

# The use of English in the social network of a student in South China

WERNER BOTHA

The social functions of language mixing among Chinese students

## Introduction

Many Chinese university students are bilingual or multilingual, increasingly switching between various Chinese language varieties and the English language (Bolton, 2013; Botha, 2014, Bolton & Botha, 2015). Bolton and Botha (2015) reported that undergraduate students at a national university in China used English for a range of social activities including ‘reading’, ‘Internet searches’, ‘online socialising’ and ‘socializing with friends’, among others. There is a need to investigate the extent to which these students actually use English in these contexts, especially in the productive use of the English language in their social lives. In examining such practices, the following questions are addressed in this article: (i) How is the English language used in the personal life of a student in Southern China; (ii) What are some of the functions of spoken and written English-Chinese code-mixing and switching between members of this student’s social network; and (iii) What kind of social information is conveyed through the use of English in this student’s social network? In order to examine the sociolinguistic reality of language use by these students, this article explores some of the social dynamics underlying the emerging use of English-Chinese code-switching and mixing within a particular social network: that of ‘Natalie’, a Chinese university student who speaks Putonghua (Mandarin, as a first language) and members within her social network, conversing within a range of modalities.<sup>1</sup> This case study focuses in particular on the use of English-Chinese code-switching and mixing practices, and the extent to which these communicative

practices are shaped by various social factors, ranging from the status of English as a perceived ‘international’ language, to aspects of stance and the affective quality of the relationships between members in this social network, to the intertextual nature of many of the linguistic instances to these practices.

Although Chinese-English code-mixing research has received some attention in general (Wang & Liu, 2016; Li & Wu, 2009; Chen, 1996; Van der Meij & Zhao, 2010; Zheng, 2009; Hird, 1996; Li, 1995; Yu & Elder, 2003; Li & Milroy, 1995; Zhang, 2000; Kwan-Terry, 1992; Lu, 1991), few studies in this context have considered code-switching and mixing practices from sociolinguistic and world Englishes paradigms (such as those of Wu, 1985 and Bi, 2011). With the increasing exposure to English among



*WERNER BOTHA is Assistant Professor at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. His research interests include the use of English in Asian higher education, educational linguistics, multilingualism, and language variation, with particular reference to the Asian region. Recent publications include research articles on the spread and use of English in China’s higher education and on sociolinguistic variation in Cantonese. Email: [wbotha@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:wbotha@ntu.edu.sg)*

Chinese university students, there is a need for investigating and interpreting the sociolinguistic realities<sup>2</sup> of the use of languages within this context (Bolton, 2013; Botha, 2013, 2014, 2016; Bolton & Botha, 2015; Li, 2012; Zhang, 2012, 2015). In examining the interactional practices influencing the use of languages in a particular social network, the study presented in this article utilizes an adapted version of Milroy's (1980) social network methodology for investigating social networks. The analysis in this current article draws out the social and linguistic patterns in order to account for some of the Chinese-English code-switching and mixing practices in the China context and the linguistic practices of Chinese young people today.

## Context and methods

The researcher invited one mainland Chinese student at a university in Macau to serve as the focus of this study, that is, as the 'ego' in his study of language and social networks among young Chinese students. At the time, Natalie (pseudonym) was a student of journalism in a university in Macau. Macau is one of the special administrative regions (or SARs) of the People's Republic of China, and the city is located in the South of China, bordering the city of Zhuhai in Guangdong Province to the North (see Figure 1). Natalie was selected because she spent her whole life living and going to school in mainland China, and relocated to Macau to study at



Figure 1. Map of Macau, Zhuhai and Guangdong Province

university (that is, as a 'cross-border student', see Li & Bray, 2007). She went to her family home in mainland China (Zhuhai) at least once a week. Natalie was interviewed on a number of occasions and a list was made of all the people she has had contact with over a two-month period prior to the research. The objective with these initial interviews was to identify her 'core' networks - people with whom Natalie had regular contact. The social network analysis needed to focus on a specific group in the subject's social network, and in accordance with network research practice set out by Milroy (1980), to use Natalie's regular close associations as a springboard for investigating how language was used within the network.

