Communication Strategies between Chinese Employers and their Basotho Employees

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Abstract
In Lesotho, an increasing number of supermarkets and small stores, in both urban and rural areas, are owned and/or managed by Chinese. This paper is a preliminary attempt to document how workplace communication takes place between Chinese employers and their Basotho employees. It specifically investigates communication strategies used in carrying out daily interaction, looking at the use of the three languages Sesotho and Chinese as mother tongue languages for both parties, then the international language, English, and their possible mixing. It discusses whether there could be said to be a local pidgin developing. The paper also looks at non-verbal communication strategies, such as gestures, and whether more ‘experienced’ employers and employees are used to ‘mediate’ in workplace communication. Data were obtained from questions administered to employees of Chinese stores. It was supplemented by observations in such stores. Analysed data reveal that competency and fluency in a language is not a hindrance in business. Workers and their employees could always employ any means of communication to carry out their normal routines.

Key words: Communication strategies, Workplace communication, Chinese employers, Basotho employees

Suggested Citation:
1. Introduction
In Lesotho, as in many countries in the SADC region, an increasing number of supermarkets and small stores, in both urban and rural areas, are owned and/or managed by Chinese. This paper is a preliminary attempt to document how workplace communication takes place between Chinese employers and their Basotho employees. There is not much research done recently on the increasing number of Chinese immigrants to parts of Africa. There has been a report for the Rockefeller Foundation (Mohan and Kale, 2007) which suggests a major increase in 21st century. "Migrants have mainly settled in urban areas, but there has been more dispersion to rural areas of late in pursuit of new opportunities" (Mohan and Kale, 2007, p. 2). However, it has proven difficult to ascertain numbers of Chinese immigrants, partly because of their uncertain legal status in African countries. However, the report records 1000 Chinese in Lesotho in 2001, with an estimate of 5000 by 2005. More recently, the incoming Chinese Ambassador to Lesotho confirmed that number (Lesotho Times dated 28 April 2011).
This study attempts to explore some aspects of communication between Chinese immigrant traders and their Basotho employees. It hopes to do so by addressing the following questions:
(i) Given that neither group speaks the other’s language, what communicative strategies are used to facilitate workplace interaction?
(ii) What language(s) and language varieties are used for communication between the two groups?
(iii) Is there a possibility of a pidgin development?
2. Methodology
Research into any aspect of the Chinese immigrant community is difficult, as suspicion is easily aroused, either because of frequent semi-legal status of Chinese, or because they fear any evidence about relationships with employees will be used against them. On the basis of this situation, the preliminary study has used two ‘indirect’ methods to collect data since direct recording of interaction was difficult. Firstly, the researchers held an in-depth interview with a Mosotho employee working at a trading store run by Chinese. Secondly, they examined an imaginative representation of Chinese-Basotho dialogue in a Sesotho drama, which suggests public perception of the situation.
3. Results and Discussion
3.1 Communicative strategies used
An in-depth interview was conducted with a female Sesotho-speaking employee of a Chinese supermarket in Roma, the town in which the National University of Lesotho is situated. The interview was conducted in Sesotho, and covered the strategies used to communicate between the Chinese store supervisor and the Basotho employees, particularly the interviewee.
The interview observed that non-verbal communication strategies are central. Gesture and demonstration of meaning are reported as widely used by both sides. For example, when asked how they communicate, the employee answered,
Re ka sebelisa matsoho, a ka ntšupisa hore, haeba mohlomong a re o batla kobo, joale ‘na ke sa utloisisi na o batla ho reng, o tla bua ka matsoho a ntšupise, ebe ke hona ke utloang hore, ohong, o batla hore ke mo fe kobo kapa o batla hore ke theole kobo eane ke e bee fatse mohlomong.

(We can use hands, she can point, say, maybe she wants a blanket, and I don’t understand what she is saying, she will use hands and point, it’s then that I will understand that, oh, she wants me to give her a blanket or she wants me to bring down that blanket and put it down).

If the employee does not understand what the Chinese supervisor wishes her to do, the supervisor may demonstrate what she wants to be done, and the employee will then take over. Equally, the employee may use non-verbal means to gain understanding as demonstrated in 2.

… kapa re nke ntho, mohlomong haeba re nahana hore o bua ka ntho joale re sa utlo, re tla nka ntho e ngoe le e ngoe ka mona re ne re e phamise ho fihlela a ba a supa e right.

(Or we can also pick up items one by one to ask her if that’s what she wants until she points at the right one).

