

# Language Shift in the Gelong Community of Hainan

Andy Chi-On Chin

The Education University of Hong Kong

## Abstract

This paper reports on a study of language shift in the Gelong community. The rapid urbanization of Hainan Province in the past three decades has increased the influence and impact of the lingua franca, Putonghua, on local dialects and languages in Hainan Province. Many speakers of local dialects and other languages have undergone language shift with various degrees by using more Putonghua than their native tongues in their daily life. This study is based on a sociolinguistic survey with 159 Gelong students residing in Dongfang City (東方市) located in western Hainan. They were asked to indicate their choice of Gelong and Putonghua in different situations such as interacting with family members of different generations and with teachers and classmates outside schools. This paper discusses the extent of shift from Gelong to Putonghua and compare the result with those in previous surveys undertaken by the project team in other multilingual communities such as Guangxi and Sanya.

## Keywords

Gelong, Putonghua, language shift, urbanization, multilingual communities

## 1. Introduction

This paper is based on the author and his research team's study on the Gelong language ( 哥隆話 ) spoken in western Hainan. There are two main objectives in the study. The first one is to examine the affiliation of the Gelong language through fieldwork investigations. It has been reported that the Gelong language contains linguistic features of Sinitic languages and non-Sinitic languages, in particular, the Hlai (also known as the Li language 黎語 ). The genetic affiliation of Gelong has been discussed in Fu (1983), Fu (1996), Ouyang and Fu (1988), Ouyang (1998), and Chin (2015) among others. Furthermore, when comparing his Gelong data collected in 2011 and 2012 with those collected by Ouyang in the 1980s (Ouyang 1998), Chin (2015) found that some lexical items have been replaced by the Sinitic forms. Some examples are listed in Table 1 below (adopted from Chin 2015: 141).<sup>1</sup>

Table 1 Lexical items in Gelong that have been replaced by Sinitic forms

Concepts	Forms in Ouyang (1998)	Forms recorded by author (2012)	Hainan Min in Woon (1987)
East 東	phui42 phek33	ʔdoŋ33	ɸoŋ44
South 南	phui42 kau35	nam35	nam33
West 西	phui42 tho42	tθi33	ti44
North 北	phui42 zok33	ʔbek55	ɸak51
In the past 以前	khuan21	i21 ʔdian21	dzi44 ɸian33
From now on 今後	hau35 bo21	i21 hou13	dzi44 ʔou42
Future 將來	ho35 bo21	kiaŋ33 lai35	tɸian44 lai21
Worker 工人	ŋa:u35 vok13 koŋ21	koŋ33 zin13	koŋ44 dzian33
Floor 樓	tsa:k42	lou13	lou44
Flooring 地板	ban42 lou13	tθi33 ʔban21	ɸi42 ɸan21

<sup>1</sup> Ouyang (1998) and Woon (1987) used /b/, /d/ and /b/, /d/ to represent the implosive consonants respectively.

The replacement of native Gelong lexical items by the Sinitic forms illustrates a situation that the Gelong language is assimilating to the Chinese language. This kind of phenomenon is prevalent in multilingual communities where several languages are spoken. Among these languages concurrently used in the multilingual communities, some of them enjoy a higher sociolinguistic status and this type of sociolinguistic hierarchy is described as diglossia by Ferguson (1959) who pointed out that the languages spoken in a multilingual speech community are usually sociolinguistically stratified into High Languages and Low Languages. Tsou (1980, 1983) further expanded Ferguson's model into a *triglossic* model by including one more level which can better describe the situation of modern Chinese society: Supreme Language.<sup>2</sup> In Mainland China, the Supreme language, Putonghua, serves as the lingua franca and the official language in formal domains such as education, the government, and mass media. The High Language refers to the dominant language of local communities which has a higher prestige compared to other local languages and dialects. For example, in Nanning (南寧) of Guangxi (廣西), the Baihua dialect (白話) is the dominant language when compared with Kejia, Zhuang, and other varieties of the Yue dialect. In the context of Hainan Province, the **Supreme**, **High** and **Low** Languages are Putonghua, Hainan Min, and other local dialects and languages which mainly serve the function of intra-group communication respectively.<sup>3</sup> This type of sociolinguistic hierarchy can bring in effects on the internal system of the language such as lexicon, phonology and syntax, as we have seen in Table 1 above.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it will also affect the use of these languages in terms of choice and frequency. For example, many speakers use the lingua franca in non-official domains such as in the family and the usage frequency can be comparable to or even higher than that of their mother tongue.

