Mǎi dan or mái dan?
‘I come to buy the bill not to bury it’

Andy Kirkpatrick and SU Heng
Griffith University, Australia / Beihang University, Beijing

Abstract
The term maidan has become a common way of asking for the bill in Putonghua. In this paper we investigate whether this is the transfer of a Cantonese expression which has been re-interpreted as a Putonghua expression, and thus an example of language change being caused by a mistake or mishearing. The study surveyed Mainland Chinese in a number of settings to elicit their preferred way of asking for the bill. By asking them to write the characters, we were also able to determine whether those whose preferred way of asking for the bill was to say maidan were using the Cantonese or the Putonghua expression. We conclude that, in many contexts, maidan has indeed become the preferred way of calling for the bill, and that the majority of those who use this expression are using the Putonghua ‘buy the bill’ rather than the original Cantonese expression.

Keywords 关键词:
Language change, Cantonese, Putonghua, origins of maidan, questionnaire survey.

1. Introduction

We shall introduce this study by first explaining the background and impetus for it. One of the authors (Kirkpatrick) first visited Beijing in 1976 when he was a postgraduate student studying Chinese and Chinese literature. While it was an austere time, there were still plenty of opportunities to eat out in local restaurants. When it came to calling for the bill, the term almost invariably used was jie zhan (结帐), literally meaning something like ‘settle the account’.

His next stop was Hong Kong where he worked in the late 1970s. There the standard way of calling for the bill was mái dan (埋单) a Cantonese compound term meaning ‘to bury the bill’. The Cantonese character mai (埋) has a range of meanings (Lu 2005), but when compounded with dan carries this meaning of settling a bill in the sense of covering it or burying it.

Many years later he was visiting Beijing and went out for a meal with an old Chinese friend, a Professor Li. After the meal and when it came to calling for the bill, Kirkpatrick was astounded to hear his old friend call to the waitress and say mai dan. When it was pointed out that he had said mai dan, Professor Li himself expressed surprise, bordering on disbelief, that
he had indeed used the term *mai dan*. As we shall show below, *mǎi dan* has since become a very common way of calling for the bill through many parts of China.

The question that this raised was whether the speakers who used the term *mǎi dan* realized that they were using a Cantonese term meaning to bury the bill, or whether they had misheard the Cantonese and assumed they were saying ‘buy the bill’ which, in Putonghua, is almost homophonous with the Cantonese ‘bury the bill’. The Putonghua *mǎi* meaning ‘buy’ carries the third tone. Cantonese *mai*, meaning bury, carries the High-Falling Tone. They are written quite differently, with 买 being the character for buy and 埋 the character for bury. This, in turn, raised the question whether a mistake or mishearing had occasioned a form of language change. That is to say, if people who used the term *mǎi dan* thought they were buying the bill rather than burying it, this would indicate either that the mishearing of a Cantonese term had become standard in Putonghua or that people assumed this was the Putonghua term meaning buy the bill. The prospect of a Cantonese term being consciously adopted by Putonghua seemed remote, not least because, traditionally at least, Putonghua speakers have tended to regard their southern cousins as being good only for business. It seemed unlikely, therefore, that they would have knowingly adopted a Cantonese term. Alternatively, however, the extraordinary economic performance of Hong Kong and the spending power of Cantonese speakers in Beijing may have given this Cantonese expression something of a ‘trendy’ quality. Indeed, the economic power and subsequent prestige of ‘southern’ languages, particularly Shanghaiese, but also Cantonese, is reported among the Chinese in Britain (Li Wei and Zhu Hua 2010), and it is possible that a similar phenomenon has taken place in China itself.

Mishearings have long been a common cause for language change. A seminal treatment of the phenomenon is given by Bolinger (1975:405-417) where he gives a range of examples. A well-known example from English of mishearing becoming standard through a process of ‘reinterpretation’ (405) is the shift of the original Persian word *naranj* to ‘orange. When English speakers heard people talk about something called ‘a naranj’, they re-interpreted what they heard following rules of English phonology and produced ‘an orange’, assuming the /n/ sound was part of the indefinite article, needed as it preceded an initial vowel sound. Similar reinterpretations can be seen in ‘an adder’ (from ‘a nadder’) and ‘an apron’ (from ‘a napron’) (412).

