

Dynamics of Language Attitudes and Language Choices In the Film Everything Everywhere All at Once: A Sociolinguistic Study on The Use of Mandarin, English, and Cantonese

Cinta Rania Sa'idah Azzah^{1*}

24020774049@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

Lanina Orva Putri Sultoni²

24020774052@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

Nasywa Fatillah Tanaya³

24020774057@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

Rokhishotul Amaliyah⁴

rokhishotulamaliyah@unesa.ac.id

Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

Mintowati⁵

mintowati@unesa.ac.id

Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia



ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Language Attitude;
Language Choice;
Sociolinguistics;
Everything
Everywhere All at
Once;
Code-switching

This study investigates the dynamics of language attitude and language choice represented in the multiple-Academy-Award-winning film Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022), focusing on the triglossic interplay of Mandarin, Cantonese, and English within a three-generation Chinese-American immigrant family. Using a descriptive-qualitative design combined with filmic discourse analysis, the study examines dialogue fragments, code-switching, code-mixing, and paralinguistic cues that index the characters' subjective evaluations of each language. Data were drawn from twenty-two purposively sampled dialogue scenes involving multilingual exchanges, transcribed and coded according to interlocutor, domain, and emotional load, and analyzed through the integration of Fishman's domain theory, Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model, Giles and Ogay's Communication Accommodation Theory,

and Garrett's tripartite model of language attitude. The findings show that language choice within the Wang family is systematically patterned by interlocutor, domain, topic, and affective intensity: Cantonese functions as the unmarked code of filial respect toward the eldest generation, Mandarin operates as an intimate-emotional bridge within the nuclear family, and English indexes institutional distance as well as the second generation's search for autonomous identity. A first-generation sentimental-loyalist attitude coexists with a second-generation pragmatic-ambivalent attitude, producing recurrent instances of lexical censorship intended to preserve 面子 (face) before the family patriarch. The study further shows that the film's emotional resolution is achieved not through the dominance of a single code but through a pluralistic, accommodative blend of English and Mandarin, indicating that reconciliation in multilingual families is linguistically enacted rather than merely narrated. The study contributes a rare tripartite (rather than binary English-Mandarin) model for analyzing heritage-language dynamics in Chinese diasporic cinema.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and transnational mobility, bilingualism and multilingualism have become an inseparable part of immigrant community life. Language contact in a new environment does not merely bring together two grammatical systems; it also brings cultural values, personal identities, and linguistic ideologies into contact and, at times, into conflict. Language choice in a multilingual society is always tied to the question of who speaks what language, to whom, when, and for what purpose, so that choice is never random or value-free but instead reflects social structure, power relations, and the language attitudes held by its speakers (Fishman, 1972).

Language attitude itself is a multidimensional mental construct comprising cognitive, affective, and conative components (Garrett, 2010). It can be positive when it fosters language loyalty and pride, or negative when speakers feel their heritage language is inferior and shift toward the dominant language for the sake of social assimilation. Among Chinese immigrants in the United States, this dynamic is especially layered because they contend not only with the hegemony of English but also with internal linguistic stratification between Mandarin (Putonghua), the formal lingua franca, and regional varieties such as Cantonese, which carry distinct historical and affective associations, particularly for families with roots in Hong Kong or southern China (Ferguson, 1959).

Cinematic works are frequently accurate sociolinguistic mirrors of contemporary urban societies. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, is a multiverse film that explicitly foregrounds this clash of language and culture. It follows the Wang family, Chinese-American immigrants who run a laundromat in the United States, across three generational positions: Gong Gong (grandfather, conventional first generation), Evelyn and Waymond (parents, transitional first generation), and Joy (daughter, second generation). Through its multiverse narrative structure, the film presents a linguistically rich landscape in which the Wang family constantly code-switches and code-mixes among Cantonese, Mandarin, and English, a triglossic configuration in which each code occupies a distinct psychological, emotional, and ideological position (Li, 2000).

Sociolinguistic scholarship on Chinese-American-themed film has so far concentrated on a simple binary opposition between English and Mandarin. Studies of films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Joy Ride* have examined how English functions as a marker of upward mobility and Westernization while Mandarin indexes ethnic authenticity, but they largely treat “Chinese” as a linguistically homogeneous category and do not differentiate between Mandarin and regional varieties such as Cantonese, Hokkien, or Hakka. This binary framing obscures the fact that, for many diasporic Chinese families, particularly those of Cantonese-speaking heritage from Hong Kong or Guangdong, Mandarin itself functions as a second, learned code rather than a native tongue, occupying an intermediate position between the heritage dialect and English (Fishman, 1991; Wong Fillmore, 1991).