The subject Natalie reported having a large number of friends, although initially she did not appear to have a very 'dense' social network (in Milroy's 1980 sense of the term).<sup>3</sup> She named around 70 people she had contact with over a two-month period just prior to the research. She also lived part of the week at her university dormitory in Macau, where she shared a room with three other girls, and she went back to her parents' home in Zhuhai (Guangdong province, bordering Macau), where she usually spent her weekends. Next, Natalie studied and socialized with at least six others of the same gender, and also had voluntary associations with some of her classmates during her leisure time.

Milroy's (1980) measurement of 'network density', as it was applied to this study, did not reveal much about the specific type of friends that Natalie has, nor did it reveal the affective quality of her relations (that is, their 'closeness'). To address this in the present study, I assessed the 'affective quality' of the relations Natalie had with people in her social network. Whereas network density is concerned with types of relationship between people (such as friend or co-worker), the affective quality of a relationship concerns people's feelings about those they are connected with in a network (for example, a person feeling 'closer' to one friend compared with another, see Botha & Barnes, 2013, 2015 for detailed discussions). To that end, Natalie and the members of her 'core' network were interviewed again in order to establish the different levels of affect that Natalie had with each of the members in her network. Once the social network had been established, the 'quality scores' (or 'weight' of the ties) were added to reveal more precisely the closeness between Natalie and members of her network. Natalie's responses showed that certain members of her network were much 'closer' to

her than others, a level of result not available from a traditional social network method. The dense part of Natalie's wider social network was selected, and speech recordings, and other communications (that is, smartphone texts/chats, online/internet communications) were collected and transcribed. People who were not part of the 'dense' section (or 'exchange network') in Natalie's network were not considered worth inclusion (that is, 'passive' and 'interactive' networks). In total 14 naturalistic conversations were recorded, and around 50 smartphone text conversations (WeChat smartphone application texts), and 10 online socializing conversation texts (Weibo chats) were collected and collated.<sup>4</sup> These modes of communication were chosen as these types of communication were selected based on the social network members' self-reported use of languages in their personal lives, which included 'socializing with friends', 'internet searches', 'online chats/online socializing'.

All the participants in this study gave consent for the research and when Natalie was in various relaxed situations with different members in her network (shopping with her friends or eating out), she recorded their conversations. In total, the translated spoken dataset of spoken language consists of approximately 185,000 words. Speech recordings were not possible for some members because Natalie was not in physical contact with these members, but she was in frequent contact with them on WeChat, or on Weibo (This is referred to as 'online socializing' in this study). WeChat was used by all members of Natalie's network and was the most frequently used application for online socializing. The WeChat and Weibo data consists of around 3500 words.<sup>5</sup> In this present study no social or linguistic variables were predetermined. The social networks were analysed using *Ucinet* (v. 6.282), which is software designed for social network analysis, developed by Borgatti, Everett and Freeman (2002), and the transcriptions were done with an adapted version of Du Bois' (1991) method.

## Data and analysis

### *Language use in the social network*

The members in the social network reported being able to speak nine different Chinese language varieties, but 13 of the 14 speakers added that they speak Putonghua (or Mandarin) as a home language with various members in their families. Natalie's mother speaks *Chaozhouhua* (or the

Chaozhou language variety of Chinese) and Cantonese, but almost exclusively speaks Putonghua to Natalie. Natalie's parents sometimes speak Cantonese with one another when discussing their family business. When Natalie and her younger sister are around, the family almost exclusively speaks Putonghua. Natalie also speaks some Cantonese and Chaozhouhua. This pattern of language use was similar to that of other members in the social network, and it was found that 13 of the 14 members spoke at least two Chinese language varieties, and 7 reported speaking three Chinese language varieties. Only one of the speakers, from Beijing, could speak only one Chinese language variety, that is Putonghua. It appears to be the norm for almost all of the people in this social network to speak multiple Chinese language varieties in their lives. All of the university students in Natalie's social network have almost completely shifted to Putonghua, perhaps due to the fact that all of these young people completed their schooling in the medium of Putonghua, and were accustomed to using the language as an educational lingua franca. In addition, the parents of many of these university students also felt that their home 'dialects' were 'not useful' for their children's future. Natalie's mother pointed out that it was a deliberate choice to raise Natalie in a Putonghua-only home environment, and that she did not consider Cantonese and *Chaozhouhua* useful for Natalie and her sister's futures. It was also found that almost all of the university students in the social network felt that their own English abilities were 'good', although a majority reported that their parents could not speak English well. Although all the speakers reported using Putonghua 'all/almost' the time, just over half of the respondents claimed that they use a great deal of English in their lives (echoing results presented in Bolton & Botha, 2015).

