
A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Mandarin Chinese as a Global Lingua Franca

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Abstract: Discussions on whether Mandarin Chinese can become *a* or *the* global language in both popular and scholarly publications have largely focused on the global macroeconomic, socio-political, and geostrategic factors to ascertain this linguistic possibility. By contrast, this paper analyzes the issue from a narrower perspective using linguistic and sociolinguistic theories. It offers linguistic perspectives on the politically-loaded and power-driven terms “global language” and “global lingua franca,” the potentialities of Mandarin Chinese as a global lingua franca, and the global linguistic community that is described as multilingual and multiglossic.

Keywords: Mandarin Chinese, global language, global lingua franca, sociolinguistics, multilingualism, foreign language education

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Introduction

Given China’s socio-geopolitical status on the international stage, the use of Mandarin Chinese has accompanied it in many areas of our global society. One pertinent question this has raised is whether the language can replace or coexist with English as the global lingua franca. While popular and scholarly discussions have not been lacking, the linguistic lines at which Mandarin Chinese will compete with English are not altogether clear and necessitate further analyses. The discussions mostly cite sources from newspapers, magazines, blog articles, and other popular publications¹ and focus on global economic, socio-political, and geostrategic factors to determine the language’s potentiality and plausibility as a “global language.” This paper is an attempt to supplement these discussions by investigating the issue from a sociolinguistic perspective. It argues that Mandarin Chinese will gradually attain its status and role as a rival

global lingua franca, coexisting with English. Its global linguistic status, however, might not necessarily occupy an H1 or L1 position, as linguistic competition in a speech community is contingent upon a range of social factors and takes time to develop. Nevertheless, the linguistic potentiality of Mandarin Chinese to become an L2 (or L1b) global lingua franca is a realistic prospect in the decades to come.

This paper is divided into three major sections. The first section provides an overview of previous scholarly arguments, the second some ground-clearing work on the politically-loaded term “global language,” and the third and last section the sociolinguistic perspectives on Mandarin Chinese as an emerging global lingua franca. One caveat to be said is that the nature of this subject yields diverse interpretations depending on how it is viewed from different ideological stances. Hence, the primary goal of this paper is simply to offer a viewpoint and some explanations on this subject from the field of sociolinguistics. Another is that however reliable or valid the research data may be, the linguistic landscape of our global society is constantly changing and thus requires the use of appropriate methodological or theoretical lenses to interpret them (i.e., demographic, social, economic, and geopolitical data). This is where sociolinguistic methodologies become handy in bridging the gap between these data and the arguments/conclusions drawn from them.

As used in this study, Mandarin Chinese (hereafter, Mandarin) refers to *Putonghua* (common language), similar to the idea of *koiné diálektos* (common dialect) used in Hellenistic Greek. While some believe that Mandarin was previously one of the seven major dialect groups that is most widely spoken by the Han population (92% of the total population), and which later became the designated standard spoken language or *Putonghua* in modern China, the Academic Conference on the Standardization of Modern Chinese Language held in 1955 clarified and emphasized that *Putonghua* was “to take Beijing phonetics as the standard pronunciation, Northern Chinese as the basic dialect, and modern vernacular writings as the grammatical norm” (Huang and Liao 10). Others have also claimed that *Putonghua* does not strictly refer to the Mandarin dialect, as *Putonghua* was developed based on an amalgamation of the linguistic features of various Mandarin subdialects and from national language standardization planning.² In any case, in this study, Mandarin is equivalent to *Putonghua*—the official language and nationwide lingua franca of China. A lingua franca is a natural language that is used as a convenient communication medium in a multilingual speech community (Comrie 982). Thus, global lingua franca refers to a linguistic variety whose role and function is to serve as a *default* contact language between individuals or social groups having different native or first languages within the global society.

Mandarin as a Global Lingua Franca: Previous Studies

Discussions about the growing global popularity of Mandarin have raised the question of whether the language can compete with English on a global scale. Its growing popularity is linked with the rise of China, and this phenomenon has been described by some as the “Chinese fever” (Wang 159). While some think that “Chinese fever” is an exaggeration of the actual scenario, arguing that the rising popularity of Mandarin in the statistical data shown by popular sources are doubtful (Plumb), there are also other studies that provide ample evidence for the developing global exposure and continual spread of the language. Two notable studies deserve mention.