Reinterpretations of this sort are a common cause of language change. ‘Language change relies crucially on mistakes made by individuals, and just as crucially on other speakers adopting mistaken usages’ (Lassiter 2008: 622).

2. Hypotheses and Research Questions

The study sought to test the following two hypotheses:

(i) *mǎi dan* (买单, to buy the bill) has become the most popular way of asking for the bill
(ii) When saying *mai dan*, the majority will assume they are using the Putonghua for ‘buy the bill’ and not the Cantonese for ‘bury the bill’

This involved seeking the answers to the following two questions.

(i) Has *mǎi dan* indeed become the most common form of asking for the bill?
(ii) When people use the term *mai dan*, are they saying ‘bury the bill’ or ‘buy the bill’?

The answer to the first question would indicate whether language change had taken place with *mǎi dan* replacing *jie zhang* as the most common form of asking for the bill. The answer to the second question would indicate whether the speakers had adopted the Cantonese expression of ‘bury the bill’ or whether they had assumed that *mai dan* was the Putonghua for ‘buy the bill’. Of course, in order to establish the answer to the second question, respondents would have to write the expression, so that the characters they used to write *mai* could be noted.

Here we need to provide a brief note about the status and position of Cantonese as a language. While many—including some Cantonese speakers themselves—view Cantonese simply as spoken vernacular, this is not the case. Cantonese has a rich history and has a written form. Many of its vocabulary items and the written forms of these are distinctive to Cantonese. Snow (2004) gives a full account and history of Cantonese as a written language. He reports that:

> It is difficult to quantify precisely how different the vocabularies of Cantonese and Mandarin are, and general estimates range from 30 to as high as 50 percent (2004:49)

It is important to stress, therefore, that Cantonese is a ‘complete’ language in its own right, rather than simply a vernacular dialect of Chinese.

A questionnaire was duly developed and trialed (Appendix 1a provides the final version of the questionnaire, with an English translation in Appendix 1b). The first part of the questionnaire sought to obtain personal details of the respondents, including whether Putonghua was their main language and, if not, what other Chinese languages they spoke. While the main aim of the second part of the questionnaire was to elicit how people would call for the bill and, if they used *mai dan*, whether they were ‘buyers’ or ‘buriers’, the question designed to elicit this only came after other questions concerning ‘restaurant language’ had been asked. This was in the hope that the main aim of the questionnaire would be concealed.

A total of 800 questionnaires were administered in eleven sites across different cities across China, namely Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu in Sichuan, Guangzhou in Guangdong, Harbin in Heilongjiang, and Zhengzhou in Henan. The majority of the sites were universities, where students and staff, both administrative and academic, were surveyed. Staff and some students in two high schools, one in Shanghai and one on Guangzhou, were also surveyed. Details are provided in Table 2 below.

Before reporting the results of the questionnaire survey, we first briefly review some literature on the *mai dan* question, including how these terms are defined in well-known Chinese dictionaries.

### 3. Origins, Debates and Definitions

#### 3.1 The Origin of *mái dan* (埋单，bury the bill)

There are a number of informal or vernacular theories or versions which attempt to explain the origins of this term. For example, Jin (2006) argues that ‘bury the bill’ originates in Hong Kong.
When sending the bill to the customer after a meal, the waiter would put it in a plate and cover it with a square towel, thus giving rise to the expression ‘bury the bill’ (as the bill is ‘buried’ under the towel).

A second claim is that ‘bury the bill’ originates in the Pearl River Delta, where the practice in restaurants is to put various dishes in different bowls, saucers and plates. “To bury the bill (埋单)” is to firstly “执埋” (Cantonese meaning “to pack or collect”) and then “开单” (write out the bill). The waiter will come to collect, pack and then count the dishes (different dishes indicating different prices) and write out a bill (Yan 2002).

These two claims receive some support from other sources. For example, the views below are taken from the journal, *Trade Union Financial Affairs of China*. (All translations by the authors unless otherwise indicated.)

