More Than Words: Code-Switching Among Chinese Immigrant Parents

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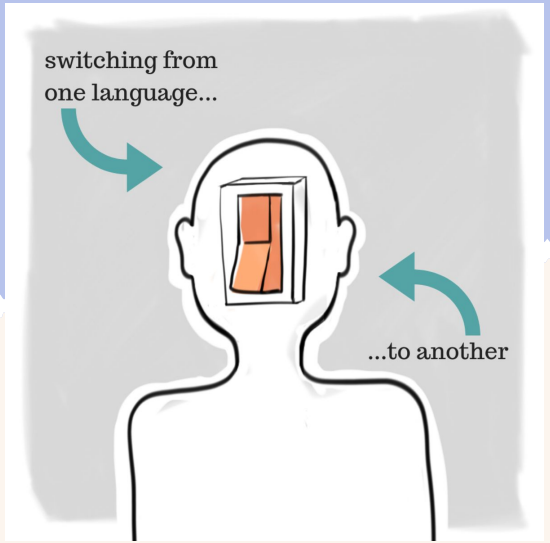
An example

What is Code-Switching?

Switching between languages within a sentence or conversation

- Common in multilingual, multicultural communities
- **Often reflects more than language fluency!!**
  - identities, emotions, culture…

- Mandarin-English code switching is very common, but **WHY? What can code-switching reveal?**



My Research Question

When and Why do Chinese Immigrant Parents code-switch when they talk about race and social status?

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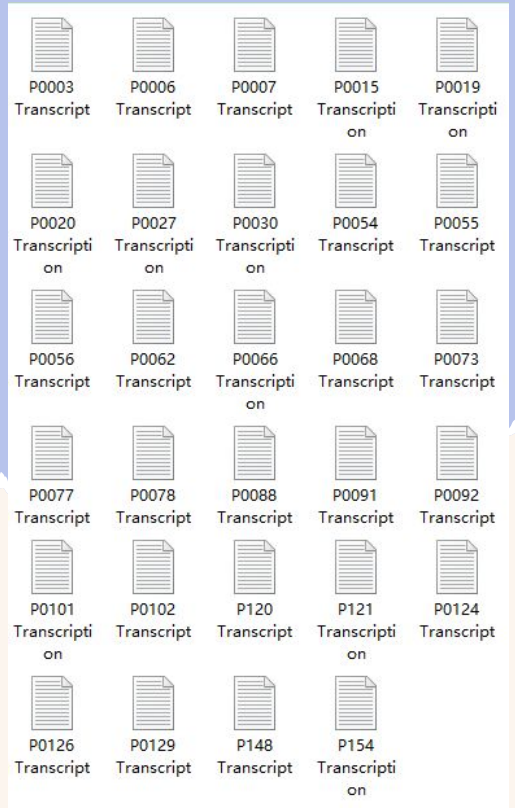
Method

Data

- 30 transcriptions of Mandarin-English mixed language interviews with Chinese immigrant parents regarding race, social mobility, and success.

- All 30 were mandarin-dominant
  - Parent and the interviewer both spoke Mandarin



Analysis

I: 能不能解释一下您的回答?

P: 就是，一个是我们在education这个阶层我们过去的几年也一直在，还在努力，虽然已经年纪算比较大，但是还在pursue一些更高的education。这是一方面。另外也因为工作年纪的增长这个家庭收入也得到了很大的提高，所以在这个number的level，这个number会有这个提高。

I: 好。现在我们想问一下您一些关于种族的问题。呃，总的来说您认为以下的种族在这个梯子上处于那个位置？然后再说一遍，在梯子的最顶端是社会最顶层的家庭，然后在梯子的最底端是社会最底层的家庭。您觉得大多数美籍黑人在这个梯子第几层?