The first is Jeffrey Gil’s *The Rise of Chinese as a Global Language*.³ Gil’s study is perhaps the most comprehensive one on this subject to date. He describes “Chinese fever” as a global, large-

scale acquisition and adoption of Mandarin for various purposes by different stakeholders. Gil argues, following Spolsky's⁴ definition of language policy, that this macroacquisition of Mandarin is influenced by three factors: language practices, language beliefs or ideology, and language management (i.e., language planning). Using an ecology of language approach (Hult), more specifically, a punctuated equilibrium model,⁵ Gil suggests that the macroacquisition of Mandarin indicates a reconfiguration of the global language system, and this reconfiguration is brought about by the "comprehensive language competitiveness" of Mandarin in relation to various forms of power in its linguistic environment (*Rise* 40).

The book ends with three possible scenarios for the position of Mandarin as a global language—continuation, coexistence, or replacement—which are contingent upon four possible outcomes concerning China's rise—superpower, major power, threat, and decline. His conclusion is that the macroacquisition of Mandarin will continue in the short term, may likely coexist with English as a global language in the medium term, and may possibly replace English in the long term.

The second study is Yeng-Seng Goh's chapter, "The Spread of Mandarin as a Global Language," in *Teaching Chinese as an International Language*. Goh argues that China's re-emergence in the 21st century as a global economic giant creates an opportunity for Mandarin to become a global language alongside English. He invokes David Crystal's (*English* [1997]) requirements for what constitutes a global language, and so believes that a language can legitimately claim global status when the number of its non-native speakers or learners is increasingly expanding. Goh then utilizes Kachru's Three Concentric Model (sic) in mapping out the present and future ecology of Mandarin. The inner circle represents the traditional core regions of China's mainland and Taiwan region where Mandarin is the official language and lingua franca. The emanating middle circle represents the 40 million overseas Chinese in the diaspora (the recent figure is 46 million; see below) who use Mandarin as a lingua franca. The expanding outermost circle represents regions where Mandarin is recognized for its role in commerce, trade, or culture.

Goh notes that the prospects for learning Mandarin in the expanding outermost circles are promising, citing a number of factors that are enhancing its developing international popularity. He also notes, however, that "The degree of global status of a language is determined by the degree to which native speakers in the Inner Circle can draw people into the Outer and Extending Circles" (8). Goh's argument contrasts Gil's in the area of scientific/technological competitiveness of Mandarin. He concludes that Mandarin will challenge but not replace the global position of English.

Both these studies, along with others,⁶ highlight various factors that could position Mandarin as a global lingua franca. They provide good reasons for the rising global prominence of Mandarin and enlighten us on its trajectory as a global lingua franca. They also show the physical and virtual signposts where the language is being increasingly used on a global scale. Studies of this nature investigate the subject from a macro perspective, suggesting that a global lingua franca is dependent upon its social and demographic status as determined by the sociopolitical and economic power of its native speakers. This is certainly true to a large extent, but this subject may as well be assessed from a sociolinguistic perspective to delineate more clearly the correlation between linguistic conclusions and the various factors that influence those conclusions. Thus, the use of a sociolinguistic lens in interpreting the data would move our conclusions from the realm of speculation to one of plausibility.

Global Language vs. Global Lingua Franca

Since the postcolonial era, English is the only language that has emerged to be called a hyper-central language. A hyper-central language positions itself at the top of a hierarchy of languages consisting of super-central languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, and Turkish), central languages (c. 150 national and official languages), and peripheral languages (c. 98% of the world's total languages). This hierarchy is said to be a representation of the "global language system" and depicts an ecology of global multilingualism.⁷ Peripheral languages constitute about 98% of the world's total languages because, out of the 7,168 languages in use today, only about 10% of the world's population actually use these languages, and only 23 of the total languages are spoken by half of the world's population. English and Mandarin account for approximately 1.5 billion and 1.2 billion users, respectively, of the total population. As language shift, decline, and death are inevitable in dynamic speech communities, these numbers continue to change (Eberhard et al.).