*Mái dan* (埋单, bury the bill) has its origins in Cantonese. There are two versions as to why people use *mái dan* to mean to settle the bill. The first version is based on Hong Kong practice. The usual practice in HK after a meal is that the waiter will bring the bill directly to the host covering it (burying it) in a folder so that guests can’t see the cost of the meal. The other version is based on a practice in Guangdong. Cookies are served in small plates of different colors that distinguish prices. After the meal, the waiter will collect the plates and count them to total on the price. In Cantonese, *mái* (埋, bury) also has the meaning of ‘collect’, so to *mái dan* simply means to ‘collect the plates’.

These meanings have now changed, as they come to be widely used by people from other parts of China. In North China, the waiter will call out the cost of the meal before the host and guests. The bill does not need to be covered (buried). Then to *mái dan* (埋单, bury the bill) becomes *mǎi dan* (买单, buy the bill)……so while *mái dan* (埋单, bury the bill) is the authentic way of saying it, *mǎi dan* (买单, buy the bill) is a more popular expression for it.

(Han, 2006)

Contributors to Chinese blogs have also debated the use and origins of buying and/or burying the bill. Here we provide just a very small sample of contributions to an on-line discussion responding to the question ‘What is the difference between buying the bill and burying the bill?’ ([http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/96790298.html](http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/96790298.html)).

*Post A Both *mǎi dan* (买单, buy the bill) and *mái dan* (埋单, bury the bill) are correct*

Both the supplement to the Modern Chinese Dictionary (2002 edition) and the Modern Chinese Standard Dictionary (2004 edition) define these two words. Both of them mean paying the bills after dining and the meanings are extended to include the idea of undertaking responsibility. We can say that *mǎi dan* (买单, buy the bill) and *mái dan* (埋单, bury the bill) are a pair of words with different forms. In terms of etymology, *mái dan* (埋单, bury the bill) should be the main entry and *mǎi dan* (买单, buy the bill) should be the subentry. *Mái dan* (埋单, bury the bill) and *mǎi dan* (买单, buy the bill) can be compatible and we do not have to decide which is better.

*Post B I will buy *mǎi dan***

In terms of the frequency of use, *mǎi dan* (买单, buy the bill) is obviously higher than *mái dan* (埋单, bury the bill). There will be a tendency to use *mǎi dan* (买单, buy the bill) because it is easier to understand. It caters to the Chinese language use habit, which is to interpret a word literally. It embodies the features of concreteness when people think in Chinese. It sets an example for how dialects actually enter Putonghua. Reasonable modification follows the principles of word standardization—“necessity, universality and clarity”. Somebody says that only *mái dan* (埋单, bury the bill) can keep the characteristics of spoken language and regional features. Mr. Zhou Zhiping says that the characteristic of spoken language is kept when using Chinese characters to write
diacritics. But only people from limited areas can understand that the price dialects have to pay to change into Chinese characters is isolating themselves. Dialect words should be assimilated by Putonghua in a way that the masses can accept. Now not all the people in Guangdong reject mái dan (买单, buy the bill) because mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) has already blended into Guangzhouhua (Cantonese). Assimilating mái dan (bury) but writing it as mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) is the way that Putonghua assimilates dialect words. But it is not inflexible and blind.

Post C: don’t use mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) when it should be mái dan (埋单, bury the bill)
In Putonghua, mái dan (埋单, bury the bill) and mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) are both new words. I think that it is more appropriate to require mái dan (bury) in restaurants when we finish dining and need to pay the bill…. mái dan (bury) is the original form and mǎi dan (buy) is the morph. The base of mái dan (bury) is clearly Cantonese. Outside the Cantonese circle, mǎi dan (bury) is not easy to understand so mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) appeared…. So….there are reasons for mái dan (埋单, bury the bill) to defeat mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) and to become the first choice.

Post D: mái dan (埋单, bury the bill) or mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill)
The appearance of mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) satisfied social needs. From mái dan (埋单, bury the bill) to mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill), the process reflects people using the language flexibly. On the one hand, it is the popularity of mái dan (埋单, bury the bill) that allows more people to know about mǎi dan (bury). On the other hand the existence of mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) allows people to understand mái dan (埋单, bury the bill) correctly. Mái dan (埋单, bury the bill) is the source while mái dan (买单, buy the bill) is the flow. At the moment, the popularity of mái dan (买单, buy the bill) still can’t threaten the status of mái dan (埋单, bury the bill). To sum up, it is still hard to decide which will defeat the other.