Research on heritage-language maintenance among second-generation immigrants further shows that early and sustained exposure to a societal majority language can accelerate the erosion of a family's home language, with consequences for intergenerational communication and identity (Wong Fillmore, 1991). However, this line of research has rarely been extended to filmic discourse analysis, and the specific mechanism by which linguistic incapacity triggers semantic censorship or the modification of cultural concepts to preserve social integrity, the concept of face or 面子 (Ho, 1976), has not been examined in depth within cinematic discourse. This study therefore addresses two gaps simultaneously: first, the near-absence of research treating Cantonese as an analytically distinct code alongside Mandarin and English within a single domestic ecosystem; and second, the underexplored relationship between multilingual incompetence, face management, and intergenerational conflict resolution in diasporic film.

Building on this gap, the present study aims to comprehensively examine how language attitudes are formed and how language choices operate in *Everything*

Everywhere All at Once, and to trace their implications for intergenerational conflict, polarization, and resolution within a Chinese-American immigrant family.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Language Attitude

Language attitude, following Garrett (2010), is a multidimensional mental construct consisting of three components. The cognitive component concerns speakers' beliefs about the structure, utility, or social status of a language; the affective component concerns emotional reactions such as pride, fondness, or shame associated with using or hearing a language; and the conative component concerns the actual behavioral tendency to choose, maintain, or abandon a language in a given social situation. A positive language attitude tends to encourage language maintenance, whereas a negative or ambivalent attitude often becomes a catalyst for language shift toward a code perceived to carry higher prestige or greater economic utility (Spolsky, 1998).

Domains of Language Use and Diglossia/Triglossia

Fishman's domain theory holds that multilingual speakers allocate different languages to different recurrent social situations, such as family, friendship, religion, education, and employment, each of which is associated with a typical set of interlocutors, settings, and topics (Fishman, 1972). This concept builds original notion of diglossia, in which a High (H) variety is reserved for formal, institutional functions while a Low (L) variety governs every day, intimate interaction. In immigrant families with more than two linguistic codes in active use, this configuration extends into triglossia, in which three varieties are hierarchically and functionally distributed rather than freely interchangeable.

Markedness Model, Code-Switching, and Code-Mixing

Language choice within multilingual interaction is often realized through code-switching, the alternation of linguistic units across clause or sentence boundaries, and code-mixing, the insertion of smaller lexical or morphemic elements within a single sentence structure (Li, 2000). Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model frames these choices as a negotiation of interpersonal rights and obligations, in which speakers select the code that is socially "unmarked", that is, expected and natural given the interlocutor and setting, or deliberately select a "marked" code to signal social distance, authority, solidarity, or rejection. Code-switching may be situational, triggered by a change in interlocutor or setting, or metaphorical, used to shift the emotional register of an interaction without any external change in context.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Giles and Ogay's (2007) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) explain how speakers adjust their communicative behavior toward or away from an interlocutor.

Convergence occurs when a speaker shifts their speech style to become more similar to their interlocutor's, typically to signal solidarity, approval, or the wish to reduce social distance; divergence occurs when a speaker accentuates linguistic differences to assert distinctiveness or independence. Within intergenerational and intercultural family communication, CAT provides a framework for interpreting why a character may switch codes not simply because a domain requires it, but as a relational strategy toward a specific interlocutor at a specific emotional moment.

The Concept of Face (面子)

Face, or 面子, is a culturally central construct in Chinese social life, referring to the social value or prestige an individual claims and is granted by others within an interaction (Ho, 1976). Face can be gained or lost depending on whether an individual, or someone closely associated with them, meets the expectations attached to their social position. In immigrant Chinese families, face operates not only at the level of the individual but at the level of the family collective, such that a family member's public conduct, including their choice of language in front of an authority figure, can be read as either upholding or threatening the family's face. This study treats lexical or topical censorship performed to preserve 面子 as a distinct conative manifestation of language attitude.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative design combined with filmic discourse analysis (content analysis of audiovisual dialogue). The material object of the research is the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022, 139 minutes); its formal object is all dialogue fragments, code-switching, code-mixing, and paralinguistic expressions (intonation, pause, non-verbal cues) that index the language choices and language attitudes of the four main characters: Gong Gong, Evelyn, Waymond, and Joy.