Whether this ranking of language groups gives an appropriate or accurate representation of this so-called global language system, it nevertheless can be a starting point to talk about the burgeoning of Mandarin as a global lingua franca. I use the term "global lingua franca" instead of "global language" because the latter becomes an ambiguous term when scholars use it to discuss this subject. Firstly, a global language could be any language in the four hierarchies mentioned above, since all languages, especially super-central and central languages, are spoken by their speakers around the world. For instance, Mandarin is a super-central language that is spoken by over 46 million overseas Chinese across every continent ("Chinese Diaspora"; Poston). Similarly, Filipino (previously, Tagalog) is a central language that is spoken in many countries where there are Filipino speakers and communities. Around two million Filipinos are scattered abroad, and English is only used by this population as a "commodified language" (Tupas 98; Lorente and Tupas 20–32). The same holds true with other super-central and central languages.

Secondly, global language is a vague term that can encapsulate a range of linguistic varieties along with their status and social functions. The term can refer to any such linguistic varieties as dialects, vernacular languages, standard languages, official languages, national languages, regional languages, and lingua franca.⁸ Even though scholars have tried to define global language using various linguistic and social configurations, their definitions still seem inadequate to capture the intended meaning of the term. Some common terminologies and notions that have been used to describe or are associated with global language (with some using it with global lingua franca interchangeably) include the globality of languages, referring to the linguistic status and function of languages globally (Ammon); the special role and status of a language as an official or co-official language in many countries, a required foreign language course in education, and a growing number of native speakers (Crystal, *English* [2003]); the global coverage and influence of a language as an official language in business, trade, and tourism or a medium of communication in education;⁹ and world Englishes (or global Englishes),¹⁰ which suggest the global use of various varieties of English (Kachru, "Standards") but employed with various meanings (Bolton). The list goes on, resulting in differences in meanings of what constitutes a global language—when the intended meaning is merely that it is a widely spoken international language by a large and growing population and across several social or language domains—so, global lingua franca.

Fourthly, and most importantly, an apparent problem the term global language creates is that

it evinces linguistic prestige¹¹ and socio-geopolitical undertones, “favouring particular people, countries, cultures, forms of knowledge and possibilities of development; it is a language that creates barriers as much as it presents possibilities” (Pennycook 515). Numerous studies have addressed this issue,¹² including the notion of English as an “exclusionary class dialect” (515). Thus, to depict a particular language as “hyper” and “global” implies the superiority of one language over the other. And since languages are spoken by their speakers, prestige language (a problematic term as well) is sometimes confused with the idea of prestige-class people (Rojo). What primarily makes English a “hyper-language” is that it is the most widely recognized *default* contact language between people or social groups who speak *different* languages; when these people or social groups come into contact, they necessarily or naturally would have to use English for mutual intelligibility.

The notion of global language seems to stem from the history of English language colonialism or English linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, *Linguistic*; “Language”), where such institutions like the British Council (founded in 1934) have constantly promoted English over other native languages. The correlation between this history and the use of the term global English becomes even clearer in sociolinguistic terms: the linguistic imposition of a language on a subjugated territory usually happens in phenomena of imperialism and colonialism. The linguistic expansion goes hand in glove with the geographical annexation and extension of the colonialist country. This linguistic phenomenon has its historical precedents. Ancient Palestine became a multilingual speech community, with Greek as its lingua franca, as a result of multiple events of language shift and decline under several military regimes from approximately 800 BCE to 500 CE (Ong, *Multilingual Jesus*). Similarly, other such languages as Latin, French, and Spanish spread throughout various parts of the world through colonialism (Goh).

The geopolitical situation of the 21st century, however, is entirely different from those in the past. One could argue that the era of linguistic colonialism ended with the British Empire (Graddol 58). The point asserted here is that global language is neither an appropriate nor an accurate term to use, as it is too allied with socio-geopolitics and with the history of English language colonialism. Hence, it is more accurate to use the term global lingua franca, as it captures the notion of global language from a linguistic standpoint, rather than from socio-political and power-differential ones. It is a more precise term that refers to the linguistic variety whose role and function is to serve as a contact language between speakers of different languages.

Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Mandarin as a Global Lingua Franca

In broad terms, sociolinguistics investigates the interrelationships between people, language, and society, and the starting point of an investigation can begin with either of the three components. The employment of sociolinguistic theories as an analytic tool is usually based on the uniformitarian principle commonly used in historical linguistics (Nevalainen). The principle states: “Knowledge of processes operated in the past can be inferred by observing ongoing processes in the present” (Christy, qtd. in Labov, *Principles* 21). This principle is shared by a number of scholars in sociolinguistics; as Suzanne Romaine puts it: “The linguistic forces which operate today and are observable around us are not unlike those which have operated in the past” (1454).¹³

It is fair to say that the notion of global language used by previous studies puts their emphasis on the “society” component, as demographic, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic elements were the prime determining factors in ascertaining the global status of a language. Here, this subject is

discussed from the “people” (i.e., language user) and “language” perspectives. The next sections demonstrate the correlations between language use, language choice, and the language user to ascertain how and why Mandarin could become a global lingua franca. They also highlight how languages interact on their own in a speech community to determine the level or status Mandarin could achieve as a global lingua franca.

Potential Acquirers and Speakers of Mandarin

Individuals become multilingual for a variety of reasons, and their proficiency in speaking each of the languages depends upon three major factors: patterns of social interaction, mobility, and personal circumstances and motivation. Children who are born into multilingual families or communities, or who are educated in bilingual schools, naturally become multilingual individuals, but the active use of their known languages vastly depends upon their personal circumstances. Migrant individuals become multilingual by becoming integrated into their new social community which requires them to use the community’s dominant language or lingua franca in many social situations (or social domains). Their patterns of social interaction range from communication within their own families, between different social groups and audiences, and with government authorities. Others become multilingual by acquiring a second or third language for ideological or professional reasons and purposes. Like migrant individuals, second- or third-language acquirers are usually highly motivated because of their desire to relocate to another country to pursue a job or career (Stavans and Hoffmann).

This concept of individual multilingualism may be used as a theoretical framework for analyzing the potentiality of Mandarin to become a global lingua franca. The gist of this framework is to situate the individual (the smallest societal unit) within the global linguistic ecology, in order to understand the patterns of their social interaction, evaluate their social and geographical mobility, and identify their personal circumstances and motivations for learning or using Mandarin as a contact language. In this regard, the critical question to ask is, what would be the personal motivations for an individual to acquire and learn Mandarin, or what personal circumstances would motivate an individual to speak and use Mandarin in specific social domains? This question serves as an important criterion for the linguistic expansion of Mandarin should more people seek to acquire, learn, and speak the language.

One of the social functions of language is the construction of social interaction. People in the society communicate through the use of a language. As human societies develop through time, patterns of social interactions through language can be observed and studied, especially since the ways in which we use language reveal our view of our relationships with other people (Hudson). These patterns may include the protection of self-identity, the projection of a public image (or face) to the world, the expression of solidarity with the audience, and the accommodation of other people’s needs and behavior through the use of language. Patterns of social interactions are also affected or constrained by social and geographical mobility. Opportunity and access to acquiring a specific language may not always be readily available for the individual who wishes to learn it. To be sure, an individual may be attracted to learning Mandarin after watching *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, but if there is no opportunity (e.g., presence of Mandarin speakers) and/or access (e.g., teachers, schools, internet) to learning the language, language acquisition will not likely happen.

Therefore, patterns of social interactions and mobility are important factors to consider in

determining the possibilities in the acquisition of a language. But the most important ones to consider are the personal circumstances and motivations of an individual to acquire and learn a language.

Selection and use of a particular language are determined through the circumstances the individual encounters in a specific social situation. Selection is constrained by the individual's audience, social setting, and topic of conversation. But the decision of selecting which particular language to use in a social situation rests solely on the individual. In "atypical" linguistic situations (e.g., when visiting another country), an individual is often confronted with three simultaneous, overlapping psychological factors—personal needs, background environment, and immediate situation—in the selection of a language (Herman). When a person visits a foreign country, for instance, the background environment becomes the most salient factor over personal needs and immediate situation, as the individual will adjust their behavior to the new environment either consciously or otherwise.

Individuals will normally "project a public face in a social interaction according to how they want their interaction partners to view them, and generally, people prefer a positive to a negative public face" (Tajfel 45). Because individuals typically want their audience to "like" them, especially when they are speaking to local residents of a foreign country, they will naturally protect their public face by projecting a positive self-image (Hudson). As a result, they will "accommodate" or "converge" to their audience by speaking their language, assuming they can also speak the language of their audience (Giles and Street). Linguistic accommodation demonstrates a solidarity-oriented social relationship between conversation partners, and it often occurs in the friendship social domain between close friends or new acquaintances. When individuals are situated in these kinds of friendship-domain contexts, they are typically either motivated to accommodate their audience, or the circumstances require them to accommodate their audience through the use of a common language.

