Parity), which places China second in the world (*world bank*). The predictions are that China could become the world's largest economy (by nominal GDP) in 2020 and by 2030 account for 24 percent of global output (*shamim*). It must be remembered that China is an economically diverse poor country. While coastal China and its major metropolises evince tremendous wealth, large portions of Western China are poor. Yet although the country's per capita GDP (PPP) is \$7,518 (93rd in the world) in 2010, China is the world's fastest-growing major economy, with average growth rates of 10% for the past 30 years. China is also the largest exporter and second largest importer of goods in the world and the world's top manufacturer in 2011, beating the United States. An ever-growing number of Chinese companies are stepping onto the global business stage, with an increasing number of international mergers and acquisitions. From 1993 to 2010, Chinese companies have been involved as either an acquiror or acquired company in 25,284 mergers and acquisitions with a total know value of \$969 billion. The number of deals that happened in 2010 has been

3,640, which is an increase of 17% compared to 2009. The value of deals in 2010 was \$196 billion, which is an increase of 25% compared to 2009. “Computer company Lenovo, international miner Chinalco, energy major China National Petroleum Corp., or the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China are just a few examples of the Chinese companies that have expanded overseas recently” (*pricewaterhousecoopers, mergers&acquisitions*).

Is it possible then that the global influx of products with the “Made in China” label will go together with an increase in numbers of Chinese Mandarin speakers? To answer that question it must be noted that the successful economic growth partially stems from demographic changes, i.e. the transition to low fertility policy and changes in age structure (Wang 2005: 1-2). At the beginning of China’s boom in 1982, the population structure was typical of a young and growing population. Thus, since 2000, China’s age structure has been based on the working age populations which generally produce more than consume. However, within the next years, taking into account the demographic prediction, the Chinese society will be increasingly aging, the ratio of the effective number of producers to the effective number of consumers will be decreasing and it is predicted that 11.8% of the population in 2020 will be 65 years of age or older (Feng and Mason, 2005). China may enter a period of decline in labour supply and hence its economic growth will be stopped. On the other hand, the Chinese economy may benefit from the capital accumulation related to an ageing population. This, however, depends on a set of factors, e.g. on the institutional forms of resource allocation and on how these resources will be used by citizens. Although the future is still uncertain, the data shows that the Chinese economy is currently strong enough to boost the popularity of the Chinese language.

2. Political and cultural factors

According to Jacques (2009:383), a new economic world order centered on China will reflect Chinese values rather than Western ones. As a result, “Beijing will overshadow New York, the renminbi will replace the dollar, Mandarin will take over from English, and

schoolchildren around the world will learn about Zheng He's voyages of discovery along the Eastern coast of Africa rather than about Vasco de Gama or Christopher Columbus" (ibid.). The economic changes would bring about some cultural ones, especially in the face of protection of Chineseness from the Western globalization. This kind of self-defence has foundations in a sense of Chinese identity, especially that "China has 2,000 years of history as a distinct civilization from which to draw strength. It will not simply fold under Western values and institutions" (Rodrik, 2010). The rise of China as a nation-state goes together with concrete actions taken to protect the Chinese culture from foreign influences. For instance, Chinese authorities have taken steps to protect its language from the increasing influences of other languages, mainly English. China's General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) described the invasion of English words and abbreviations in Chinese texts as an abuse on the language. GAPP officially stated that English "severely damaged the standard and purity of the Chinese language and disrupted the harmonious and healthy language and cultural environment, causing negative social impacts" (*bbc*). That is why some clear guidelines concerning the protection of the Chinese language were offered: "Chinese newspapers, books and websites will no longer be allowed to use English words and phrases. (...) It is banned to mix at will foreign language phrases such as English words or abbreviations with Chinese publications, creating words of vague meaning that are not exactly Chinese" (*bbc*). Moreover, GAPP demanded that an explanation in Chinese is made when words are written in a foreign language. This, according to Jacques (ibid., 410), may be just one of examples of the end of the dominance of the west and of the start of a new era of global diversity in terms of values.