Figure 2 presents a visual representation of the social network investigated for this study. Natalie has four people in her first-order network zone (everyone knows everyone in this zone), and ten people in her second-order network zone, where the affective quality between Natalie and these associations decreases as one moves further away from the centre. Some of the members also know one another in Natalie's second-order network zone. The affective quality of the network is also presented in Figure 2, and from the 'ties' it can be noted that Natalie has the closest relationships with her dad and her best friends Ali and Joan. These relationships all have a tie strength of '6' or '7'. Natalie also has close relationships with

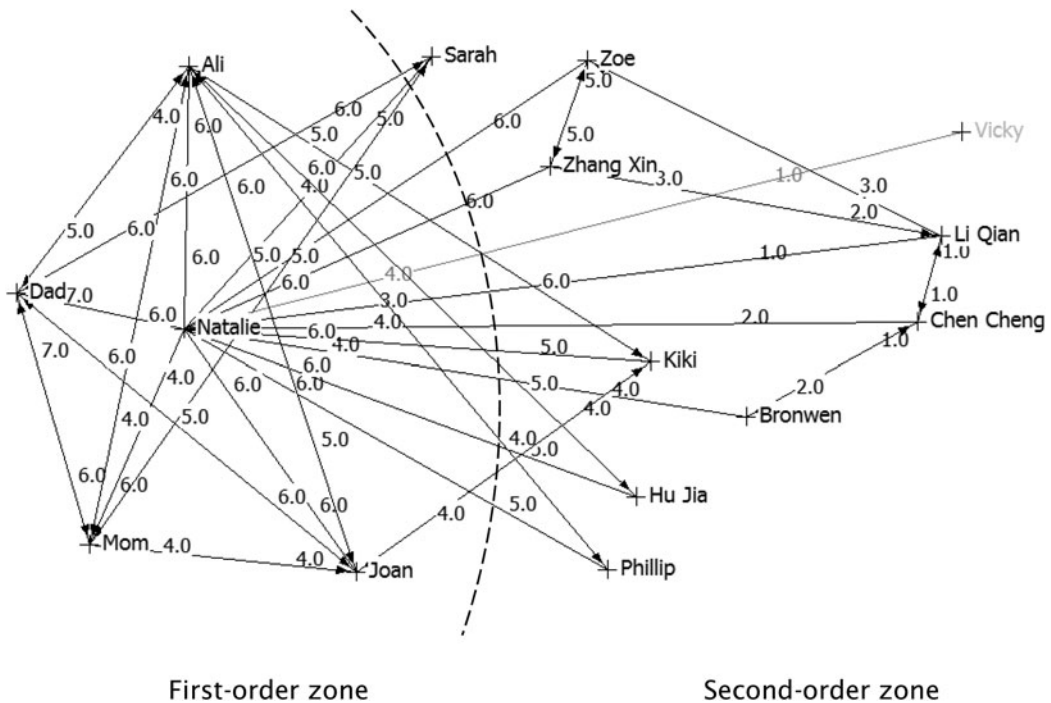


Figure 2. Natalie's social network (with Natalie as the ego of the network)

Sarah, Zoe, Zhang Xin, Kiki, Hu Jia, and Natalie's boyfriend Phillip, with values of between '4' and '6'. The value of Natalie's relationships with Bronwen, Chen Cheng, Li Qian, and Vicky measure between '1' and '3' – the lowest between Natalie and the members in her network. At the beginning of the research project, Natalie and Vicky were closer friends, but started to less frequently contact one another during the research period, and by the end of the study seldom contacted one another.