The posts give readers a feel of the tenor of the debate. It is, on occasion, passionate and contributors argue with some feeling that the original Cantonese expression (bury) should be given preference (see posts A, C and D, for example). Others (for example, Post B) argue that Putonghua has the right to assimilate dialect words. In the next section, we shall report on how dictionaries have defined these terms. These findings will let us know whether ‘bury’ is indeed the first choice and the main entry or whether ‘buy’ has become the more popular in common usage.

3.2 Dictionaries and definitions

The most famous and respected of all Chinese dictionaries, the Ci Hai (辞海) or Ocean of Words, gives no entry either for mái (埋, bury) or mǎi (买, buy) the bill, presumably because these terms are relatively recent. Interestingly, the 1979 edition of the well-known Chinese-English Dictionary (汉英词典) published by Commercial Press in Hong Kong does not give entries for either mái (埋, bury) dan or mǎi (买, buy) dan either. Under mái (埋, bury), the dictionary gives ‘cover up’ (with earth, snow etc.) and bury as the primary meanings, but mái dan (埋单, bury the bill) is not listed as a possible compound. Under mǎi (买, buy), ‘buy’, ‘purchase’ are given as the primary meanings. Again, the compound mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) is not given. This suggests that the use of neither of these compounds to mean ‘pay the bill’ were common in Putonghua 1979.

As far as we can determine, the earliest appearance of mái dan (as both buy and bury) is in
Beijing Xian dai Liuxingyu (Modern Popular Expressions in Beijing) by Zhou Yimin, published in 1992. Once we consult editions of dictionaries published since 2000, however, entries for both are common. For example, the 2004 edition of the Commercial Press’ Xinhua Chinese Dictionary (Kang & Liu 2004) had the following entries. (Translations of the entries are provided in brackets after each.)

买单: 原为‘埋单’，指用餐后结账付款，也用于其它方面的消费付款。

(Buy the bill: originally “bury the bill”. This means to settle the accounts or pay money at the end of a meal, and also to use other ways of paying.)

Note that the terms jie zhang (结帐) and fu kuan (付款) meaning settle the account and pay money respectively, are used to define the term. As will be illustrated below, both these terms are also occasionally suggested by the questionnaire respondents, with jie zhang remaining relatively common.

埋单：‘埋’是收拢，聚拢的意思。“埋单”就是把在餐馆消费的账单聚拢在一起最后结账。

(‘Mái’ means collecting and getting together. To ‘mái dan’ is to collect all the bills for meals in a restaurant and pay for them.)

The Modern Chinese Standard Dictionary (Li 2004) clearly treats ‘bury’ the bill’ as the primary term. Under the entry of ‘bury the bill’ it gives:

埋单：在饭馆用餐后结账付款，泛指付钱。

【例】谁请客，谁埋单。

先看病，后埋单。（也说“买单”）

(Bury the bill: after dining in a restaurant to settle the account or pay money; to pay
[Example] Whoever invites must pay
First see the doctor, then pay the bill [also ‘buy the bill’])

(To help explain this example, hospitals often ask patients to pay first, even when the patient is in a critical state. The present example is advertising a hospital which allows patients to pay after treatment.)

Under the entry for ‘buy the bill’, it simply gives “买单：埋单”.

The 2005 edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary (Chao & Han 2005) redirects readers who look up ‘buy’ the bill to the entry under ‘bury’ the bill.

买单：见911页 [埋单]
(Buy the bill: see page 911 [bury the bill])

埋单：《方言》在饭馆用完餐后结账付款，泛指付款。原为粤语，传入北方话地区后多说买单。

(bury the bill: {dialect} Settling the account or paying money after a meal in a restaurant, paying the bill. It is Cantonese in origin, and more often referred to as buy the bill after being introduced to northern dialect regions.

