

# I WON'T SPEAK OUR LANGUAGE WITH YOU: ENGLISH PRIVILEGE, ENGLISH-SPEAKING FOREIGNER STEREOTYPE, AND LANGUAGE OSTRACISM IN TAIWAN

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**Abstract:** The present study addresses language ostracism in intercultural communication, a phenomenon when someone speaks a language but some members of this language community don't speak to him in this language. This phenomenon is illustrated by language behaviour towards visually distinct bilingual minorities in Taiwan. Visually distinct minorities in Taiwan reported that they had been spoken to in English by small children or people who did not believe and accept that they really understood Mandarin when they spoke it. They might be spoken to in English despite actually speaking good Mandarin. Taiwanese people behave this way because of two conditions existing in Taiwan: an English-speaking foreigner stereotype where people assume that every foreign-looking person speaks English, and English privilege in Taiwanese society which leads to people being treated better if they can speak English.

**Key words:** language ostracism; social exclusion; English privilege; visually distinct minorities; Taiwan.

Ostracism is a phenomenon that has received considerable scholarly attention in social psychology in recent years (Sacco, Wirth, Hugenberg, Chen, & Williams, 2011; Poon, Chen, & DeWall, 2013; Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014). Kipling D. Williams (2007a) defined this phenomenon based on his personal experience—once when he was in the park, two men were throwing a frisbee to each other and it went to him. He threw it back and the men included him in the game by returning the frisbee. After playing the silent game for two minutes, suddenly they stopped throwing the frisbee to him and even stopped looking at him. According to Williams (2007a, p. 237), he felt “terrible and awkward and helpless” as if he was “suddenly invisible and had never existed”. That prompted Williams to start his research on social exclusion and its subsequent intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences—which he called ostracism—and many other studies followed. Having experienced ostracism, even in the short-term, people may feel a loss of control as a result of social exclusion, which further leads to lower self-esteem. This might result in aggression and self-hatred (Smith & Williams, 2004; Williams, 2007b). If people are ostracized for an extended period, feelings of alienation, depression, helplessness and worthlessness are the likely results (Williams, 2007a).

The first author encountered a similar situation to that of Williams. In 2011, he moved from mainland China (where he regularly spoke Mandarin) to Taipei to study and during

the first week of his stay, he made a phone call to a Taiwanese study buddy to set up a first appointment in Mandarin, the local working language. Back then his Mandarin was good enough to conduct a proper conversation, though he still needed to mix it occasionally with English. When the first author met his study buddy face-to-face, he started talking in Mandarin. However, the local student tried to switch their conversation to English by never responding in Mandarin again even after the first author had made several attempts to use the local language. The situation even continued after the local student spoke in Mandarin with the others in the group. This gave the first author very negative feelings. The first author searched on the internet to find out whether other people had similar experiences as him and found stories like this:

*... He is a Chinese native speaker, but people talk to him in bad English (which he doesn't speak) - he is told so many times that he is a foreigner that he comes crying to me. He would be the only foreign looking (blond) kid in the huge elementary school. (touduke)*

*... He told the story of a black girl he knew who was adopted by a Taiwanese couple as a baby. ... She only knew a little English, learned in school. Every Taiwanese person outside her immediate circle insisted on speaking to her in English, even after she replies in perfect Taiwanese or Mandarin. (gao buhan)*

This forced him to research this phenomenon further, which is described in what follows. We call such situations *language ostracism*, defined as a situation in which someone speaks a language, let us call it Language A, and this language is spoken in the community, but some members of the community choose not to converse with the speaker in Language A, despite the speaker showing competence in that language. Instead, they reply to him or her in another language: Language B. Note that language ostracism doesn't include situations in which the speaker has not shown an ability to speak language A or in which the speaker is unwilling to speak language A. In this study we describe language ostracism in Taiwan, where language A is Mandarin, and language B is English.

## Method

In this study, we adopt a version of the qualitative descriptive (Sandelowski, 2000) approach, an indirect observational study of participants' reflections of linguistic encounters in previous naturally occurring settings. The first author conducted 10 interviews in Taiwan. The interviewees were asked whether they had any experience of being spoken to in English, even after they had spoken to the local interlocutor in Mandarin, and whether they had witnessed any similar cases. The interviewer interrupted the interviewees if they strayed too far from the topic, while leaving them enough space to express themselves. The interviewer searched for interviewees until he had collected enough examples to describe the phenomenon. The interviews were recorded for the purpose of analysis.

