

Rules and constraints of the code-mixing patterns in Hong Kong Cantonese

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Li (1998) used the “Principle of Economy” to explain Cantonese speakers’ lexical choice between Cantonese and English. He observed that speakers prefer to code-mix English words into Cantonese utterances if the English words are shorter than the Cantonese equivalents. This study is to put this principle under empirical investigation. In particular, we tested Cantonese speakers’ code choice of non-jargon noun phrases in order to avoid code-mixing preference due to a lack of translation equivalents.

Fifty university students participated in a questionnaire survey about their frequency usage of some noun phrases in both Cantonese and English. Both the Cantonese and English noun phrases were embedded in the same utterance and the students were asked to indicate their frequency of usage of both utterances using a 5-point Likert scale. We expect that Cantonese speakers prefer to use the noun phrase in the language which has a fewer number of syllables. If the number of syllables is the same in both languages, they will use both the Cantonese and the English terms equally often.

The results showed that most of the items followed our expectation. For example, speakers prefer to use ‘notebook’ (2 syllables) more often than its Cantonese equivalent ‘sau.tai.din.lou’ (4 syllables) while they prefer to use Cantonese ‘din.lou’ (2 syllables) more often than ‘computer’ (3 syllables). For items with the same number of syllables (e.g. ‘tennis’ and ‘mong.kau’), speakers tend to use both terms equally often. Phonotactic constraints are used to explain the items which do not follow this rule.