The Modern Chinese Dictionary of New Words (Lin & He 2005) also sees ‘bury’ as the primary
meaning and states its Cantonese origin.

买单：即“埋单”。结账。
(Buy the bill: as ‘bury the bill’. Settle the account.)

埋单：结账。也作“买单”。原系粤语词。
(Bury the bill: settle the account. Also ‘buy the bill’. Originally a Cantonese term.)

The 2008 edition of A Source Dictionary of Chinese Characters (Gu 2008) lists the following entry under mai (埋). This entry also makes reference to the Cantonese origin of the term.

埋：粤语用作‘埋单’，又表示把账单收拢在一起最后结账付款。普通话里也有的说成“买单”
(Mai: Cantonese use ‘bury the bill’, also means paying money after collecting together all bills and accounts. In Putonghua this is also expressed as ‘buy the bill’.)

The 2010 edition of the Modern Chinese Learners’ Dictionary (Fu & Zhang 2010) also makes explicit reference to the Cantonese origins of the term.

买单：(粤语)指付账;也说‘埋单’ (粤语‘埋’有‘结算’的意思)
(Mai (buy) the bill: (Cantonese) to mean pay the account; also ‘bury the bill’ (Cantonese ‘bury’ has the meaning of ‘settling the account’).

The final dictionary we have consulted is the recently published World Chinese Dictionary (Li 2010). This is particularly interesting for our purposes as it gives contemporary usage of terms in different Chinese speaking countries and regions, including Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau.

Under the entry ‘bury the bill’ it has:

埋单：
(1)【动】在饭馆用餐后结账付款。
[Verb] After eating in a restaurant, to settle the account or pay.
埋：粤方言也指结束，结算。
: A Cantonese expression which also means to wind up or settle.
(2)【动】泛指付款或付出代价。
[Verb] A general term to mean settle up or pay

使用地区：大陆，港澳，新马泰
Found: The Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand

异名词语： 买单（大陆，台湾）
Related expression: Buy the bill (Mainland and Taiwan)

知识窗： 粤方言的“埋”字由收拢，聚合，结算之意，如“埋口”指伤口愈合，“埋份”指参与一份，“埋堆”指同利益相关者常聚在一起。因为广州的饮食业，尤其是茶楼向来有先吃后付的传统，吃完开单结账，便称为“埋单”。做生意的年终结算，称为“埋年”。
Background: The Cantonese expression ‘mai’ (bury) has the meaning of ‘collect’, and “bring” together. For example ‘mai kou’ means to heal a wound, ‘mai fen’ means to participate as a member of a group and ‘mai dui’ means to bring people of like minds together. As it is customary in the Cantonese catering trade to eat first and pay later, calling for the collection of the bills and paying became known as ‘mai dan’. The settling of annual accounts in business is known as ‘mài nián’ (埋年, bury the year).

It is interesting to note that this dictionary indicates that the variant ‘buy the bill’ is restricted to the Mainland and Taiwan, while the Cantonese version, ‘bury the bill’ is attested throughout the Chinese speaking world. The same claim is also made under the entry for ‘buy the bill’ below. This would repay further investigation and we refer back to this in our review of corpus studies below.

Under the entry, ‘buy the bill’ the World Chinese Dictionary gives:

【动】义同“埋单
[Verb] Same meaning as “bury the bill”

使用地区：大陆，台湾
Found: Mainland, Taiwan

异名词语：埋单（大陆，港澳，新马泰）

Related expression: bury the bill (Mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand)

知识窗： “埋单”是粤方言词，进入大陆北方话地区后，也有说“买单”的。

Background: ‘Bury the bill” is Cantonese, but after entering Northern Mainland speech, it can also be expressed as ‘buy the bill’.