P: 大多数来说的话，应该说比较低一点吧？可能算挺低的，2，1，2左右吧。

```
    return '\n'.join(chinese_lines)

def extract_english(content):
    lines = content.splitlines()
    english_lines = []

    for line in lines:
        if line.startswith("I") or line.startswi
            # Skip lines starting with I: or i:
            continue
        else:
            english_part = ''.join([c for c in line if n
            english_lines.append(english_part)

    return '\n'.join(english_lines)

def process_txt(file_path):
    with open(file_path, 'r', encoding='utf-8') as f:
```

P: , education, , , pursue education。。, number level, number。

P: , ? , 2, 1, 2。

P: , , , , , 2, 3。

P: diversified, 。, population, 4, 4, 5。, , , , 。black and white, tricky。

1. Raw transcript

2. Python script to automate extraction of English insertions

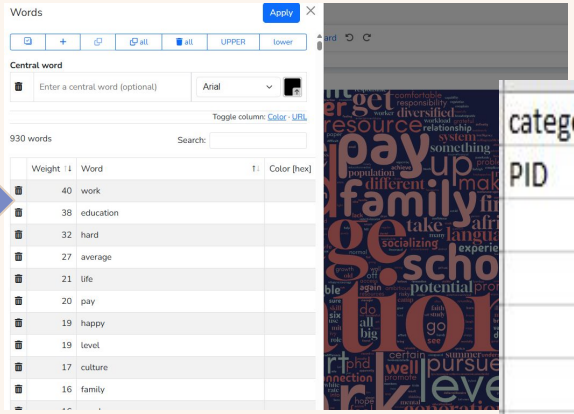
- Also filtering out filler words not relevant to the topic

3. Extracted English insertions

Analysis

```
for word, freq in word_frequencies.items():
    if word not in headers:
        headers.append(word)
        for pid in data:
            data[pid][word] = 0
    if word not in data[PID]:
        data[PID][word] = 0
    data[PID][word] += freq

# Write updated data back to CSV
with open('word_frequencies.csv', 'w', newline='', enc
    writer = csv.writer(csvfile)
    writer.writerow(headers)
    for pid, word_freqs in data.items():
        row = [pid] + [word_freqs.get(word, 0) for wor
        writer.writerow(row)
```



931 unique English insertions in total

category	1	1	2	2	
PID	i	you	work	education	hard
3	3	1	24	10	1
6	34	13	5	1	
7	0	0	0	0	
15	1	0	0	1	
19	22	21	1	4	

4. Frequency observation (automated into csv file) and word cloud display (wordclouds.com)

5. Manual coding of word categories based on existing literature

- **Zhong et al. (2024)**
- **Ritchie & Bhatia (2013)**

Modified Theoretical Framework

5 Categories of Code-Switching	Explanation
Participant Identity	Self presentation, social roles… (asian, mom, immigrant…)
Situational	Topic relevant, setting… (education, work, business…)
Message-Intrinsic	Topic comment, cultural wisdom, quotation… (best, average, hard…)
Sociopsychological	Language dominance, technical terms… (NBA, GRE, MD…)
Convenience	Word more readily available in English than Mandarin due to environment or priming (deadline, paper…)