## Sample

The sample was constructed so as to consist of people who might have experienced the phenomenon in question—visually distinct minorities were chosen as interviewees. The first

author searched for interviewees of non-East-Asian appearance who had lived in Taiwan for at least three years and were fluent in Mandarin. He searched for interviewees through his personal network (mainly Czech and Russian speaking communities) and through online advertisements. He found eight such people and finally added another two people who had only lived in Taiwan for one year and were less fluent in Mandarin. Three of the interviewees were Czech, three were Russian, two were American, one was German, and one was from Saint Lucia. Nine of the interviewees were white and one was Caribbean. Those interviewed were between 24 and 45 years old, three were female and seven male. Three interviews were held in Czech and seven in English. All the interviewees were living in Taipei or its vicinities.

## Results

In Taiwan, it is usually strangers who experience being spoken to in English because they are foreign-looking. All the interviewees reported that they had been a target for English practice by Taiwanese children, encouraged by their parents. It happened less often when communicating with adults who want to practice English:

*Kids on the playground, they go out with my son, he is just one year old. But Taiwanese people they just teach their children, who are maybe like five years old six years old. Oh, this is foreigner, child, go to him and speak English with him. He is just one year old, he can't talk at all. Why they talk English with him? (1)*

Other situations in which a foreign-looking person is spoken to in English in Taiwan occur when a Taiwanese person wants to show off his or her English proficiency to peers. Such a person might also start to use more English words when a foreign-looking person is present:

*People in some circumstances will be trying to show off to their friends. ... if Taiwanese guy speaks English very well, maybe he can pick up woman. (2)*

*It happens to me, it was not in conversation with me, but because I appeared there, that people around started to use English words when communicate together, even if they can't speak very well. But suddenly, after they noticed my presence, there was much more English words in their conversation. (3)*

Some Taiwanese adults do not believe that a foreign-looking person will be able to understand the local language, so it may take them a while before they realize and switch to Mandarin. In the case cited below, a manager in a local company takes *one year* to realise, accept and act on the fact that her employee actually speaks Mandarin well:

*For example one manager, she ignored me for a very long time. When I tried to speak Chinese, she turned to someone other and explained whole thing in Chinese, while I stand beside, understood all conversation, but I was not perceived as being full member. But after one year this lady speaks to me both in English and Chinese. ... (4)*

In extreme cases, foreigners with a near-native command of Mandarin may end up being spoken to in English:

*I was with a sinologist from Slovakia. She speaks perfect Chinese. She spoke with person working in shop, she spoke Chinese to him and he replied in English even if his English was bad. Still it was one way Chinese, second way English. (5)*

Even when English is not a language the foreign-looking person is proficient in, it is chosen as the language of communication. The Portuguese speaker in (6) and the French speaker in (7) are forced to speak (or even learn) English, despite speaking Mandarin:

*... even she had lived 12 years at Taiwan and her Chinese is perfect, she spoke in Chinese and he spoke continuously in English to her. Which is funny, because her English is very bad. She learned English from Taiwanese at Taiwan after she had mastered Chinese, her first language is Portuguese. (6)*

*One friend of mine, when he came to Taiwan, he didn't speak English, he spoke French and couple of African languages and he said he had trouble with this, that everyone assumed, that he can speak English. (7)*

This conscious choice of English over Mandarin as the communication language may backfire by irritating the foreign-looking person, which is testified by several of the interviewees' responses:

*I don't like it very much, because English is not my first language, so it irritated me at beginning. (8)*

*Once I was at bus stop, there were students from junior high school, 15 or 16 years old. They were just standing on bus stop and saying "hello, hello, hello, hello". ... I was really angry. (9)*

*In Taipei my experience has been everybody just speaks English to me, which is very frustrating. ... it's not that they are practising their English with you, they're practising their English on you. (10)*

To sum up, local people's widespread choice of English as the language of communication in Taiwan when they see a foreign-looking person may result in dismay and frustration in intercultural communication. The interviewees said that the phenomenon described here happens rarely and mostly with children. Nevertheless, it could even happen to people who have near-native knowledge of Mandarin and who don't understand English.

## **Discussion**

Our interviews indicate how the conscious choose to use English as the communication language may result in the language ostracism of visually distinct minorities in Taiwan. Below, we discuss two reasons why this might be so: the stereotype of a foreign-looking person as an English speaker and the strength of English privilege in the society.