This sampling of seven dictionaries published since 2000 indicate that ‘bury the bill’ is classified as the primary term and meaning, with many explicitly indicating the Cantonese origins of the term. We now turn to a discussion of the questionnaire survey we conducted, along with a small corpus study

4. The Study

4.1 The Questionnaires

As explained above, 800 questionnaires were administered in eleven separate sites across six different parts of China, of which 572 were returned. The return rate was about 72 % and although a few respondents chose not to answer certain questions, the great majority answered all questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Gender | Male | 245 | 42.8% | Female | 327 | 57.2%
---|---|---|---|---|---|---
Age | 15-25 | 156 | 27.3% | 26-35 | 153 | 26.7% | 36-45 | 215 | 37.7% | 46-55 | 46 | 8% | Over 56 | 2 | 0.3%
Composites of respondents | Student | 156 | 27.3% | Staff | 263 | 46% | Admin Personnel | 67 | 11.7% | Campus Workers | 86 | 15%

The answer to question 4a of Part B of the questionnaire is the key, and we shall start with that. The question asked, “Once you have finished eating and want to pay, generally speaking what would you say to the waiter?”

Table 1 summarizes the responses.

Table 2: Summary of Responses to Question 4a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Type of responses</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage (approximately)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>572 respondents</td>
<td>买单 (buy)</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>埋单 (bury)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>结账 (settle account)</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>其它 (other)</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This summary provides the overall answer to both the research questions listed above.

The answer to the first question, ‘Has mǎi dān (买单, buy the bill) indeed become the most common form of asking for the bill in China?’ is yes. Of a total 572 responses 319 indicated that they would use the expression mǎi (bury/buy) dān. There were, however, 201 responses which indicated the use of jie zhang or settle the account. Later we shall consider the extent to which the region and/or the first language of the respondents were possible variables. There were 61 ‘other’ responses and we briefly summarize these later.

The answer to the second question, ‘When people use the term mǎi dān, are they saying ‘bury the bill’ or ‘buy the bill’?’ is that the overwhelming majority are saying ‘buy the bill’. In other words the Putonghua expression ‘buy the bill’ has replaced the Cantonese expression ‘bury the bill’ in popularity. Again, the extent to which the region and/or first language of the respondents was a possible variable will be considered later.

Here we should point out that the total number of responses (581) slightly outnumbers the total number of respondents (572) because a few respondents offered more than one alternative in answer to the question. For example a few people offered ‘mǎi dān’ (buy the bill) ‘jie zhang’ (settle the account). Only one respondent offered both ‘buy’ and ‘bury’ the bill.

4.1.1. Did the site have any bearing on the choice of expression?
Table 2 shows the responses for each of the eleven sites.

Table 3 Responses by Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Expressions used: No. &amp; Percentage</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Harbin Institute of Technology</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>单：48 (53.3%)</td>
<td>Staff and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>埋：3 (3.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>结账：36 (40%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>其它：3 (3.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Beihang University, Beijing</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
<td>单：39 (59.1%)</td>
<td>Staff, students, campus workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>埋：4 (6.06%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>结账：23 (34.84)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Capital U of Business and Trade, Beijing</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6.82%</td>
<td>单：12 (30.77%)</td>
<td>Staff and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>埋：3 (7.69%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>结账：17 (43.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>其它：7 (17.95%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Beijing Printing University, Beijing</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>单：14 (48.3%)</td>
<td>Staff and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>埋：1 (3.45%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>结账：10 (34.5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>其它：4 (13.79%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Beijing U of Information and Sci-Tech, Beijing</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10.49%</td>
<td>单：18 (30%)</td>
<td>Staff, students, campus workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>埋：3 (5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>结账：31 (51.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>其它：8 (13.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. University in Shanghai</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.42%</td>
<td>单：10 (32.3%)</td>
<td>Staff and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>埋：5 (16.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>结账：9 (29%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>其它：7 (22.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. High School in Shanghai</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.57%</td>
<td>单：4 (44.4%)</td>
<td>Staff and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>埋：3 (33.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>结账：2 (22.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>其它：0 (0%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Zhengzhou, Henan Province</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>11.36%</td>
<td>单：23 (35%)</td>
<td>Staff, students and campus workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>埋：2 (3.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>结账：24 (36.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>其它：16 (25%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Chengdu, Sichuan</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8.39%</td>
<td>单：7 (14.6%)</td>
<td>Mainly staff and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>埋：4 (8.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the 44 tokens of ‘bury the bill’, a total of 20 (nearly half) were reported by respondents in the two Guangzhou sites. This is perhaps not surprising given the Cantonese origins of the term. In other sites, the number of respondents who provided ‘bury the bill’ was low.