### *The functions of English in the social lives of Chinese university students*

One immediate observation from the data was that the use of English in the spoken conversations was much less frequent compared with the online socializing data, consisting of only a few instances of English-Chinese code-switching and code-mixing (approx. 0.01%). The use of English in the spoken data consisted most often of isolated words and phrases (that is, code-mixing). When the speakers used English in their conversations, it was mostly when talking about their studies, or for proper nouns (names) of people or things. As can be seen in examples (1) and (2), Natalie and Bronwen are talking about their studies at

university, and are talking about their teachers' pronunciation. In (1), Natalie and Bronwen identify their teachers by their English names (Lydia, Fandy), and also use the English name for the course they are studying (Social issues). In (2), Natalie and Bronwen are also talking about their studies, and Natalie uses English words 'translation' and 'education' when talking about one of her classes. Interestingly, in both (1) and (2) English is also used in the context of humour, as in both cases English is used when talking about what the speakers in the dialogues refer to as the odd pronunciation of some of their teachers, in (1), or a funny event in one of their classes, in (2).

(1)

- Natalie: Qi shi..you you yi dian neige ...  
 you yi dian neige Guangzhoude  
 kou yin ah ... jiu gen **Lydia**  
 jiangde youdian xiang  
*(Actually.. there is a bit of ... there  
 is a bit of Guangzhou's accent ... It  
 sounded like Lydia's accent)*
- Bronwen: Ah.. ranhou neige shei ... bushi ...  
 jiu jiao women **Social issue**de  
 neige lao shi.. jiang yingwen jiang  
 tiebie qiguai ...

(Ah..then there is someone ... didn't she ... teach us social issues that teacher ... spoke English very weirdly ...)

Natalie: [uh ... ] shi shei ah?  
([uh ... ] Who is that?)

Bronwen: ... xiang xiang ... **Fandy**  
(... let me think ... Fandy)

Natalie [**Fandy?**] (ha ha)  
Fandy

*Natalie and Bronwen (Putonghua) – walking to a bus station*

(2)

Natalie: Wo bu zhidao fan zheng ta jiu ...  
Wo bu zhidao fan zheng ta yizhi  
bi kai.. ta yi.. ta yi bu kaixing ...  
ta jiu zuo zai yizi shangmian yizhi  
nian yingwen

(I don't know in any case he ... I don't know in any case he kept avoiding.. once he.. once he is upset ... he will sit down and keep speaking English)

Bronwen: (ha ha)

Natalie: Jiushi.. dui.. shenme.. **translation..**  
ah.. shenme.. ah.. shenme **educa-**  
**tion** (ha ha)  
(It's just.. towards.. what.. transla-  
tion.. ah..what..ah..what education  
(ha ha)

Bronwen: (ha ha)

*Natalie and Bronwen (Putonghua) – walking to a bus station*

From (1) it can also be seen how English is incorporated into the Putonghua structure, with the Putonghua possessive particle 'de' used together with the English word/name 'Social issue' to form 'Social issue de'.

The recorded data also reveals that English code-switching and mixing was used for topics related to current technology, such as the use of 'wifi' by Natalie and Bronwen in (3), and Natalie in (4). In (4) Natalie uses the possessive particle 'de' with 'wifi' to form 'wifide' (to imply 'the place where wifi is/can be used'). The English names for smartphone games were also sometimes used, as in the example of 'Candy Crush' in (5). And in (6), Natalie and Zoe are talking about a new version of the i-phone, and 'i-phone' is used in English.

(3)

Bronwen: Ei, **wifi** you meiyou?  
(Hey, is there WiFi?)

Natalie: You **wifi** ... huh ... weishenme bu  
kai na ne?  
(There is WiFi ... huh ... why can't  
it switch on?)