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to Mainland China, there are other Chinese communities also manifesting different aspects of triglossia. These include Singapore, Taiwan as well as Hong Kong (see Tsou 2002, Tsou and You 2001).

<sup>3</sup> The Hainan Min dialect was considered a provincial language which is used mainly in local administration. However, according to our survey, this dialect is not regarded by the informants as important as before.

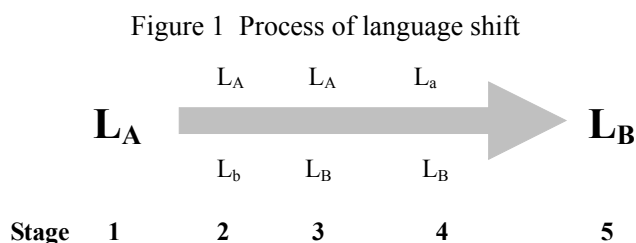
<sup>4</sup> For example, the author's previous study on the verb-resultative complement construction in the Mai dialect spoken in Sanya (Chin and Tsou 2013) shows that the two word-order patterns of this syntactic construction, namely, Verb-Object-Complement (VOC) and Verb-Complement-Object (VCO), have different usage frequencies. Generally speaking, the former is used mainly by older informants while the latter is used by the young speakers who have more exposure to Putonghua which has the same word order pattern (i.e. VCO).

This phenomenon illustrates that speakers are shifting away from their mother tongue to the official language. The second objective of the Gelong project is thus to explore the phenomenon of language shift in the Gelong community.

## 2. Language shift in multilingual communities

When several languages with different sociolinguistic status co-exist in a community, speakers of these languages usually become multilingual and proficient in some, if not all, of these languages. Furthermore, there could be competition between one's native tongue and other languages especially when the native tongue does not enjoy a prestige status in the community. This could result in language shift whereby one gradually gives up his native tongue and shifts to the more prestigious language(s).

The long term competition between the Low Languages and the Supreme Language can lead to several results. One of such is “the disappearance of one of the languages” (Thomason 2001: 12) when one language is displaced by another language and the languages concerned usually differ in terms of social status in the community. Romaine (2010) distinguishes two types of language death: sudden and gradual. The gradual one is relevant to the situation of language shift discussed in this paper. Language shift is a process which does not take place in a short time period. Tsou, Chin and Mok (2010: 271) proposed the following model illustrating the process of language shift.



According to Tsou, Chin and Mok (2010), when language shift takes place from Language A to Language B, there are a number of transitional stages where the two languages (A and B) are used concomitantly but with different degrees of usage as represented by the upper case and the lower case in Figure 1. The model suggests that in the course of language shift, an individual may use more than one linguistic variety for a given situation though with varying degrees of usage.

There are two types of forces contributing to language shift. The top-down language policy implemented by the government makes the official language more popular and prestigious. In addition, the demographic and socio-economic change of the community concerned such as urbanization and migration, can also create impact on the linguistic ecology of the community. Both the top-down language policy and the bottom-up socio-economic forces, when joining together, can speed up the rate of language shift.

Take Mainland China as an example. Putonghua has been promoted by the Central Government as the lingua franca of the nation<sup>5</sup> and is thus socially more prestigious when compared with local dialects and languages which are mainly used for intra-group communication. This unequal sociolinguistic status of linguistic varieties brings in the situation that some speakers (especially those who have more exposure to Putonghua) have begun to give up their mother tongue and shift to using Putonghua as their dominant language or even the home language.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Hainan as a linguistic melting pot

There are many multilingual communities in Mainland China where different dialects and languages co-exist and interact. Among these multilingual communities, Hainan Island has drawn the author and his team's attention. Since 2007, the team has been working on a number of Chinese dialects and non-Sinitic languages from the perspectives of language contact and language ecology. The first such community the team worked on was Sanya, located at the southernmost tip of the Island as well as China. According to Tsou et al (2007), at least 8 Chinese dialects and non-Sinitic languages are spoken as the first language by the local residents. This linguistic scenario is far more complex than what was described in *The Language Atlas of China* (Wurm et al 1988). It is also noted that these dialects and languages are mutually unintelligible and a lingua franca is needed to ensure inter-group effective communication. Hainan Province is thus best described as a "linguistic melting pot" (Chin 2015: 184).