Data were collected through repeated viewing combined with the listening-and-noting technique (Sudaryanto, 1993), producing orthographic transcriptions in the three languages used in the film (English, Mandarin, and Cantonese), with English subtitles cross-checked against independent back-translation for the Mandarin and Cantonese segments. From the full script, all scenes containing multilingual exchange (i.e., at least two of the three codes within a single scene) were identified, yielding a corpus of 22 dialogue scenes distributed across the film's three acts. Each scene was segmented into discourse units and coded for four variables: (1) interlocutor dyad, (2) domain (following Fishman's typology), (3) code-switching/code-mixing pattern, and (4) inferred emotional load (low/medium/high, based on paralinguistic and narrative cues).

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, applied iteratively across coding rounds. Data validity was addressed through theoretical triangulation, cross-reading each coded scene against three independent theoretical lenses, Fishman's domain theory, Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model, and Giles and Ogay's Communication Accommodation Theory, and through investigator triangulation, in which each of the three student researchers independently coded a subset of scenes before consensus discussion with the two supervising researchers to resolve coding discrepancies. Table 2 (Section 4) illustrates the coding scheme applied to four representative excerpts from the corpus.

As a limitation of method, the analysis relies on the film's official English subtitles for Mandarin and Cantonese dialogue, cross-checked manually rather than by a certified bilingual transcriber; nuances of tone, dialectal variation, and register that are not fully captured in subtitling may therefore be underrepresented in the coded data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the 22-scene corpus shows that the Wang family's linguistic landscape is organized as a highly dynamic triglossic system. The three languages occupy diametrically different social and psychological functions, forming the matrix of domains and functions summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Matrix of Triglossia and Language Choice Functions of the Wang Family

Language	Primary Domain	Socio-Emotional Function	Primary Speaker
Cantonese	Domestic-Traditional, Older Generation Interaction	Respecting Patriarchal Authority, Hong Kong Nostalgia	Gong Gong, Evelyn
Mandarin	Domestic-Intimate, Nuclear Family Conflict	Emic Emotional Negotiation, Transitional Bridge	Evelyn, Waymond
English	Public-Institutional, Ego Identity Expression	Social Assimilation, Safe Space for Self-Freedom	Joy, Deirdre (IRS)

Distribution of Language Choice Patterns Across Characters

Language choice in the film reflects each speaker's sociolinguistic position along the acculturation continuum. Gong Gong, as the first-generation patriarch, uses Cantonese as an absolute unmarked code (Myers-Scotton, 1993): in every coded scene involving Gong Gong as an interlocutor ($n = 6$), Cantonese is either the language he initiates in or the language other characters switch into upon his entry into a scene. For Gong Gong, Cantonese use is inseparable from the maintenance of traditional patriarchal authority.

Evelyn, positioned transitionally between generations, displays the most intense pattern of metaphorical code-switching in the corpus (present in 14 of 22 scenes). When addressing her father, she subordinates her own linguistic ego by defaulting to Cantonese, an act consistent with maintaining 面子 before an elder (Ho, 1976). When addressing her husband Waymond, however, Evelyn consistently switches into Mandarin, the code associated with the domestic intimacy the couple built during their youth prior to emigration. In coded scene D-02 (Table 2), for instance, Evelyn and Waymond discuss the laundromat's tax audit largely in Mandarin, code-mixing only at points requiring institutional vocabulary, a pattern consistent with Myers-Scotton's (1993) observation that unmarked code choice can be locally overridden by lexical gaps rather than by a shift in relational stance.

The gulf becomes explicit when Evelyn addresses Joy. Evelyn repeatedly initiates in Mandarin, the code she associates with maternal authority and moral instruction, while Joy consistently responds in English, the code in which she reports feeling capable of full self-expression. This asymmetry recurs across every coded mother-daughter exchange in the corpus and constitutes the clearest instance of what Fishman (1991) and Wong Fillmore (1991) describe as heritage-language attrition across generations: Joy's receptive competence in Mandarin appears intact, but her productive use is minimal, and she does not code-switch into Cantonese at all across the sampled corpus, indicating that the ancestral H-variety of the family (Cantonese) has effectively dropped out of her active repertoire.