*Natalie and Bronwen (Putonghua) – taking a bus*

(4)

Natalie: You gaosu **wifide** difang. Huozhe  
ni you zijide liuliangshang  
(There's a place with high-speed  
WiFi. Or is there another place  
you want to go)

Mom: Jiali ?  
(Home?)

*Natalie and her parents (Putonghua) – having dinner*

(5)

Natalie: Ni wanle duoshao le.. neige..  
**Candy Crush**  
(What is your level in Candy  
Crush)

Zoe: Bashi duo ba  
(More than 80)

*Natalie and Zoe (Putonghua) – at a dancing lesson*

(6)

Natalie: **i-phone** liu bushi you chule ma  
(Hasn't i-phone six been  
released?)

Zoe:: [shenmeshihou]  
[when]

Natalie: Neige shi **i-phone air** ba  
(That is the i-phone air model)

Zoe: Shenmeshihou chu ah?  
(When will it be released?)

Natalie: Jiu yue  
(September)

*Natalie and Zoe (Putonghua) – at a dancing lesson*

On one occasion it was found that the speakers switched to English when they did not want other people to understand what they are saying. In (7) Natalie and Bronwen are talking about someone they recognize in a shopping mall, and switch completely to English, with both wondering why this person is in a particular store. Compared with

Natalie and Bronwen's ordinary conversations, this bit of English-only conversation in (7) is much slower and somewhat static, with little speech overlap.

(7)

Natalie: And she's work.. ah.. downstairs  
 Bronwen: [Oh yeah]  
 Natalie: So why does she have so many  
 time to come here?  
 Natalie: I don't know.. maybe it's the clos-  
 est store  
 Bronwen: I don't understand  
 Natalie: Me neither  
 Bronwen: So crazy

*Natalie and Bronwen (Putonghua; English) – in a shopping mall*

### The functions of English in texting

The frequency of English words in the text data indicates a surprisingly frequent use of English between members in the social network. In fact, 22.5% of the words in this sample were in English. The frequency distributions also increased in a general manner where the affective quality between the members in the network is higher. For example, Natalie and Philip are quite close and there is more frequent use of English between the two, while Li Qian and Natalie are not very close, and there is considerably less frequent code-switching and mixing in their WeChat conversations. However, this latter claim only holds true for those members who know English well, as communications between Natalie and her parents seldom contain English words and/or expressions. It appears problematic to correlate contact frequency between members through their WeChat conversations, and the affective quality between the members may only have some impact with regards to the frequency of English use between the members. This is perhaps attested by the use of English between Natalie and Ali, where 13.4% (or 74/552) of their chats were in English, even though the two used WeChat the most frequently compared with all the other members, and they are very close friends. And the WeChat conversations between Natalie and Chen Cheng were quite regular, and they are not very close, but 9% (or 28/309) of words were in English.

It appears that conversation topic varies between the different members in the social network, and that Natalie tends to chat about more personal

matters in English with people that she is closer to in her network. From example (8) it can be seen how the topic involves one of Natalie's emotional issues, but that the conversation contains more lengthy expressions in English, and that Ali is using English almost exclusively to comfort Natalie.

(8)

Natalie: 诶 好 sad  
 (Oh very sad)  
 Ali: 不要不开心 好好安静一下 要知道 i am always here  
 (Don't be unhappy be peaceful for a while know i am always here)  
 Natalie: 嗯好  
 (Ah good)  
 Ali: xoxo [Rose]  
 Ali: Everything will be alright~  
 Ali: Tmr is another day  
 Natalie: Sure. I'll be fine. no big deal, don't worry

From (8) it can also be seen that that many of the phrases that Ali uses are routine and formulaic English expressions, particularly here to comfort Natalie. Ali uses the phrases 'Everything will be alright' and 'Tmr (tomorrow) is another day' to connect with Natalie and to indicate a close social bond between the two speakers. It can be argued that these formulaic expressions are of an intertextual nature, with many of these expressions seemingly adopted from English films and television series that these students are exposed to in their personal lives. This use of English to maintain social bonds between Natalie and Ali was noted in a number of their WeChat conversations.