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on language policy and language reform after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, see Rohsenow (2004).

<sup>6</sup> In their previous studies on three-generation Chinese bilingual families living in Tyneside, Li, Milroy and Pong (2000) noted that speakers of older generations tend to use more Chinese than English while younger speakers tend to speak more English as well as a mix of Chinese and English.

Hainan became a province in 1988. Since then, there has been significant demographic change. According to Gu and Wall (2007: 161), the population of Hainan increased from about 6 million in 1986 to 7.78 million in 2002. The province underwent rapid urbanization as reflected by a number of socio-economical developments such as tourism<sup>7</sup> and migration. Between 1987 and 2002, the number of tourists rose from 139.9 thousand to 2.78 million (Gu and Wall 2007: 162). Another notable demographic feature of Hainan is migration from the Mainland. Feng and Zhan (2006) interviewed 100 new and recent migrants from the Mainland. Among these 100 migrants, 60 of them have their place of origin in Sichuan, Hubei, Henan, Jiangxi and Hunan. When these migrants settled in Hainan, they either learn the local language(s) to interact with the local people or use the lingua franca, Putonghua, since many of these migrants are “college-educated, socially active and influential” (Feng and Goodman 1997: 65) and these migrants are “almost exclusively involved in the new industries and enterprises occasioned by the reform era” (p. 62). As remarked by Feng and Zhan (2006: 87), there are “signs of joint efforts by migrants and locals to create a new Hainanese culture”. Furthermore, “those villagers over middle age who never spoken Mandarin [Putonghua] before, have managed to speak Mandarin and are ready to accept the mainland communities. The vocabulary of daily language on the island has grown rapidly during last two decades due to massive imports from other parts of China” (ibid). These remarks well illustrate that the interaction between local people in Hainan and migrants from the Mainland has become more intensive which exerts influence on the linguistic ecology of Hainan.

The remark given by Feng and Zhan can also be exemplified by the multilingual situation in the Guangxi region. In their studies of the language shift issue in cities of Yulin (玉林), Baise (百色) and Nanning (南寧) in Guangxi, Chin, Tsou and Mok (2010) found that parents of those informants<sup>8</sup> who underwent a larger extent of language shift from Baihua (白話) to Putonghua are mostly white-collar workers, civil servants, and merchants. These occupations require frequent use of Putonghua in addition to the local dialect and it is not surprising to see that children of these parents received influence from Putonghua in terms of the choice of language in their daily interaction.

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<sup>7</sup> This can be seen by the opening of two international airports, the Sanya Phoenix International Airport and the Haikou Meilan International Airport, in Sanya and Haikou in 1994 and 1990 respectively.

<sup>8</sup> The informants were primary and secondary school students.