Sentence 3 below shows that non-verbal strategies are often used to enhance communication in a context when an attempt at linguistic communication has failed:

_Ee, kapa a hla tlohe, a lo mpontša ntho eno a e batlang, ebe joale kea utloisisa_ (Yes, or she may decide to leave her position and come to show me what she wants, then I will understand).

A further major strategy is for both the supervisor and the employee to use more experienced intermediaries to assist their communication. For example, the employee reported:

_Ee, e ea etsahala, nka botsa e leng khale a sebetsa hore na joale motho enoa o reng ha a cho tjena ebe joale eno o re, ae, o re tjena. Haba le eena ha sa utloisisi, o tla batla e mong hape a tlo thusana, joalo joalo._ (I can ask somebody who has been working here for longer, then that one will tell me that ‘this is what she means’. If s/he also does not understand, s/he will also seek help somewhere else etc. etc).

If the supervisor fails to communicate, she sometimes asks for translation from another Chinese member of staff. When asked what happens if she further fails to understand what the employer is saying, the employee reported that

_O tla ngola ka language ea hae ebe joale ke isa ka mane, eane ha a fihla ka mona, o tla mo joetsa hore enoa o na sa utlo na ke ne ke reng, ke nqena ke la ka getelletse ke ngola._ (She would write in her language, then I would take the written message to the other side, when that one comes on this side, she would tell him that I could not follow what she was saying, that is why she ended up writing).

Where linguistic strategies are employed, it is clear that the Chinese attempt to learn a small, basic amount of Sesotho, rather than English. The employee reported that at one point the supervisor requested written labels for items in the store:

_O ngola mabitsi a lintho tse ling ka shopong, ha a sa tsebe na ntho e bitsoang, o tla tla ho uena a tlo o botsa na ntho e bitsoang ka Sesotho, ebe uena o mo joetsa ka Sesotho kappa_
ka language sekooa, eena o sa ngola ka puo ea hae na ntho eno e bitsoang. She writes names of some things in the shop, if she does not know what something is, she will come to you and ask what that thing is in Sesotho, you will tell her using Sesotho or English, then she will write its name in her language.

Thus, the main focus of language learning is on lexemes necessary for the business. When a linguistic response is essential, the most basic form is used. For example, when asked what happens when a customer wants discount and asks the employee to negotiate price discount on his/her behalf, the employee said,

Ke tla mo joetsa ke tla re, ena customer e batla ena, joale now now eena chelete ke 150, haeba a re ae eseng 150, 150 e nyane, ebe customer e ea lla hape ere ke na le 160 hee. (I will tell her and say, ‘this one, customer wants this one, but now now money is M150’, if she refuses and say not M150 because that M150 is too low, but still customer pleads with M160 this time, she then says, ‘M160 sharp’).

In this example, it can be seen that the supervisor understands the price mentioned (presumably in English words, since these are commonly used in Sesotho) and can respond non-verbally. It is also notable that the employee uses the repeated English adverb ‘now now’ for emphasis, apparently thinking that this may communicate more efficiently. When the supervisor is willing to agree to a price, she uses here a mix of English number and a common colloquial marker of agreement – ‘sharp’. Thus, she is not so much using any form of Sesotho, but expressions as used by the young employees in their own somewhat mixed sociolect.

As reported by the employee, the supervisor has acquired a small amount of basic Sesotho, which is limited to the uninflected form of the verb, utilizes pronouns instead of inflections and shows no grammatical connection between clauses as illustrated in 8 below:

Q: Does she ever ask for assistance from others?

Ee, haeba a batla hore Mr X a tle a tlo mo thusa, o tla mo bua ka lebitso a re ‘tsamaea bua X o tla thuza nna’ kapa a re ‘nna tsamaea, bua X thuza nna’. (Yes, suppose she wants X to come from the other side of the shop and help her, she would say his name and say, ‘go talk X help me’ or she would say, ’me go, talk X help me’).

The employee remarked that the supervisor attempts to use her limited Sesotho in inappropriate contexts, having ‘picked up’ expressions from the employees:

Q: You also mentioned that if she happens to learn a certain word, she overuses it?