When foreigners travel to China, they also encounter similar social situations and are typically immediately situated in friendship-domain contexts. Learning to speak some foreign words for daily friendly conversations is a travel norm. To be sure, foreign travelers to China would at least already learn such greetings and polite expressions as *xiexie* (thank you), *ni hao* (hello), *bu keqi* (you're welcome), *duibuqi* (I'm sorry), *mei guanxi* (that's okay), *zaijian* (goodbye), etc. Their exposure to the language and subsequent acquisition of more words and expressions into their linguistic repertoire will vary according to the purposes and duration of their travel—shorter periods for leisure and temporary visits, and longer periods for work or migration. This linguistic scenario represents the opportunities as well as the reasons for foreign individuals to acquire and learn Mandarin. When we look at the number of foreign individuals who travel to China whether as visitors or workers, the number is not insignificant.

Statistics on international tourist arrivals in China show an increasing trend from 2010 to 2019. In 2014, China's tourism industry created 66.1 million jobs, ranking first in the world (WTTC), and this figure increased to 80 million jobs between 2018 and 2019. By 2019, shortly before the pandemic period, there were 145.3 million inbound tourist travelers to China. At the end of 2022, tourism contributed 814 billion dollars to the country's GDP, which placed it second in the world behind the United States and ahead of Germany (Blazyte, "Number of employees"; "Travel"). It is forecasted that the absolute economic contribution of tourism in China will reach a new peak of 3.2 trillion dollars (+79.42% from the current figure) by 2028 (Degenhard)—this

directly correlates with the anticipated steep increase in inbound tourist arrivals in the country. The significance of inbound tourist travelers to China as potential learners and users of Mandarin certainly cannot be underestimated, especially when they become attracted to the conveniences of the country's technological advancement (e.g., *WeChat*, *Alipay*, *Taobao*, *Didi*) and attached to its rich culture and history.

Similarly, China's outbound tourism has continued to be a booming industry for world tourism: "Tourism expenditure from China surged from \$24 billion in 2006 (3% of the world's total) to \$261 billion in 2016, or 21% of the world's international tourism spending" (Butler). The 2016 expenditure was more or less steadily maintained until 2019 when outbound tourism expenditure registered 255 billion dollars (Blazyte, "Travel"). The country has consistently ranked first in the world in tourism expenditures since 2012, and in 2016, approximately 1.24 billion Chinese tourist arrivals were recorded across the globe. Over 100 million outbound Chinese travelers were registered in 2014 (Butler), a figure which rose to 155 million in 2019 (Blazyte, "Number of Outbound Tourists"). Some have estimated that this 2019 figure will nearly double by 2030, reaching 228 million outbound travelers from China (Bersola).

It is projected that the country's inbound-outbound tourism in the post-pandemic period will rebound gradually and steadily (Interesse; Blazyte, "Number of Outbound Tourists"). All these statistics indicate the high mobility and access of language learners and users of Mandarin all over the world, a global phenomenon that is perhaps unprecedented in world tourism history. The 145.3 million inbound tourists to China represent those individuals who are exposed to Mandarin and thus would likely learn to speak the language, even if it is just for daily friendly and phatic communication purposes. China is arguably a predominantly *Putonghua*-speaking community (Ong, "Sociolinguistic Framework"), with 840 million L1 and 178 million L2 speakers of the language (Goh 4). In this kind of linguistic situation, foreign and migrant travelers have stronger tendencies to learn the national lingua franca (even if it means a few words here and there) than in those contexts when the locals are able to speak the foreign language, English, for example (e.g., Singapore, the Philippines).

By contrast, outbound Chinese travelers to different destinations around the world represent those Chinese individuals who are exposed to non-Chinese languages. While this scenario should indicate a similar linguistic situation to that of when foreigners travel to China, it is important to note that, when Chinese people travel abroad either as immigrants or visitors, they typically congregate in Chinese communities. Chinese communities (e.g., Chinatown) are spread everywhere in the world, and local Chinese organizations and federations in these communities are often put in place to assist settling-in Chinese immigrants and visitors. Some countries even provide Chinese-language mobile apps for Chinese travelers (Gil, *Rise*). Mandarin is used as the lingua franca in these communities. For Chinese migrant workers and international students, it is fair to say that, to some extent, the language will also be spread in varying degrees to the local residents as these workers and students come into contact with them.