Figure 2 Comparison of the use of Putonghua and Baihua in the Guangxi region

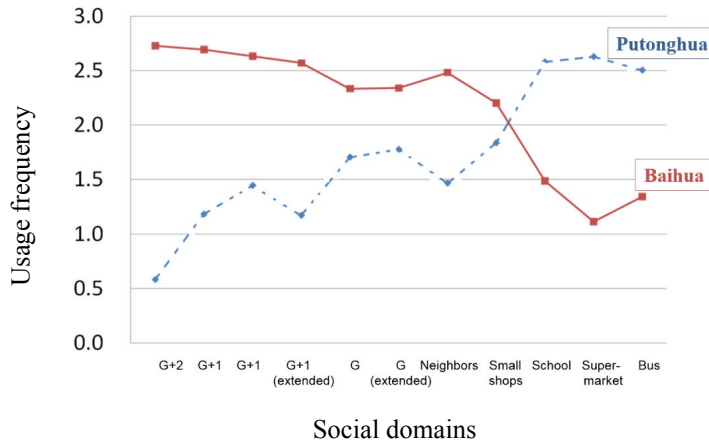


Figure 2, slightly modified from Chin, Tsou, and Mok (2010: 184) shows the comparison of the use of Baihua (the native tongue of the informants) and Putonghua in different social domains: Family (with members of different generations),<sup>9</sup> local community (with neighbors and in local shops), and the public (in supermarkets and taking public transportation). The usage of languages is measured with a scale between 0 and 3 with 0 referring to null usage and 3 representing the most frequent use of the linguistic variety concerned. It can be seen that Baihua is the dominant language in the domestic context. At the same time, we observe an increasing use of Putonghua from the older generation to the younger generation. The usage of Putonghua is the lowest when interacting with grandparents and it is used the most frequently when interacting with family members of the same generation such as siblings and cousins. When the context goes beyond the family, the usage of Putonghua increases substantially and exceeds that of Baihua in some domains.

#### 4. Multilingual situation in the Gelong Community

In his study of the Gelong language in the 1980s, Ouyang (1998) claims that 62% of the Gelong population was *bilingual* in Gelong and Putonghua while 65.5% was

<sup>9</sup> G+2 refers to the grandparents of the informants (i.e. two generations above the informants). G+1 refers to the parents of the informants. G refers to the siblings of the informants. "Extended" refers to the members of the extended families such as uncles and aunt (i.e. G+1 (extended)) and cousins (i.e. G (extended)).

*bilingual* in Gelong and the Hainan dialect. However, we find that the term *bilingual* is insufficient enough to reflect the linguistic competence and linguistic choice of an individual. For example, is there any particular context that a Gelong speaker would choose to speak Putonghua instead of his mother tongue or vice versa? In addition, when a speaker is undergoing language shift from his mother tongue to another language (e.g. Putonghua in the present situation), s/he may use both languages at the same time but with different degrees of usage frequency as the shift is an on-going process. In this regard, would it be possible to capture and compare the extent of the shift to Putonghua from a quantitative perspective?

To better understand the choice of language by Gelong speakers, the author and his research team conducted one survey with about 350 Gelong speakers in late 2011. The participants of the survey were students of two primary schools at Sanjia town (三家鎮) which is about 1 hour of driving time from the downtown of Dongfang. The survey contains a questionnaire with 70-some items and was based on the one used by the author's research team in their previous studies in Sanya as well as the Guangxi region. Using the same questionnaire can allow us to compare the differential extent of language shift across these multi-lingual communities.

In the questionnaire, three domains are identified: family, school and social environments. For the family domain, we collected data on students' use of different languages or dialects (focusing mainly on Gelong and Putonghua in the present project) with family members across different generations in both nuclear families (e.g. parents and siblings) and extended families (e.g. grandparents, siblings of parents, cousins). For the school domain, we are interested in the languages or dialects used between teachers and students, as well as among students outside classroom. For the social domain, we asked the students their language choice when doing shopping and taking buses.

Since the phenomenon of language shift we are studying is an on-going process, in our survey, we did not only ask the informants to indicate the language or dialect they would use for a particular context as may be often the case in other studies. Instead, we asked them to *rank the relative usage frequency* for each linguistic variety in terms of the following attributes: “**Not used at all (不用)**”, “**Used marginally (少用)**”, “**Often Used (常用)**” and “**Used the most (最常用)**”. This elicitation method can allow us to compare the relative usage between the target language (such as Putonghua)



and informants' mother tongue (Gelong in the present case) in different settings. The four attributes of the scales are given the numeric values of 0, 1, 2, 3 respectively. For each context, the total amount of usage is divided by the total number of respondents,<sup>10</sup> and the value indicates the usage of that language (Putonghua or Gelong in the present project) in that context. This value lies between 0 (i.e. no participant uses this language at all in this situation) and 3 (all participants use this language the most in this situation).

After collecting the data from the students, we first needed to identify those who are native speakers of Gelong. As we discussed in Section 3, there have been more and more migrants settling in Hainan in the past three decades. These migrants may use Putonghua in their daily communication but this is not considered language shift in our study. Therefore, it is important to exclude this group of informants from our dataset. By examining the question on the language used during the dinner time and the place of origins of students and their parents, we can easily decide if a student is a speaker of Gelong. Altogether, 159 out of 352 students were identified as native speakers of Gelong.<sup>11</sup> The following discussion is based on the data from these 159 students.