It was also found that English was used when conversations involved topics that might cause embarrassment between opposite genders, such as sex. An example of this is presented in (9), where the conversation between Natalie and Phillip starts getting personal, and she gently chides him for thinking about sex (that is, 'the desire of ur deepest heart that related to sex'). This somewhat echoes the findings of Zhao (1989) who noted that college students in the 1980's were using English to express affection because Chinese culture does not encourage explicit expression of affection, and using English reduces the effects of perceived psychological barriers in the local culture by distancing the native culture (see also Zhao & Campbell, 1995).

(9)

Phillip: Don't be worry  
 Phillip: Hahahaaa  
 Natalie: Will u kill me just to keep me in the most perfect moment?  
 Phillip: I deem u always heavy thinking  
 Phillip: so what's the perfect moment means? when u sleeping on ur bed? or bathing?  
 Natalie: That shows the desire of ur deepest heart that related to sex ...  
 Natalie: well ... i just read some books of Freud, that makes me think sososo much ...  
 Phillip: . . . . . i guess so

When the topics in the conversations were of a more general nature, the use of switching and mixing was restricted to isolated words or phrases, and the use of English was mostly restricted to the use of place names, music, and technology. From (10) it can be seen how the use of English is restricted to place names such as 'Venetian' (a casino resort in Macau), 'G2000' (a shop's name), the name of a popular singer 'Corinne Bailey Rae'.

(10)

Natalie: 你买了suit了没?  
 (Have you bought your suit yet?)  
 Zoe: 还未有! 我打算去G2000看看  
 (Not yet! I'm planning to go to G2000 to have a look)  
 Natalie: Venetian的还是新马路的?  
 (The one at Venetian or in Sanmalou?)  
 Zoe: 新马路的吧 V太远了  
 (Sanmalou. The one at V is too far)  
 Natalie: 好吧 你下午来训练不? 我不想去  
 (Alright. Are you coming to training this afternoon? I don't want to go)  
 Zoe: come on baby! 来训练! 我们可以聊天啊  
 (Come on baby! Come to training! We can chat)  
 Natalie: 好吧好吧 那我来吧  
 (Alright, alright, I'll come)  
 Natalie: 你不是要听歌吗 我给你几首  
 (Didn't you want to listen to music. I'll give you some)  
 Natalie: Put your records on  
 Natalie: Corinne Bailey Rae唱的 超好听  
 (Corinne Bailey Rae sings super nice)

Natalie: 第一个清晨 王力宏  
 (The first thing in the morning is Wang Li Hong)  
 Zoe: okok 现在就download!  
 (okok going to download it now!)

English was also used when the speakers were using light-hearted humour, as can be seen from example (11). In this example Natalie calls Zhang Xin an 'Aunty', and Zhang Xin replies by telling Natalie, jokingly, that she is a 'bad egg' (that is, a scoundrel). Interestingly, Natalie uses English to keep her social bond with Zhang Xin by ending the conversation with a repeated 'luv u'. Also of note, is the use of unconventional orthography of textual information to represent auditory information such as laughter, prosody, and other non-language sounds. In (11) it can also be seen that Natalie uses both English and Chinese to represent laughter in her text message.

(11)

Zhang Xin: 应该可以的吧  
 (It should be possible)  
 Natalie: 大妈  
 (Aunty)  
 Natalie: see u later  
 Zhang Xin: 哈哈你这个坏蛋 bad egg  
 (Hahaha, you are a bad egg bad egg)  
 Natalie: luv u luv u hahahaaaaaa

Finally, some of the members in Natalie's social network also communicated with each other on Weibo chats, and in the data collected for this study just over 5% of the Weibo chat data consisted of English words. Although, the data set for the Weibo chats was significantly smaller (containing 10 group chats over the period of a month) than the speech recording and WeChat data sets, it was found that English was also regularly used in these chats. The contexts in which English code-switching was used were similar to those in the spoken and WeChat data sets.