The growing importance of Chinese is visible also in the fact that Chinese Mandarin has become the second top language used on the Internet. It is generally believed that the extent of the growth of the Chinese market is mirrored in the potential of the language under consideration to take over the Internet. In other words, in the days of the Internet boom, the vast majority of websites were in English, not

to mention software packages and search engines. However, after decades of English being the Internet's language number one, a trend towards multilingualism has been observed. As a result, today the number of non-English speaking users has surpassed the number of English-speaking users on the Internet, Chinese Mandarin becoming language number two. To be precise, according to He (2007:2), while the dominance of English on the Internet reached its peak at the end of the 1990s, 80-85% of websites being created in English then, the year of 2005 showed a surprising change. The number of the English-speaking population declined to 30.6%. According to the data collected in 2010 by *internetworld*, the new dominant language of the Internet is going to be Chinese. As the statistics show, the number of English-speaking Internet users in 2010 was 27.3% of total users (growth of 2.81% as of 2000-2010) whereas the number of Chinese-speaking Internet users was 22.6% of total users (growth of 1.277% as of 2000-2010). What is more, bearing in mind the fact that not everyone in China uses Chinese online yet, it seems really plausible to state that, as the data collected by Nextweb suggest, Chinese will become the dominant language online in as soon as five years' time.

On its way to online dominance, Chinese has had to overcome a couple of barriers. The difficulty in searching for Chinese information on the Internet has two sources. As He (2007:5) maintains, the first difficulty is the difference between the international coding schemes for processing the English language on computers. This is due to the fact that while the English language uses the single byte character set (SBCS), Chinese uses the double byte character set (DBCS). As a result, many Internet applications appear to be incapable of identifying DBCS encoding and, consequently, cause problems for Chinese information retrieval on the web. Moreover, the problem of using Chinese on the Internet is intensified when one takes into account the incompatibilities between the character set coding schemes used in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. As He (2007:5) notes, the websites created in Mainland China and Singapore use GB code, the popular coding scheme for the simplified Chinese characters, whereas Hong Kong and Taiwan use the popular coding

scheme for the traditional Chinese characters, i.e. BIG5 code. To make the situation even more difficult, it should be stated that some Chinese characters are likely to be incorrectly displayed owing to the complexity of encoding and decoding Chinese characters. However, the problem has been recently solved by implementing Unicode, a new character set coding scheme. This, including both the simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese characters, has reduced “(...) problems caused by compiling and translating Chinese characters coded in different character sets” (He 2007:5). Together with the introduction of internationalized domain names that allow users to conduct the Internet exploration in their native language, English is likely to decline as the central language of the Internet.

3. Social factors

Together with the general development of China more and more people around the world are beginning to acquire Chinese Mandarin as a second language. This tendency is supported by the Chinese government, which establishes Confucius Institutes, usually linked to local universities, in many different countries (Jacques, 2009:412). The program was started in 2004 and is financed by the Office of Chinese Language Council International, a non-profit organization affiliated with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. In 2010, there were 316 Confucius Institutes and 337 Confucius Classrooms in 94 countries and regions (*xinhuanet1*). It is estimated that 100 million people overseas may be learning Chinese Mandarin now and it is predicted that 1,000 Confucius Institutes will have been established by 2020 (*xinhuanet2*). The aim of Confucius Institutes is mainly the spread of the Chinese language, as well as the promotion of the Chinese culture. The Chinese have realized that “[t]he traditions are kept in the language. Language was an obstacle to us going out, but it also prevented others getting inside. Language was our Great Wall” (Hung, 1999) and it is a time for change.

It must be remembered that the spread of Mandarin is taking place in East Asia itself. Chinese Mandarin is becoming more and more popular among overseas Chinese communities in South-East Asia, as

well as in Hong Kong. As of 2009, there were 160,000 students studying Mandarin in South Korea, which was an increase of 66 per cent in comparison with the period of five years before (Jacques 2009: 412). All elementary and middle schools in South Korea and Thailand teach Chinese Mandarin, and it is estimated that one-third of high school students are fluent in Mandarin in Thailand (Vatikiotis, 2006). The attraction of Mandarin in East Asia is connected with its growing importance in trade, diplomacy and cultural exchange. As Erard (*wired.com*) states, Chinese Mandarin is a popular foreign language taught not only in Asia, but also on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. Since for most of the students in McCormick School in southwest Chicago Chinese Mandarin is their third language, the kids are part of the largest school program in the United States. As a result, 3,500 Chicago learners, from kindergartens up to 12th graders, study Chinese Mandarin. In a survey carried out in US high schools in 2006, 2,400 of them stated that they would consider teaching Mandarin if the resources were available (Jacques, 2009:413). However, a survey carried out in 2004 showed that only 203 US high schools and about 160 elementary schools were teaching Mandarin. In total, it was estimated in 2009 that there were about 50,000 American school children studying Chinese Mandarin at the level of public schools and a comparable number in private and specialist schools (Jacques, 2009:413).