#### 4.1. The overall trend of language use

There is an item in the survey asking students to rate the overall usage frequency of Putonghua and Gelong in the scale from 0 to 5 with 0 indicating zero usage and 5 the most.<sup>12</sup> The scores of Putonghua and Gelong are 3.51 and 3.74 respectively which are very close showing that Putonghua is used with nearly the same frequency as Gelong. In the following, we will focus on the family and non-family domains.

#### 4.2. Language use in the family domain

The usage profile of Putonghua and Gelong in the family domain across generations are presented in Table 2 below.

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<sup>10</sup> The number of respondents may not be the same as the number of informants as some questions were not answered by all informants. For example, for the question on "the language used when talking to grandparents", some informants did not provide response because they never see their grandparents for various reasons.

<sup>11</sup> Besides migrants, there are also speakers of other local dialects or languages which are not the target of the current research project.

<sup>12</sup> The attributes are: 0 – never used (不用), 1 – used very marginally (很少用), 2 – used marginally (少用), 3 – occasionally (一般), 4 – always used (常用), 5 – used the most (最常用).

Table 2 Usage values of Putonghua and Gelong in the family domain

Situations	Usage of Putonghua	Usage of Gelong	Ratio= $\frac{\text{Usage of Gelong}}{\text{Usage of Putonghua}}$
I. G+2 → G+2 <sup>13</sup>	0.58	2.26	3.92
II. G+1 → G+2	0.72	2.34	3.25
III. G → G+2	0.91	2.22	2.44
IV. G+1 → G+1	1.17	2.36	2.02
V. G → G+1	1.55	2.11	1.36
VI. G → G	1.64	1.98	1.20

When communication takes place between students and their grandparents (i.e. Situation III), the usage of Putonghua is only 0.91 in our 4-point scale, which means “marginally used”. When it comes to the parents’ generation (Situation V), the usage of Putonghua (1.55) increases even though Gelong is still the dominant language. It is interesting to compare the usage of Putonghua by parents when communicating with their siblings (i.e. Situation IV: students’ paternal and maternal aunts and uncles) and the students (Situation V). There is an increase of Putonghua (from 1.17 to 1.55) and a drop of Gelong (from 2.36 to 2.11), and the ratio drops by about 33% from 2.02 to 1.36.

When students communicate with family members of the same generation (Situation VI), the usage of Gelong is the lowest (1.98) and the usage of Putonghua is the highest (1.64) among the six situations.

#### 4.3. Language use outside of the family domain

Table 3 below shows the usage of the two languages in contexts outside of the family domain.

Table 3 Usage values of Putonghua and Gelong in the non-family domain

Domain	Usage of Putonghua	Usage of Gelong	Ratio= $\frac{\text{Usage of Gelong}}{\text{Usage of Putonghua}}$
With neighbors	1.45	2.13	1.46
Local shops	1.39	2.04	1.46

<sup>13</sup> For the meanings of G, G+1 and G+2, see footnote 9 above.

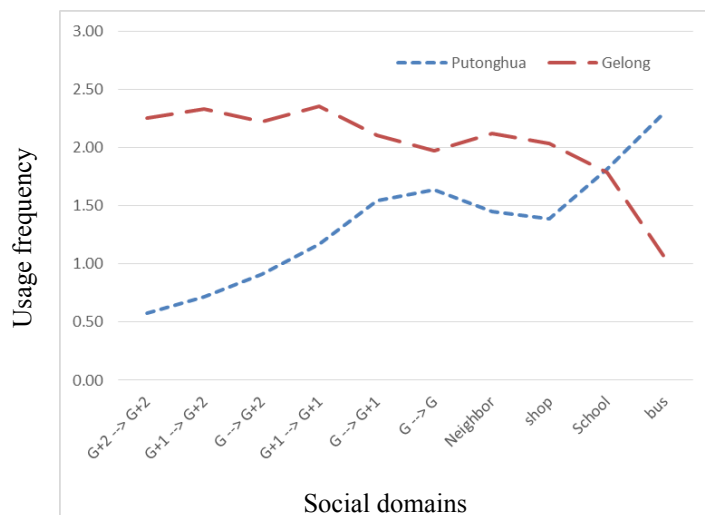
With classmates and teachers (outside classroom)	1.82	1.79	0.98
Taking public transportation	2.30	1.06	0.46