Taiwan is subject to an Occidental myth which links whiteness or non-Asianness to being English speaking. Popular culture portrays white people as being English speaking (Lei, 2009). In Liu and Tannacito's (2013) research on Taiwanese students studying English, the students typically associate whiteness with English speaking and so they have a "narrow

viewpoint of foreign cultures since many students associate foreigners with English-speaking people only" (Chung & Huang, 2010). At the social level, strict immigration policies applied to people from non-Asian countries make it easier for people from English-speaking countries to work as English teachers—immigrants from non-Asian countries are therefore mostly people from English-speaking countries (Lan, 2011). This leads to a perception that "White = American" (the same perception applies in the United States—see Devos & Banaji, 2005) and also to the perception that "non-Asian = English speaking". Such a perception might have fostered language ostracism in Taiwan, because foreign appearance is more likely to be used as the primary categorisation key (Kouřilová, 2011) for choosing English as the language of communication.

We argue that the privilege enjoyed by the English language is another factor that may help us account for the phenomena observed. Better treatment of good English speakers might be called "English privilege". Tsai (2010) found that "school languages (i.e., English and Mandarin) are essential for getting ahead in Taiwan" and "linguistic assimilation to school languages is a necessary step toward gaining access to socioeconomic opportunities for the native Taiwanese" while they "may advance their socioeconomic status more with fluency in English than with fluency in Mandarin" (Tsai, 2010). We claim that this corresponds to our interviewees' comments that people speaking English may enjoy preference over others. English privilege is mentioned by Lan (2011) who interviewed migrants to Taiwan who speak good English and she states that the most valuable asset of these migrants "is not money but their English-speaking ability". We wanted to conduct interviews with six East Asians living in the Czech Republic with a good knowledge of both Czech and English (to compare the phenomenon of language ostracism in Taiwan). We had to give up because our interviewees hadn't experienced the phenomenon of being spoken to in English while speaking in Czech. One of our interviewees (who is Taiwanese) noted the following about English privilege in Taiwan when she compared the role of English and the local languages in the two countries:

*Compared to Taiwan the differences are not so big. If you are in Taiwan, if you speak English, you will really get better treatment. ... Speak English and have a foreign face is like a golden pass in Taiwan, but it is not a golden pass in the Czech Republic. (11)*

English privilege is related to language ostracism in the sense that in a society with a stronger English privilege, people may tend to use English as a status symbol by being inclined to communicate in the more prestigious language (Petřjánošová & Graf, 2012). In the same vein, English-speaking Taiwanese people might impose English on other people, given the prestige associated with the language, despite their foreign interlocutor being more proficient in Mandarin and showing a willingness to conduct a conversation in Mandarin.

Language ostracism, the English-speaking foreigner stereotype, and English privilege might be viewed as three different levels of the same phenomenon. At the individual level, a person experiences language ostracism from his or her peer group. At the group level, his or her peers have a stereotype that s/he should be spoken to in English. And at society level, it is better to speak English whenever possible, because society privileges English-speaking people over others.

## Conclusion

We think that the phenomenon of the language ostracism of visually distinct minorities varies culturally and regionally. Future research could produce other examples of places where language ostracism occurs in intercultural communication, for example South Africa, where some Black people believe that “Whites speak perfect English” (Dyers & Wankah, 2012, p. 238) or South Korea, with its “English fever” (Lee, Han, & McKerrow, 2010). (Note that we do not wish to claim that the language involved in language ostracisation is limited to English nor that the target of ostracisation is limited to visual minorities.) Future research could also thoroughly explore the motivations of those who language ostracise visually distinct minorities.

We believe the present paper has important consequences for intercultural communication, in the sense that it provides observations that bear theoretical significance with respect to the interaction between cultural stereotype and the social integration of foreigners (or immigrants). The equation between being visually different and “speaking a foreign language” may lead to a “perpetual foreigner stereotype” (Kim, Wang, Deng, Alvarez & Li, 2011), in which local residents belonging to a visually distinct minority may still be perceived as temporary visitors. Language ostracism may also lead to the “identity denial” of native-born visually different people (Cheryan & Monin, 2005) because they are misperceived as foreigners. We believe that in practice, if attitudes about the language chosen in communication with visually distinct minorities change in places where there is strong language ostracism, this will help improve the integration of foreign-looking people into mainstream society and reduce the perpetual foreigner stereotype and identity-denial relating to native-born visually distinct minorities.

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