In the UK schools 2,233 pupils chose Chinese for GCSE in 2000, and 3,726 in 2004. A growing number of private schools are beginning to teach Mandarin as an optional subject, with similar plans to be brought to life in the state system. The number of students taking Mandarin as their main subject at UK colleges and universities doubled between 2002 and 2005. A similar tendency to learn Chinese Mandarin has been observed in other European countries (Jacques, 2009:413). An example of a European country where Chinese is gaining in popularity in schools is Sweden, whose Minister of Education, Jan Björklund, explains that “[i]n the world of business not everyone speaks English, and the range of Chinese, from the economic point of view, is constantly growing. This language has

become more important than French or Spanish” (Angora, 31/2011: 4). The Czech Republic has also taken steps to prepare its youth for future business contact with Asia. Elementary schools in Prague and Liberec have already started to teach Chinese (Angora, 17/2011:83). The Czech enthusiasts of teaching Chinese at schools take care not only teaching the language but also attempt to acquaint learners with the Chinese culture. As Jiří Zeronik, the organizer of Doctrina school in Liberec, states “[t]his is a completely different culture, so we make every effort to make kids absorbed with it. This is the reason why we invite Chinese people from the embassy to present their country to our children” (Angora, 17/2011). This will give young people a better start in their business life and “in the future they will not be surprised with a contact with a Chinese trade partner or employee” (Angora 2011:83). *Dziennik Polski* (*dziennik*), maintaining that Chinese is bound to be the language of the future also in Poland, postulates that the possibility to incorporate Chinese among A-level subjects is a matter of time. What is more, according to Angora (27/2011:4) Chinese is to be the compulsory second foreign language in one of elementary schools in Poznań already in September 2011.

In spite of such a widespread popularity of the Chinese language, McWhorter (2011) postulates that although China “(...) is [posed to become the world’s economic leader within the next few decades”, “[t]he world’s de facto international language will continue to be English”. The reason for such a state of affairs is the fact that, as McWhorter maintains, “English is permanent because it came to reign amidst print, widespread literacy, and eventually omnipresent media” (McWhorter 2011). China still lags hugely behind the West when it comes to the international media although it makes efforts to catch up with it. “Recently the Chinese government has attempted to expand their international reach, upgrading Xinhua, the state news agency, creating new overseas editions of the People’s Daily and an English language edition of the Global Times, professionalizing the international broadcasting of CCTV, and enabling satellite subscribers in Asia to receive a package of Chinese channels” (Kurlantzick: 63). Compared with the international audiences that Western media like

CNN and the BBC enjoy, the Chinese media are at the beginning of the road to huge audiences. An attempt by the Chinese authorities to transform the reach of their international media using a combination of new international television channels can be expected over the next decade. The success of the Arabic Al-Jazeera suggests that a challenge to the Western media is possible. What is more, China may make us of the potential that CCTV offers. As of 2009, it reached 30 million Chinese overseas and its revenues in 2008 topped \$2.5 billion, compared with about \$1 billion in 2002 (after: Jacques, 2009:418). Thus, Chinese television and film centers are emerging as potential competitors of Hollywood, both in terms of numbers of audiences as well as gross revenue. "Media executives can, for the very first time, begin to contemplate the prospect of a global Chinese audience that includes more moviegoers and more television household than the United States and Europe combined" (Curtin, 2007:10). With this kind of international potential, China has a lot of chance to become more and more global.

4. Linguistic factors

It must be remembered that Chinese Mandarin is a group of various yet related Chinese dialects spoken across most of northern and southwestern China. The rest of the native Chinese use over 100 other dialects, many of which are mutually unintelligible, which belong to 7 major dialect groups. In the early years of the Republic of China, it was a priority to define a standard national language, which, by the decision of the National Language Unification Commission in 1932, was the Beijing dialect. The People's Republic founded in 1949 retained this standard, calling it *pǔtōnghuà* (literally "common speech") (Ramsey, 1987:3-15). This national language has been promoted and by now used in education, the media, and formal situations in both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan and spoken intelligibly by most young people in Mainland China and Taiwan, although with various regional accents.

Turning to the account of linguistic factors behind the potential future popularity of Chinese Mandarin overseas, one needs to consider

the level of difficulty to grasp the language. Although Adina Zemanek from Confucius Institute at the Jagiellonian University, in her interview for *Dziennik Polski* (*dziennik*) claims that Chinese is not more difficult to learn than English, there is a common belief that Chinese Mandarin belongs to these languages that are difficult to learn. This seems to be the reason why not every enthusiast of studying the aforementioned language manages to grasp the intricacies of even its basic lexical and grammatical features. Quoting Ivana Ullmannová (Angora, 17/2011:83), Chinese “(...) is an incredibly difficult language, so not everyone who wishes to learn it will manage”.