Ee, o sa le sebelisa linthong kaofela, mohiomong, like ha a re na o ile kae, o tla bua a re, ha a na re, ntho o ile kae, o tla re Nthabiseng ke tsamaea kae? Kapa ha a re ha a oe, ha a na re ha a eo , o tla re ha e eo . Ha a sebelise ha a eo , o sebelisa ha e eo, ntho e ngoe le e ngoe ho eenka ha e eo. (Yes, she uses it on almost everything, maybe, like when she asks whereabouts of somebody, she will say, she won’t say, ‘Where is X?’ She would say ‘Nthabiseng is walking where?’ Or if she wants to show that somebody is not there, she would not say ‘She is not there’ but she would say ‘It is not there’. She does not use ‘she is not there’; she uses ‘it is not there’. Everything is ‘it is not there’).
It is also clear that the Chinese supervisor sometimes mixes Sesotho and English vocabulary in attempts at communication:

Q: *What does she say when she wants you to work overtime?*

*Haeba ke re ke chaise ka bo 6, o tla ba re ‘thusa nna uena tsamaea lapeng 7 nna customer too much’, haeba customer li le ngata.* (Say I knock off at 6.00pm, she would say, ‘help me you go home 7.00pm me customer too much’ if customers were many).

It is not clear whether this mixing is due to the supervisor knowing the English lexemes ‘customer’ and ‘too much’ rather than the Sesotho equivalents, or whether these are used routinely (along with the hours) as part of code switching by the employees, and have been ‘picked up’ as part of the workplace sociolect.

It should be noted that what is happening in this situation is not the development of a true pidgin, since, as far as can be ascertained at this point, the Basotho employees address the Chinese in inflected Sesotho, in a somewhat simple form. They also code switch with English on a small scale, as is common in the speech of young Basotho. Thus, they retain their own speech forms, while the Chinese acquire a limited range of the same sociolect, sufficient to function in the store.

Interestingly, the employee suggested that the communication strategies she reported are considered perfectly adequate for the situation, and are common to Basotho-Chinese communication:

*Ee puo ea bona e ea tsoana, le ha o bua le ea Mokhotlong ha feela o so kila sebetsa le bona o tlo tseba ho bua le e mong le e mong oa bona hore na ke Thaba-Tseka kapa Maseru kapa ka le kae.* (Yes, their language is the same. You can communicate to any of them anywhere once you have worked with them, whether it is at Mokhotlong, Thaba-Tseka, Maseru or anywhere).

The communication may also be explained phonologically. Chinese employers tend to add prolonged vowels to words that end with open syllables as in the cases of *cheka* for check, *talka* talk, *tella* for tell. Mispronunciation of consonants is also observed as in the examples of *tis* for this, *tausand* for thousand.

The following playscript is written by an academic in the area of Sesotho language and literature. It is included in this study because the researchers take it to be reflecting Basotho perception of Chinese-Basotho communication modes.

**Extracts from ‘Re li bona tjena’ playscript by L.S. Phafoli**

(C stands for Chinese employer, L stands for Lineo who acted as an interpreter between Basotho employees and their Chinese employers, B stands for Basotho employees)