Li and Xue note that, among the 190 countries that implement some form of Mandarin education, 85 of them have included the language as part of their national educational curriculum and over 80,000 schools or language institutions offer Mandarin courses; as of 2023, the number of Mandarin learners exceeds 30 million.¹⁴ Adding this number of Mandarin learners to the 145.3 million foreign travelers to China, we get a very conservative estimate of the number of individuals who can be considered as acquirers and users of the language. This number does not

even include the 46 million overseas Chinese (projected to increase to over 59 million by 2040; Gil, *Rise*) distributed across some 130 countries (Li and Li), the number of foreign travelers to countries where Mandarin is widely (e.g., Singapore) or occasionally (e.g., Malaysia, the Philippines) spoken, and the local residents of various countries who could possibly acquire the language as they come into contact with Chinese travelers and immigrants around the world. In addition, the high traffic rate of Chinese tourist arrivals in various global destinations exposes more people around the world to the language as can already be seen in Chinese-language signages on major roads, establishments, and airports in many countries (Gil, *Rise*).

While one may arguably say that this linguistic scenario would also apply to other countries, they should also note and acknowledge China's massive economy as the giant driving force that is creating job opportunities and tourism for people across the globe. Additionally, not every country has a large and growing middle-class population who can afford to travel abroad, and travel often.

To be sure, between 1980 and 2000, China became the fastest-growing economy in the world with an average annual GDP growth rate of over 9% (Fairbank and Goldman 406). In 2010, its GDP was already 6.1 trillion dollars ("China GDP"), and the total net household assets of its middle-class population were valued at 69.1 trillion dollars, which surpassed the 57.1 trillion dollars of the United States (China's Southwest University of Finance and Economy). By 2018, the country became the world's largest trader with a total global trade of 4.6 trillion dollars, representing 12.8% of the world's total. At the end of 2022, the country's GDP was 17.97 trillion dollars, showing small increments of year-over-year growth rate from 2010 to 2020 and a steep increase from 2020 to 2022 ("China GDP").

These statistics, along with the sociolinguistic factors and dynamics involved in an individual's acquisition of a language, indicate that, unlike learning Mandarin, inasmuch as individuals would want to learn other languages, there would be less reason, access, mobility, opportunity, and motivation for them to do so, at least at the present.

Global Multilingualism and Multiglossia and L2 (or L1b) Global Mandarin

Postcolonialism has brought language diversity to the world and has catapulted other supranational and transnational languages to the international linguistic arena. In many ex-colonial countries, national policies have already commissioned local and regional languages as official languages. From a macro perspective, the 21st century's linguistic situation is one that is highly multilingual and diverse (Stavans and Hoffmann).

Multilingualism may be viewed from both a language-user and a societal perspective. In individualism multilingualism, the complementarity principle states: "Bilinguals usually acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. Different aspects of life require different languages" (Grosjean and Li 165). By contrast, from a societal perspective, the concept of diglossia states: "There is a division of labor among the languages" in a speech community (Homes 31). In a highly multilingual global speech community, individuals naturally acquire the need to learn a foreign language. Their reasons and motivations are influenced by the status, role, and function of that language within the global speech community. This is because a language possesses these internal features in relation to other languages within a speech community. With reference to Mandarin, the question to ask is, what would be its status, role, and function if it coexists with English as a global lingua franca?

Diglossia (or multiglossia) is a useful concept in studies of societal multilingualism (hence,

“language comprehensive competitiveness” [Zou and You; Xu] is certainly not a new idea [Gil, *Rise* 40]). In the original definition of diglossia by Charles Ferguson, diglossia simply referred to the functional use of two different dialects called the high (H) and low (L) forms in a community. The H-form is usually standardized, codified, and used in more official and public communicative events (government, civic events, education, etc.), whereas the L-form is normally confined to more private and informal social domains (home, friends) or informal everyday speech (Ferguson). Later, however, diglossia was used to distinguish broadly the functional use and linguistic statuses and roles of various language varieties in a community (Fishman).