The fundamental problem that the English-speaking learners of Chinese usually encounter is the Chinese writing system which, contrary to English that employs an alphabetic writing system, uses logographic writing. To be specific, in logographic systems it is symbols (pictographs, ideographs, compound ideographs, loan characters, and phonetic compounds), and not combinations of letters that represent a word. Hence, since these symbols represent words, not sounds, the pronunciation of Chinese characters is not implied by the way the symbol looks. What is more, as many as 50,000 characters exist in the language, and 8,000 are used in contemporary speech. The knowledge of approximately 1,500 to 2,000 characters is required to obtain basic literacy skills (Plump, 2007:1). As a result, Chinese provides much complexity for those who are familiar with the contemporary, sounds-based, global language, i.e. English. The complexity becomes even greater when one mentions the fact that while English is written from left to right, Chinese can be written from top to bottom, right to left, or left to right. Therefore, while in the words of McWhorter (2011), “(...) to learn (...) [Chinese] at an adult level is an almost Herculean labor for the foreigner”, “(...) English (...) gets by with conjugation as simple as I walk, you walk, he walks [and], (...) as world languages go, it is considerably user-friendly”. On the other hand, Mandarin words usually consist of one or two morphemes and in many cases the language is devoid of inflections. Instead of using prefixes and suffixes, the Chinese use word order,

particles and prepositions to indicate grammatical relationships. Notions like subject, direct and indirect object do not play a vital role as well as parts of speech. Verb forms are changed not by using different forms, but rather by using adverbials, word order and context (Plump, 2007:2-3).

Another aspect of Chinese that a learner of this language might, and probably does, find difficult to tackle, is pronunciation. To be specific, unlike English, Chinese is a tonal language (*suite*). Therefore, the meaning of a Chinese word is largely dependent on the pitch used while pronouncing the word. In search of an example that can prove its difficulty, one can refer to McWhorter (2011: 18), who mentions the problem of expressing meaning through different pitches. The author illustrates the problem with a single word *mā*, which, depending on the pitch, can mean a horse, mother, scold or numb.

Mandarin also uses fewer vowel contrasts than e.g. English, and Mandarin diphthongs are usually pronounced with quicker and smaller tongue and lip movements than their English counterparts, which may pose a difficulty for English-speaking learners of the language. There are also many differences in pronunciation between English and Chinese Mandarin consonants. For instance, /b/, /d/, and /g/ are voiced in English, but not in Mandarin, /v/ is absent in Chinese, as well as /n/ and /z/, whereas /l/ and /r/ are usually difficult to distinguish.

In view of the aforementioned linguistic features, it could be stated that although Mandarin may not seem as easy as English to learn, the speed and easiness of its command will probably depend on the previous linguistic experiences of the learner. According to Los Angeles Chinese Learning Center (*wright*), "[t]he biggest impediment to learning Mandarin seems to be fear - sometimes caused by the teachers". Los Angeles Chinese Learning Center also presents an example of Mark Wright, who studied several foreign languages and none of which were as easy for him as Mandarin.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, it is true to state that the status of languages keeps changing, creating new language hierarchies. The changing status of Chinese Mandarin will possibly lead to one of three situations. One is that the English language will still hold the position of the preferred language of international communication within Asia. This will mostly stem from the fact that the English influences may be too strong to be threatened. It must be remembered that the English language and its culture are still popular in China as well as other Asian countries, and a lot of social and personal capital have been invested in its acquisition and use all around the world. The second scenario may be that Chinese Mandarin will become more and more important regionally and thus will achieve the status of a lingua franca in Greater China and will increase its importance in South-East Asia. The third option may be that no single language, but a lot of regional languages, will achieve the status of a lingua franca in Asia. A similar scenario, yet on a global scale, is painted by Ostler (2010: 31-64), who predicts that English will lose its strength and that no new lingua franca will replace it since translation software will allow direct communication without a need to learn a common language. However, there may be a situation in which Chinese Mandarin gradually becomes more and more important overseas. McCrum (2010:247-248) puts forward a hypothesis that the future of a global lingua franca may be decided in Africa, the untapped resources of oil and natural gas of which may be a great incentive for Chinese investment, which is free of colonial stigma so characteristic of the UK. Although it may seem too early to state definitely what the global reach and appeal of Mandarin will be, with the continuing economic decline of the US and the increasing growth of China, the spread of Mandarin over the Internet and the media, a constantly growing number of schools teaching Chinese overseas, and the relative easiness with which Mandarin could be acquired, Chinese Mandarin may equal English both in terms of the number of speakers as well as the language status.

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