### Code-switching and code-mixing practices

The examples of research data presented above illustrate the various uses of English in the personal lives of Chinese university students today. It was found that English was much more frequently used in the WeChat and Weibo chats, compared with the spoken data (see Table 1). The data reveal which contexts are typically associated with code-mixing and switching in the conversations between

**Table 1: The use of English in Natalie's social network**

Natalie and ...	Languages	Use of English -% of words*	Contexts
<b>First-order zone</b>			
Dad	P	0.07%	Place names; humour; technology
Mom	P; Ch	<0.01%	Technology
Ali	P	6.7%	Agreement; softening; comfort; humour; names; closeness; ending conversation
Joan	P	2.5%**	Dancing terms; names
Sub-total avg. %		2.3%	
<b>Second-order zone</b>			
Sarah	P	20.9%**	Agreement; closeness; confirmation marker; surprise
Phillip	P; C	14.8%	Social distance marker; place names; softening; conversation starter; Secretive conversation/social distance (Ns parents around); popular mixing terms (status); ending conversation
Hu Jia	P	8%**	Humour; popular mixing terms (status)
Kiki	P	40%**	Conversation starters; general code mixing; names
Bronwen	P	7.9%	University; studies; teachers; secretive conversation/social distance marker; names; closeness; conversation starter; technology; humour;
Zhang Xin	P	5.7%**	Humour; ending conversation
Zoe	P	7.2%	University; studies; technology; surprise; names; innovative use
Chen Cheng	P	9%**	Names; place names; technology
Li Qian	P	3.7%**	Studies
Sub-total avg. %		10.5%***	
Total avg. %		6.4%	

P = Putonghua; C = Cantonese; Ch = Chaozhouhua

\* Percentages are heavily skewed towards text data in the WeChat data set. Avg. % for spoken data is 0.1%, while avg. % for WeChat data is 22.5%; \*\* WeChat and Weibo chat data only; \*\*\* Highest and lowest % not calculated in avg. %

the members in this network. Overall it was found that names for people, places, and things were the most commonly used contexts where English was used. The English names of the students' friends and Chinese teachers were used, the names of technological items, smartphone games, and 'foreign' brands were frequently used in both the spoken and WeChat data. English was also used frequently for greetings or when ending conversations, where the speakers would greet each other (as with 'Hi'), or close their conversations in English ('Bye bye', 'Take care'). The next most frequent use of code-switching and mixing was

observed when the students discussed their university, studies, or teachers. Another frequently-observed use of English was found when the speakers talked about technology, especially smartphone technology, such as various smartphone applications, the use of 'wifi', 'app', and the names of phone or computer brands. It was also found that some of the speakers also used English for humour. Less frequent uses of English were observed for indicating social distance, as either a way of drawing speakers together (that is, for closeness or solidarity), or to deliberately create social distance. This was particularly noted in the



WeChat data, and with members who are socially very close to Natalie. Examples in the WeChat data are shown above, where Ali comforts Natalie about a personal issue, and when Phillip and Natalie discuss their personal thoughts and feelings. An interesting finding was that English also created social distance and was used to deliberately exclude others from the conversation, as when Natalie and Bronwen were gossiping about someone they know, and perhaps also when Natalie and Phillip were talking about personal issues. English was used to talk about personal issues between Natalie and Phillip, especially when Natalie's parents were around, when she did not want her parents to know that she was in a romantic relationship (to have privacy). When she was with her parents and chatting to Phillip using WeChat, Natalie would often switch to English in her chats.

All the speakers indicated that English had a practical purpose in their lives, and that these students perceived themselves to be 'English-using bilinguals'. They also claimed to use English regularly in various aspects of their social lives. Even though the results indicate a far less frequent or 'actual' use of English in their lives, these speakers *believed* that they regularly and frequently used English in their social lives. These beliefs about the importance and utility of English were shared by all the members of this social network and evidently indicated a stereotypical belief about the role and value of the English language. It was also interesting to note that similar values were also associated with Putonghua.