Language Attitude and Intergenerational Linguistic Censorship

Contrasting language attitudes generate significant interactional distortion. Consistent with Garrett's (2010) affective and conative components, Joy exhibits a pragmatic-ambivalent attitude: in her reported and enacted stance, the heritage languages (Mandarin and Cantonese) are associated with cultural constraint that limits her ability to articulate a modern, queer identity. Evelyn, by contrast, exhibits a sentimental-loyalist attitude, treating Joy's limited Mandarin fluency as symptomatic of a broader erosion of moral and cultural identity, an evaluative stance rather than a neutral observation of proficiency.

This gulf reaches its peak in the scene in which Joy introduces her girlfriend, Becky, to Gong Gong (coded as D-03 in Table 2). Joy attempts to state her identity honestly in English; Evelyn intervenes by cutting off Joy's utterance and re-rendering it in Mandarin, substituting a relational term that recasts the relationship in non-romantic terms.

Joy: "This is my girlfriend, Becky." / Evelyn (interrupting, in Mandarin): "... 好朋友" ("...good friend").

This act of code-switching accompanied by lexical substitution functions as a form of semantic censorship: Evelyn's language attitude treats Mandarin spoken before the older generation as bearing a near-sacred function of preserving collective family face, even where doing so requires overriding her daughter's self-representation. Read through Ho's (1976) concept of face, the substitution is not primarily about vocabulary but about protecting Gong Gong's, and by extension the family's, social standing, at the cost of Joy's linguistic and personal autonomy. This finding extends existing accounts of language and "face" in Chinese-American contexts (Ho, 1976) by showing face-preservation operating as an active, real-time code-switching strategy rather than only as a background cultural norm.

Emotional Resolution through Pluralistic Linguistic Accommodation

The climax of the film's sociolinguistic arc occurs during the emotional confrontation in the laundromat parking area (coded D-04). Overwhelmed by the failure of intersubjective understanding, Joy expresses her despair predominantly in English. For the first time in the narrative, Evelyn does not respond in the codes previously reserved for maternal authority (Mandarin) or filial deference (Cantonese); instead, she responds with a blended, halting use of English interspersed with affective Mandarin expressions.

Interpreted through Giles and Ogay's (2007) Communication Accommodation Theory, this shift constitutes linguistic convergence: rather than requiring Joy to accommodate to her mother's code, as in the earlier Becky scene, Evelyn converges toward Joy's dominant code while retaining Mandarin only for the affective core of her message. Language choice at this point is no longer governed by domain restrictions or institutional hierarchy but is reorganized into what this study terms a pluralistic linguistic compromise. Evelyn's language attitude, in Garrett's (2010) terms, shifts along its conative dimension from rigid-ethnocentric to accommodative-inclusive, indicating that in this narrative, emotional reconciliation between generations is not merely represented by language but substantively enacted through a real-time change in code choice.

Table 2. Summarizes The Coding Of The Four Representative Excerpts Discussed Above, Illustrating How Each Scene's Code-Switching Pattern Maps Onto A Specific Function Within The Family's Language-Attitude System.

Data Code	Scene / Context	Code-Switching/Mixing Pattern	Language Attitude Function
D-01	Evelyn greets Gong Gong in the living room (prime universe)	Situational code-switching: English → Cantonese as Gong Gong enters the room	Hierarchical deference; unmarked code choice to preserve the father's 面子 (face)
D-02	Evelyn and Waymond discuss taxes in the laundry's back room	Mandarin-English code-mixing regarding technical terms (“audit,” “receipts”)	Mandarin as a marker of intimacy; English lexicon for institutional concepts lacking emotional equivalents in Mandarin
D-03	Introducing Becky to Gong Gong in the laundromat area	Lexical censorship: Evelyn translates Joy's relational terms from English to Mandarin	Linguistic intervention to preserve the family's collective face before the senior authority figure
D-04	Climactic confrontation in the laundromat parking lot	Emotional/metaphorical code-switching: English dominance (Joy) met with a mix of broken English and affective Mandarin (Evelyn)	Accommodative convergence; a shift in attitude from rigid ethnocentrism to inclusive pluralism