It is clear from the quantitative data that outside of the family domain, the usage of Putonghua increases as all values are greater than 1 in the 4-point scale. It is noteworthy that in the case of communicating with classmates and teachers outside classroom and taking public transportation, Putonghua is used more than Gelong (as the ratios are smaller than 1). This is not surprising because the homogeneity of speakers' language background cannot be simply assumed in the public domain, and thus the lingua franca is preferred over their mother tongue.

#### 4.4. Summary on the language shift process in the Gelong community

The overall usage of Putonghua and Gelong in both family and non-family domains are presented in Figure 3 which shows a converging trend of Putonghua and Gelong when the domain moves from the domestic to the public. It is also observed that even in the family domain, Putonghua plays an important role especially when students communicate with junior family members. In the non-family domain, there are situations where the usage of Putonghua exceeds that of Gelong.

Figure 3 Language use in the Gelong community



When we compare the result of the Gelong community with that of the Sanya region reported in Tsou, Chin and Mok (2010), we note that language shift from speakers' mother tongue to Putonghua in the Sanya region took place with a faster pace than that in the Gelong community. There is a constant and gradual increase in the use of Putonghua in the Sanya community and for some dialects, the shift within the family domain has reached the extent that Putonghua is used more than the native tongue. The two schools in Dongfang City where the survey was conducted are located in the rural area and the Gelong community, compared with the Sanya region, is relatively homogeneous<sup>14</sup> and the rate of urbanization in Dongfang is slower than that of Sanya. The rate of language shift is thus not as rigorous as that in the Sanya region.

### 5. Concluding remarks

This paper reports on the study of on-going language shift in the Gelong community located in western Hainan. The quantitative data derived from the survey shows that Putonghua and the local language, Gelong, are competing with each other even in the home domain. Romaine (2010) notes that a language will become extinct if "it is not used for all the functions and purposes it was previously" (p. 324). This happens in particular when "family structures and practices once supporting the transmission of language and culture have weakened" (ibid). In our previous studies in Guangxi and Sanya, we noted that some parents only use Putonghua to interact with their children at home. Furthermore, we also observe that in some cases, local students are found to be more proficient in Putonghua than their mother tongue. Tsou et al (2007), when conducting the language shift study in Sanya, organized a bilingual speech competition in which local students were invited to tell stories in their native tongue and Putonghua. The aim of the competition was to raise students' awareness and respect to the native tongues of the region. Some students "performed better in Putonghua than in their L1" (p. 72). There were cases in which students "chose to begin their presentations in Putonghua to be followed by a halting presentation in their local languages" (p. 72). In the long run, some remedial measures may need to be taken to preserve the language and its associated cultures.

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<sup>14</sup> As discussed in Section 3, at least 8 linguistic varieties (both Sinitic and non-Sinitic) are spoken in Sanya as first language, it is not surprising that the lingua franca, Putonghua, plays a more important role in the region for effective inter-group communication.

While the status of Putonghua as a lingua franca with the functions of promoting national unity and effective communication is well recognized, the native tongues of local communities should not be overlooked. In fact, we can explore how our native tongue can be converted as facilitators for acquiring the lingua franca as well as other languages.

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## 海南省東方市哥隆話的語言轉移現象

錢志安

香港教育大學

### 提要

過去三十多年海南島發展迅速，普通話的應用範圍增加不少，出現了本地人多用普通話，母語使用度減少的語言轉移現象。2011年，作者的研究團隊調查了海南省東方市159位以哥隆話為母語的學生，了解和比較在不同情境下母語（即哥隆話）和普通話使用度。我們同時把相關數據跟之前在廣西南寧地區和海南省三亞地區的比較，進一步了解多語社區在迅速都市化下的語言狀況。

### 關鍵詞

哥隆話，普通話，語言轉移，都市化，多語社區