The results also suggest that some code-switching patterns highlight specific conversational contexts and the social conditions of the speakers. One example of the contextual use of English is when speakers are talking about their education and studies. This suggests that university campuses can be regarded as a crossing of spaces in a physical sense, where Chinese students bring together various dimensions of their personal histories and experiences, along with their ideological values about languages and language use, into one coordinated and lived experience. These acts of code-switching and mixing can then be interpreted as indexing (or referring to) this physical space. A recent study by Botha (2014) discussed the increasing case of English as a medium (or additional) medium of instruction in China's universities, and one can assume that many of these students have had exposure to English through their studies. Natalie, and some of her friends in the social network presented here are studying at a university in Macau, and the university promotes itself as an

English-medium university. Even though these students most often hear Putonghua in their classes (Botha, 2013), many of these students are used to referring to their studies (such as specialized terms, courses, and their majors) in English. Switching and mixing here indicates that certain English words/phrases act as 'markers' that are shared between specific members. Another marker is when English is used in the context of 'humour' between the speakers.

In text data it was found that English was frequently used to indicate social distance and/or to indicate affect, especially when two speakers were close. This is perhaps best captured in Natalie and Phillip's WeChats when they were talking about issues related to their relationship, or when Natalie's parents were around. Natalie used English to create social distance between Natalie and her parents, and to create and maintain a social bond between herself and Phillip, and to provide an opportunity for them to talk about personal issues related to their relationship. Another instance of switching and mixing indexing affect was captured in Natalie and Ali's WeChats. One final observation here is that all the participants in this study used Hanyu Pinyin (Romanization) of Chinese when texting on their phones, and in order to input English, a person has to change the input language setting on their phone. This suggests that the use of English in the context of online socializing is a deliberate and conscious choice on the part of the speaker.

## Conclusion

With reference to the research questions outlined in the introduction of this paper, the results of this study indicate that English played an important role in the social network of the Chinese student who served as the 'ego' of the network investigated for this study, albeit through the practice of code-mixing and code-switching. Such practices appeared closely linked to individual and network-shared experiences of these particular informants related to: (i) the affective quality between speakers; (ii) conversation topic (such as studies, technology); and (iii) the network density of speakers in a social network. From the linguistic data gathered for this research, it is apparent that the frequency of English code-switching and mixing is greatest when the interlocutors use online socializing methods and the conversation topics are focused on particular contexts and the speakers' social conditions. In this study the code-switching and mixing practices in the social networks of

young people in China reveal the fluidity of their language practices, specifically in the ways they cross spaces in the physical sense between places, and also in their online and media communications, while constantly displaying aspects of their personal and group identities through their patterns of language behaviour. This could perhaps also suggest that this linguistic practice reflects creative ‘translanguaging’ practices, and in addition, a transformation in the language ideologies of these Chinese students today, which may especially alter their values and beliefs toward languages and language practices as they negotiate new perspectives through their interaction with others in these contexts (Li & Zhu, 2013: 533).

## Notes

- 1 Multimodal communication methods refer to spoken discourse as well as online and mobile phone texting. These methods of communication are also referred to as ‘modalities’ in this article.
- 2 The ‘sociolinguistic realities’ of language use refers to Kachru’s (1992) concept, which aims to describe a socially realistic way in which languages (specifically English) are used in the day to day lives of speakers, particularly with regards to various varieties of English.
- 3 For a discussion of measuring network density, see Milroy (1980).
- 4 WeChat is an instant messaging service that has gained increasing popularity in mainland China. WeChat provides multimedia communication with text-messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, broadcast messaging, and photo/video sharing, among others. Chats are available for two people, or for groups, and previous chats with people in one’s contacts are displayed as one continuous page, so chat history with another person (or group) can easily be accessed. Weibo is a China-based microblogging site akin to Facebook.
- 5 After Natalie’s ‘core’ social network was established many of her conversations with members in this network were recorded. All Natalie’s WeChat and Weibo text messages between her and the member in her social network were collected over the period of a month. The transcriptions for the conversations were done in Pinyin for Putonghua. No tone diacritics are indicated in the spoken Putonghua data. All the written chats between the members were captured exactly as they were written (in simplified Chinese script).

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