Toward a Tripartite Model of Diasporic Language Attitude

Taken together, these findings extend the binary English-Mandarin frameworks used in prior studies of Chinese-American-themed film by demonstrating that Cantonese occupies an analytically distinct position , functioning as the family's true H-variety of ancestral authority, while Mandarin operates as an intermediate, affectively coded bridge,

and English marks both institutional distance and generational autonomy. This tripartite patterning is consistent with, but also elaborates diglossia framework, which were originally developed for two-variety systems; the Wang family's triglossia suggests that immigrant families with regional-dialect heritage may require a three-tier rather than two-tier model of domain allocation. The recurrent lexical censorship documented in Section 4.2 also suggests that face-preservation (Ho, 1976) functions not only as a social norm constraining what is said, but as an active trigger for real-time code-switching, a mechanism largely unaddressed in prior filmic discourse studies of Asian-American cinema.

This study has at least three limitations. First, the corpus is limited to a single film and a purposively sampled set of 22 multilingual scenes; the findings describe patterns within this text and should not be generalized to Chinese-American families or Chinese-American cinema at large without further comparative research. Second, the analysis relies on official English subtitles cross-checked manually for the Mandarin and Cantonese segments rather than on transcription by a certified bilingual linguist, which may affect the precision of tonal, dialectal, and register-level distinctions. Third, as an interpretive qualitative study, the coding of “emotional load” and attitude type, while triangulated across three coders and three theoretical lenses, retains an irreducible element of researcher interpretation.

Future research could extend this tripartite triglossic framework to a comparative corpus of Chinese diasporic films (e.g., *Joy Ride*, *Turning Red*, *The Farewell*) to test whether the Cantonese-Mandarin-English configuration identified here recurs across texts or is specific to *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Studies incorporating certified bilingual transcription, audience-reception data, or interviews with bilingual Chinese-American viewers would also help triangulate whether the face-preserving censorship pattern identified in Section 4.2 is recognized as realistic by members of the community the film represents.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) comprehensively illustrates that language attitudes and language choices within immigrant communities are dynamic, transformative, and tightly bound to generational polarization. The triglossic interaction pattern within the Wang family shows that Cantonese, Mandarin, and English do not function merely as mechanical media of communication but as representations of contesting ideological spaces: Cantonese as the domain of ancestral authority, Mandarin as an intimate-emotional transitional bridge, and English as the domain of institutional distance and second-generation identity. The first generation exhibits a sentimental-loyalist attitude that produces linguistic

ensorship in defense of 面子, while the second generation exhibits a pragmatic-ambivalent attitude rooted in heritage-language attrition. Although this linguistic gap produces a deep communicative and emotional crisis, the film's resolution demonstrates that accommodative, pluralistic communication strategies, converging rather than insisting on a single dominant code, can dissolve rigid linguistic boundaries and transform intergenerational identity conflict into inclusive, hybrid harmony. Beyond its analysis of a single film, the study offers a tripartite (rather than binary) analytical model that future research on Chinese diasporic media may adapt to other multi-dialectal immigrant communities.

REFERENCES

- Ferguson, C. A. (1959). Diglossia. *Word*, 15(2), 325–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00437956.1959.11659702>
- Fishman, J. A. (1972). *Language and nationalism: Two integrative essays*. Newbury House.
- Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Multilingual Matters.
- Garrett, P. (2010). *Attitudes to language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Giles, H., & Ogay, T. (2007). Communication accommodation theory. In B. B. Whaley & W. Samter (Eds.), *Explaining communication: Contemporary theories and exemplars* (pp. 293–310). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410614308-21>
- Ho, D. Y. (1976). On the concept of face. *American Journal of Sociology*, 81(4), 867–884. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226145>
- Kwan, D., & Scheinert, D. (Directors). (2022). *Everything everywhere all at once* [Film]. A24.
- Li, W. (Ed.). (2000). *The bilingualism reader*. Routledge.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1993). *Social motivations for codeswitching: Evidence from Africa*. Oxford University Press.
- Spolsky, B. (1998). *Sociolinguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Sudaryanto. (1993). *Metode dan aneka teknik analisis bahasa: Pengantar penelitian wahana kebudayaan secara linguistik*. Duta Wacana University Press.
- Wong Fillmore, L. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 6(3), 323–346. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(05\)80059-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(05)80059-6)