**Extract: 1**

1 C: Ausi ‘why’ uena ‘no come me’ cheka uena? (*Sister why you no come me check you?*)

2 Uena u bua lekan ‘why’ la? ‘M’e (1) tsamaea. Ntate X ‘come’. (*You you speak enough why la? Mrs. go. Mr. X come.*)

3 Ausi,’come!’ ‘where’ la? (*Sister, come! Where la?)

4 L: Here I am.

5 C: ‘Why’ uena ‘no’ (2) tsamaea ‘go home’? (*Why you no go, go home?*)
6 L: Ntate o re na ha le ee hae keng? (Mr. is asking you why are you not going?)
7     Bo-ausi bona ba bua uena ‘answer’ ntate X o bua ‘why?’ (Sisters them talk
    You answer Mr.X talk why?
8 C: M’e ‘no’ o o bua ntate kong-kong la. (Mrs. No talk Mr. kong-kong)
9 L: O re ha a na ho bua le motho eo o a lona ea se nang kelello. (He is saying he will
    not talk to that person of yours who has no brains)
10 C: (3) Tsamaca la, ‘go home’. ‘No sing’ la. (Go la, go home. No sing la.)
    This kong-kong no work la?
12 L: Me don’t know.
13 C: Ua bua uena ‘no’ aa tseba. ‘Ask’ la. (You talk you no you know. Ask la.)
14 L: Ho thoe na ha le sebets e keng? (He is asking why are you not working.)
15 B: Re mo joetsitsa maobane. (We told him yesterday.)
16 L: Bo-ausi bona ba bua bona tella uena yesterday. (Sisters them they talk them tell
    you yesterday.)
17 C: Ba bua ‘me’ talka kong-kong abuti? (They talk Mrs. Talk kong-kong brother?)
18     ‘Tell’ bona ‘me no’ talka kong-kong abuti. Tell ausi ‘no’ mosebetsi ‘no money’.
    (Tell them me no talk kong-kong brother. Tell sister no work no money.)
19 L: Bo-ausi ba bua okay. (Sisters they talk okay.)
20 C: Ba bua okay. Tell ausi ‘me’ cutha bona. Okay? (They talk okay. Tell sister cutha
    them. Okay?)
21 L: O re o tla le tebela. (He says he will fire you.)
22     Ba bua uena ‘tell’ ntate X. (They talk you tell Mr.X)
    (No Mr. la. Mrs. I talk this work me. Mr. him kong-kong no work.)
24     Tell’ bona ‘m’e kea bua ‘no’ cutha bona. Bona worka ‘good’. ‘Na talka bona, ‘no’
    ntate.
    (Tell them mrs I talk no cutha them. Them work good. Me talk them, no mr.)
25 L: Ba bua bona ‘work good’ uena ‘give’ bona ‘money’. (They talk them work good
    you give them money.)
26 C: ‘Tell bona ‘me give’ bona ‘money May next year’ (Tell them me give them
    money May next year)
27 L: Ba bua ‘no’. (They talk no.)
28 C: Ba bua ‘no’, (4) tsamaca ‘go home’ (They talk no, go go home)
Extract 2
29 C: ‘M’e calla uena bo ausi ‘no’ worka. (Mrs call you sisters no work)
30 L: Bo-ntate ba bua bo-ausi ‘no’ tsotsi. Oa bua ‘why’? (Sirs they talk sisters no
    criminal. You talk why?)
31 C: ‘Tell’ ntate ‘m’e’ oa give’ bona ‘money’ toto necka bona talka good. (Tell mr
    mrs will give them money bottle neck them talk good.)
32 L: O re ke le bolelle hore ha le ka buiseha o tla le fa chelele le likipa tsa ‘bottle neck’.
    (He is saying if you can negotiate he will give you money and bottle neck
shirts.)
33 Bo-ntate ba bua ‘no take’ toto necka ‘and money’. Ba bua bo-ausi ‘no’ worka ‘why’? 
   (Sirs they talk no take bottleneck shirts and money. They talk sisters no work why?)
34 C: ‘Give’ bona ‘tea’. (Give them tea.)
35 L: Bo-ntate ba bua uena ‘give how much’? (Sirs they talk you give how much?)
36 C: ‘Na ‘give’ bona ‘five taosand’ ha. Bona ‘no’ kong-kong. (Me give them five thousand ha. Them no kong-kong.)
37 ‘Go’ talka bona. (Go talk them.)

The study confirms Mohan and Kale’s view that Chinese employers do little to integrate with local communities: Chinese communities in Africa have generally remained relatively self-contained. One important upshot of this for integration and business is that language remains a problem. Very few recent migrants speak any local languages and have rudimentary English or Portuguese at best” (Mohan and Kale 2007, p. 15).

In their limited interaction with Basotho employees and customers who have at least acquired high school education, they pick up a little of English which enables them to code switch between Sesotho and English.

It is further observed that the communication is loaded with more content words than function words. It does not observe grammar rules. This makes their language to be limited because they do not know a lot of words; they ensure that they acquire words that address specific items. Chinese employers are thus satisfied with a limited functional mode of communication. They tend to over generalize the little Sesotho they have acquired, as in the case of tsamaea used to mean ‘walking’, ‘go’ or ‘whereabouts’, bua used to mean ‘talk’ and ‘tell’, uena used for both ‘you’ and ‘they’.

Double mention of words such as ‘tsamaea, go home’ also feature in Chinese communication. It may be concluded that they use such a strategy as an emphasis of what the speaker wants to convey. Further examples are ‘sisters them’ and ‘bona, uena’. For the sake of communication, it is observed that Chinese create their own words as in the following examples: kong-kong (nonsense), cutha (tebela), toto (bottle). In cases like that, the speaker will also use gestures to reinforce what he/she is saying. This results in their language featuring overuse of pointers/demonstrative pronouns such as uena, bona. Chinese employers display sociolinguistic sensitivity hence the use of ausi for workers, ‘m’e for interpreter. By using these address terms, they show that they are aware of the different status between the workers and the interpreter; workers are junior while interpreter is senior.

4. Conclusion

Based on the interview data, one is likely to conclude that Basotho employees and their Chinese employers use language for specific purposes, hence all communication strategies reflected in their workplace communication.
About the Author:
Maboleba Kolobe is MA in English Language and Linguistics and has been teaching at tertiary level as a lecturer in the Service Department at Lerotholi Polytechnic for the past 6 years. She is currently pursuing her PhD in English Language and Linguistics in the National University of Lesotho, Lesotho. Her areas of research interest are Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics, Morphology, and Communication Skills. She has also published in various accredited refereed journals.
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