The linguistic landscape of our modern world may also be mapped out, even if it means in the broadest terms, with respect to English and Mandarin. English is already considered a global lingua franca, and Mandarin is now considered a widely-spoken super-central language. Some scholars note that, as new languages increase in popularity, the global acquisition of English may lose momentum and eventually level out (Graddol) or become fragmented into a family of languages (McArthur), especially with the emergence of a strong competing lingua franca. Although, some also believe that English “has already grown to be independent of any form of social control” (Crystal, *English* [1997] 139; *English* [2003] 290; “English” 21) or that “only catastrophic upheaval could seemingly threaten it in the near future” (Bruthiaux, “Predicting Challenges” 129). Such arguments seem to ignore the fact that language and society are permanently intertwined and that language endangerment, decline, and shift are real social phenomena.

Given the present-day global linguistic mosaic, it is important to understand that the acquisition of English by an individual does not necessarily have to be at the same level or degree as they would learn Mandarin. Bilinguals’ competency levels vary; hence, sociolinguists study different types of bilinguals and bilingual families, categories of measuring bilingual proficiency, and code-switching abilities. It usually happens that individuals are competent in both oracy (listening and speaking) and literacy (reading and writing) skills in their first language, but are only competent in oracy skills in their second or third language. For example, an English–French international translator (or any balanced bilingual for that matter) would be competent in both languages in all four areas of language skills, but he or she could only be orally competent in Mandarin. Many people simply want to learn to speak a language for practical reasons. As such, even though learning how to read and write (script learning) Mandarin is difficult, as some scholars assert (e.g., Bruthiaux, “Predicting Challenges”), it should not in any way hinder the discussion of the language becoming a global lingua franca.

Having considered this inherent multilingualism in our global speech community, as well as the specific language skill an individual can choose to acquire Mandarin, we can now look at the social domains where Mandarin is (and will potentially be) used to become a global lingua franca. This information will be useful in ascertaining the status, role, and function of the language as it coexists with English as a global lingua franca: which language will function as the high variety and which as the low variety, and in which domains (schools, media, public transport, etc.) each language will be used.

As mentioned, different languages may occupy both H and L statuses or simply either of them with reference to their usage as a lingua franca. For example, in the education domain, an international student may be studying English as their major, but at the same time, they are also studying oral Mandarin as an elective subject to learn how to speak the language. In this case, English would become their H2 and L2 language (after their native or first language) and

Mandarin their L3 language (since they only acquired oral competency in the language). If their oral competency level in Mandarin is similar to that in English, then Mandarin would occupy an L2b status in their linguistic repertoire. Similarly, in the trade and commerce domain, participants at the negotiation table may use English as the H1 and L1 language while simultaneously using (or codeswitching to) Mandarin as an L2 (or L1a) language on some occasions. These L1 and L2 statuses of English and Mandarin, respectively, may also be conceived as L1a and L1b to grasp the idea of a bi-lingua franca phenomenon that could happen in the future.

Let us stretch this domain concept further to include regional speech communities that could illustrate different language domains where two or even three languages are simultaneously used as lingua francas and the fact that languages do compete with each other to achieve their own status and roles in a speech community. Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China with a population nearing 7.5 million as of 2024 (www.worldometers.info/world-population/china-hong-kong-sar-population/). Cantonese has been the dominant vernacular and regional lingua franca since the colonial period, and it therefore has served as the L1 variety of the speech community until today (David C. S. Li)—about 90% of the total population are L1 speakers and 6% are L2 users of Cantonese (Chen 528). With the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, social and geographical mobility between people from China's mainland and Hong Kong has eased up, and more and more people from the mainland travel to Hong Kong regularly. Promotion of Mandarin through the new “biliterate and trilingual” (两文三语政策) language policy by the HKSAR government further fostered the use of the language, particularly in all primary and secondary schools (Wang and Kirkpatrick; Pan; Poon, “Language Use,” “Language Policy”). As a result, the acquisition and use of Mandarin by the local residents have gradually increased, especially among the younger population.

