

The Freedom of Language

Abstract.

Danying Yi is 54 years old and speaks both English and “Chinese”. Within the numerous Chinese languages, she speaks Mandarin, the official language of China, as well as Cantonese and Hunan. She grew up speaking Hunan in her home town, and eventually picked up Mandarin, Cantonese, and English while attending university in Guangzhou. She considers herself fluent in Mandarin, Hunan, and English, but having lived in the United States for the past few decades, English is now her most dominant language. The language she uses varies by case, as she switches based on the subject matter and the group she is interacting with. Conversations with her parents and brother are conducted in Hunan, the language of her childhood, while she speaks English at home with her family in Washington D.C.

Danying Yi, now age 54, was born in a small town in the Xiangxiang county of China’s Hunan province (1, 2). Her journey saw her move from her mud-brick home to one of the largest cities in China, then all the way across the Pacific to the United States. Now she lives in Washington D.C. along with her native English-speaking husband and her two cats Basil and Ginger (3). Speaking as her son, I would say Danying is best described as determined and hard-working. She always approaches any topic with a practical stance, and multilingualism is no exception. For the average person, juggling numerous languages in a country as diverse as China while keeping up with English might seem daunting, but for Danying being multilingual is just something natural – “a byproduct of living in different places.” (19)

Although now Danying speaks Mandarin, the official language of China, and two other Chinese languages, Hunan and Cantonese, in her small rural town she grew up only speaking Hunan (4). Thinking back on her childhood, she remarks that Hunan is a “very ancient” language. Many of the oldest Chinese poems, written thousands of years ago, still rhyme in Hunan, but have lost some of their rhyme and flow when read in Mandarin. After graduating from high school in 1978, Danying was admitted to Zhongshan University, a prestigious public university in Guangzhou, China. Her father was a professor of comparative literature at the

university, and Danying's family moved to the campus after a change in policy allowed her mother to move from Xiangxiang to Guangzhou without losing her job. After moving into a university in one of China's largest cities, Danying met students from all over the country and began learning Mandarin and Cantonese. It wasn't until college that Danying had her first experience with English, "starting from ABCs." She admits to being one of the worst students in the class during the first year and other students "made fun of [her] since most of them came from big cities." Being from a small town, Danying hadn't had the same prior exposure to English that many of her classmates had. Nevertheless, she continued her studies of English for two more years in college and continued to read English literature in graduate school. Looking back, Danying recalls that coming to the United States for graduate school, her reading skills were enough to get by but her comprehension was "not great." She remembers how when first moving to the states she read *Time* magazine but had difficulty "telling the difference between advertisements and stories since in China advertisements in magazines weren't as common." Living in Mississippi, the strong accents in the region only made learning and comprehension more difficult, but over time Danying became increasingly familiar with English and she eventually moved to Washington D.C. (5)

When comparing picking up different Chinese languages to learning English, Danying makes it clear that learning English was much more difficult. She picked up most of her knowledge of Mandarin and Cantonese by simply going through daily life at the university (11). "Learning [other languages in China] was made easier because there is only one written language in China, dictated by the first Emperor of China, Qi Shi Huang, after he united China more than two thousand years ago." On the other hand, Danying was completely thrown off when she was first introduced to English. At Chinese universities, English is a mandatory course but prior to then she had no exposure to the language. She recalls having "to memorize a lot of new words over the course of many years." To this day, she still remembers her first English book, which she described as "a sci-fi booklet that [she] read to pass time on the train." (11, 12)

Having lived in the United States since 1986, Danying has become much more comfortable with English. Right now, Danying considers herself fluent in English, Mandarin, and Hunan but she uses them in different circumstances. English is her go-to for talking about politics and work, but she prefers Mandarin in computational operations. "In English eleven has nothing to do with two ones, but in Mandarin it is yī-yī, or one-one. Eleven is also shíyī which is

ten-one.” (7, 8). She admits that she doesn’t have the new vocabulary that Mandarin has developed since she doesn’t live in China anymore. She explains how “Mandarin changes rather rapidly due to the government”. For example, the term “river crab” is currently used as a reference to internet censorship on many Chinese forums. Although Danying could get by on her current vocabulary, she notes that it would be difficult to “banter with the new Mandarin words.” (6, 13). Danying continues to maintain her knowledge of Hunan by using it regularly with her parents and brother but she doesn’t feel fluent in Cantonese since she hasn’t had the opportunity to use it much since moving to the United States (7, 9). Whenever she visits China, Mandarin is Danying’s preferred language but she also falls back on Cantonese if she happens to come across older people who are not well-versed in Mandarin (8). At home, Danying speaks English since her husband is a native English speaker from Wales (8, 10). For Danying, English is the language that is closest to her heart since it has a strong connection to the family she started.

However, when talking about family, Hunan is also a language that springs to Danying’s mind. She notes that she sometimes behaves in a more “infantile manner” when speaking Hunan because it was the language of her childhood. After leaving her hometown, Danying never really spoke Hunan except with her parents and brother, so it is deeply rooted in her family experience and childhood. In her words, “it stopped growing after [she] left home at sixteen.” (23) Even in her dreams, things that happened “in high school or before high school, are [dreamt about] in Hunan.” On the other hand, later events relating to Guangzhou and Zhongshan University are often dreamt about in Mandarin, and only dreams about her life in America are in English (15).

As evidenced by her dreams, Danying associates current events with English since she has lived in the United States for a few decades now. She describes how politics and work have become more prevalent in her life since moving to the United States, so she thinks in English when dealing with those areas. If she ever feels the need to think in Chinese, perhaps when visiting China, she thinks in Mandarin as that is the most common language in China’s largest cities (14). In her mind, each language serves a different purpose, and Danying very rarely mixes them. In fact, when asked about why she might avoid mixing languages, Danying points out that “in China people think you are pretentious if you mix in English with Mandarin.” However, certain situations might force her to use several languages at a time, which can lead to inadvertent mixing. She recalls one return to China where she had “friends talking in Mandarin,

[her] husband speaking English, and [her] parents chiming in with Hunan,” which was quite confusing! (17)

Even though Danying prefers to keep her languages separate when speaking, she takes a different stance when it comes to relationships. From her experience, relationships in one language tend to be more limited for her than bilingual or multilingual relationships. She distinguishes this limit as not being so much about content, but that relationships conducted in a single language are “more targeted in the subjects you are dealing with.” For example, Danying highlights that her multilingual relationships with close friends often span numerous topics and have an additional ease of understanding based on shared experience (24).

That additional ease, “the ability to bridge a gap and open up your world”, is what being multilingual means to Danying (19). Speaking several languages has allowed her to broaden her horizons and has given her a new point of view. When considering some of the pros and cons of being multilingual, Danying’s gut reaction was that “there is no real disadvantage”:

Being multilingual gives you freedom. Freedom from your past, freedom from yourself, and freedom to have a different point of view. Language is a product of geography and limited mobility, so speaking more languages gives you access to the point of view of people living in various places that have distinct ways of living. You realize people live differently, so you don’t have to limit yourself.

Ultimately, being multilingual gives people the ability to travel across the world and have countless enriching experiences. Danying summed it up best in saying that all in all “it gives you freedom.” (31)