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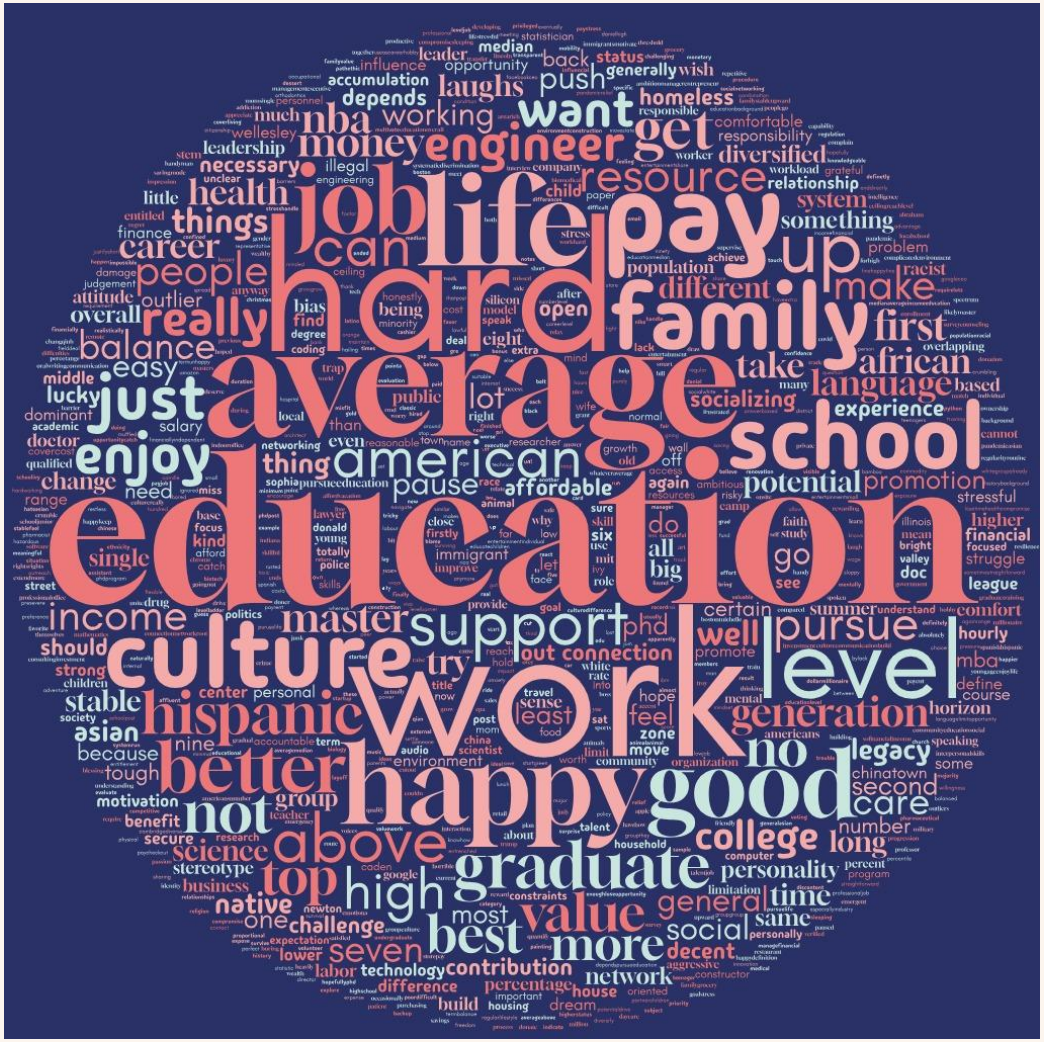
Results


education
average
hard
life
job
pay
family
school
work
culture
happy
good
level
engineer
money
resource
hispanic
better
graduate
high
value
more
best
above
top
not
no
generation
pursue
support
master
income
enjoy
just
can
up
make
first
african
language
experience
potential
promotion
financial
career
people
really
balance
health
things
nba
want
get
laughs
push
depends
homeless
diversified
relationship
something
system
problem
racial
different
open
bias
being
take
socializing
lot
public
than
even
thing
american
pause
affordable
do
all
big
go
see
single
income
stable
asian
because
tough
motivation
benefit
secure
science
stereotype
business
native
challenge
seven
labor
technology
contribution
difference
percentage
network
house
dream
build
housing
general
social
personality
college
long
second
care
number
legacy
chinatown
horizon
mba
comfort
hourly
league
struggle
higher
focused
stressful
summer
certain
well
phd
out connection
try
center
personal
sense
least
feel
hope
mental
zone
move
organization
community
environment
china
scientist
limit
household
computer
program
percent
time
same
personally
decent
aggressive
constructor
oriented
important
housing
dream
build
difference
percentage
contribution
technology
labor
seven
challenge
one
newton
most
best
more
value
general
high
graduate
personality
college
long
second
care
number
legacy
chinatown
horizon
mba
comfort
hourly
league
struggle
higher
financial

When did people switch to English? (Ranked)

- **1. Situational**

Work (40), education (38), job (16), school (16), engineer (9)

- **2. Message Intrinsic**

Hard (32), average (27), happy (19), good (16)

- **3. Identity**

Culture (17), family (16), american (11), asian (5)

- **4. Convenience**

Master’s [degree] (7), network (4), China(2), startup

- **5. Sociopsychological**

NBA (7), PhD (5), MBA (4), Google, Ivy [league]

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Discussion

Why?

Conceptual and lexical accessibility

Some terms are more deeply rooted in / originated from Western cultures; Strong English association

Labeling, alignment, & belonging

Certain uses of English reassures the American identity and positioning within the U.S. social structure

Emotional emphasis

Participant might have stronger feelings toward certain topics in a English context

Limitations

Specific demographic

- Chinese immigrant parents with adolescent children
- Mostly highly educated

Limited scope

- Topic of the interviews impacted the use of certain words

Ambiguity in coding categories

- Overlaps in categories
- Lack of formal codebook

Causal inference

- Still difficult to draw causal inferences for WHY people choose to code switch
- Can only hypothesize based on pattern observation

Thanks!

Questions?

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