Thus, in Hong Kong, Mandarin could be seen as the looming, more dominant L2 variety compared to English, even though English would still be a prestige variety after Cantonese, which is the L1 and H1 variety (H1 Cantonese here refers to the standard, written form of traditional Chinese, otherwise known as Modern Standard Chinese or MSC). In fact, Mandarin already became the co-official language alongside English in 1974, and the language has since been used in official transactions (Wang and Kirkpatrick). This linguistic campaign has not only spread the use of Mandarin but has also deepened the linguistic complexities in the society.¹⁵ The HKSAR government desires to create a “biliterate and trilingual” citizenry—biliterate in Mandarin and English, and trilingual in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English (Wang and Kirkpatrick 5).

Many studies on this global lingua franca subject have acknowledged the global position and competitiveness of China in the areas of economics, geopolitics, education, and cultural advancement (e.g., Confucius Institutes). In the preceding section, we have also seen the significant population of potential Mandarin acquirers and speakers from foreign travelers to China and Chinese travelers to foreign countries.

Certainly, because of China's active engagement in and increasing influence on a wide range of international activities, not least spearheading global projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Mandarin has now come into *close* linguistic contact with English in the international speech community. When language contact happens, the dominant language (English) will tend to “maintain” its chief position as the emerging language (Mandarin) challenges and vies for its position. This may not be easily observed from a societal or an individual person's vantage point, but this is simply the internal dynamics involved between two competing languages. Studies on

language contact and change (Bayley et al.; Stavans and Hoffmann; Wodak et al.; Holmes; Baker and Jones; Fasold) have shown that when two powerful languages come into contact, they will naturally compete against each other, and in the course of time, which could mean decades or even centuries later, the “weaker” language will gradually decline.

For this reason, insofar as ascertaining the different social domains where Mandarin can be used as a global lingua franca, I would argue that they will also be those social domains in global economics, politics, education and cultural exchange, and travel and tourism, where English is also used. This does not necessarily mean that Mandarin is instantly present whenever English is used to compete with it. It further does not mean that Mandarin will have the same status as English in terms of its function as the H1 and L1 global lingua franca. But it does mean that we may judiciously assign an L2 (or L1b) lingua franca status to the language in the global arena, as more people worldwide would increasingly acquire it as their L2 or L3 foreign language for similar purposes and domains related to these globalization processes.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the linguistic possibility and plausibility of Mandarin becoming a global lingua franca based on its potential acquirers and users. It has also examined the potential status, role, and function of Mandarin as it coexists with English as a global lingua franca. Whether this linguistic situation will actually happen is something that only time can tell. Further research on language attitudes and beliefs through fieldwork, surveys, and interviews can be conducted to further validate these conclusions. Within the global community, globalization and the processes that go with it are variegated and complex, and thus occurrence of events and subsequent outcomes are hard to predict. This becomes even truer with respect to linguistic outcomes. What is observable and realistic to say at the moment is that, as China continues to grow in its global influence, the use of Mandarin will grow alongside it. If English became a global lingua franca through globalization processes, the same will occur for Mandarin. The only major difference is that the former originated with colonialism processes during the post-medieval centuries and the latter with international multilateral relations and cooperation in the 21st century. This unique approach to international diplomatic relations would inevitably introduce and promote Mandarin in various social situations on the international stage.

Notes

1. See Chmelynski; Lo Bianco; Lu; Zhao and Huang; Zhang.
2. For an overview, see David C. S. Li.
3. Gil, “Comparison”; “Exploratory Study”; “Will”; *Rise*.
4. Spolsky’s *Language*; “What”; “Modified and Enriched Theory.”
5. See Dixon; Nettle and Suzanne.
6. Plumb; Żyśko and Rusinek; Ning Wang; Lo Bianco.
7. See de Swaan, “Language Systems”; *Words*.
8. For definitions, see Holmes; Wardhaugh; Hudson.
9. See Kachru’s Three Circles Model, “Standards”; “Sacred Cows”; “Teaching World Englishes”; *Asian*

Englishes.

10. See Pennycook.
11. See also covert prestige; Dodsworth.
12. See Tollefson; Bruthiaux, “Hold Your Courses”; Lysandrou and Lysandrou; Ramanathan; Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*; “English”; *English-Only Europe?*.
13. Cf. Lass; Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*.
14. Cf. *Language Magazine*, 2021, which estimates 25 million students and 200 million learners of the language in over 70 countries and 4000 colleges across the globe.
15. See Poon, “Language Policy”; Adamson and Lai; Wang and Kirkpatrick.

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