The respondents who provided ‘settle the account’ were distributed across the country. Starting from the northeast, there were 36 from Harbin, 81 from the various sites in Beijing, 24 from Zhengzhou in Henan Province and 26 from Chengdu in the western Province of Sichuan. In some sites, there was actually a preference for ‘settle the account’, as in Chengdu. The total number of respondents who suggested ‘settle the account’ in the Beijing sites was 81, only three fewer than the total number of those who suggested ‘buy the bill’. In Zhengzhou the numbers who suggested ‘settle the account’ and ‘buy the bill’ were almost exactly the same. Interestingly, 26 respondents from the University of Foreign Studies in Guangzhou, where Cantonese remains widely spoken, also provided this ‘traditional’ Putonghua expression.

The respondents who suggested ‘buy the bill’ were also distributed across the country, but, interestingly, well over 50 percent of the respondents from the two Guangzhou sites providing this option.

4.1.2 Did the first language of the respondent have any bearing on the choice of expression?

As noted in Table 1 above, there were a total of 44 tokens of Cantonese ‘bury’ the bill. Only 6 of these respondents listed Cantonese as their first language. Exactly half of the respondents (22 out of the 44) who provided ‘bury the bill’ classified themselves as being first language speakers of Putonghua. Other first languages listed for those who provided ‘bury the bill’ were Zhongshan dialect (4) Hakka (3) and Sichuan dialect (2). A range of other Chinese dialects were listed by single individuals. These included dialects of Hunan, Chaozhou, Hu, Nanyang, Ningxia and Hebei. A small minority of respondents did not list their first languages.

Not surprisingly, the six who listed Cantonese as their first language were from one of the two Guangzhou sites. Given, however, that a total of 135 people were surveyed in the two Guangzhou sites, six represents an unexpectedly small number of first language speakers of Cantonese. It would be wrong to assume, from this, however, that the majority of those surveyed in Guangzhou listed Putonghua as their first language. For example, only 12 of the 46
respondents of the Guangzhou High School listed Putonghua as their first language, making Putonghua a minority first language among this group. Perhaps interestingly, given that the Chinese Language Law prescribes Putonghua as the sole language of education – although national minority groups can be taught through their own language in certain circumstances – (Kirkpatrick and Xu 2001), none of the eleven students surveyed listed Putonghua as a first language. Most listed either Cantonese or Hakka as their first languages.

Similar results were found in other sites. For example, of the 65 people surveyed in Zhengzhou, the great majority, 43, listed a language other than Putonghua as their first language. And of the 48 surveyed in Chengdu, 35 listed a language other than Putonghua as their first language. Having said that, the great majority of Zhengzhou respondents listed either ‘buy the bill’ (23) or ‘settle the account’ (24). In Chengdu, 26 respondents provided ‘settle the account’ and 7 ‘buy the bill’. Many Harbin respondents also provided ‘settle the account’ (36), although the majority (48) provided ‘buy the bill’. This suggests that the traditional way of asking for the bill, ‘settle the account’ is still used in many parts of China, although, as we have seen, it has now taken second place to ‘buy the bill’.

4.1.3 What were the ‘other’ choices?

61 respondents gave alternative expressions to either of the two mai dan expressions and ‘settle the account’. These included suan zhang (算账) (calculate the account), fu qian (付钱) (pay money), shou qian (收钱) (collect/receive money) and duoshao qian (多少钱) (how much money). One respondent from Harbin wrote dian dan (点单), but this is not an expression with which either of us is familiar. Informal variations of jie zhang and mai dan such as jie xia zhang (结下账) and mai xia dan (买下单) were popular, but were classified under jie zhang and mai dan respectively rather than separately.

4.2 A Corpus Study

These trends are supported by the findings of two corpus studies, the first conducted in 2001 (Tang) and the second conducted recently by the authors.

Tang’s study investigated the comparative use of ‘settle the account’ (jie zhang 结帐), and ‘buy’ and ‘bury’ the bill in six different regions, including Macao, Hong Kong and Singapore. The results are shown in the table below.

Table 4: Buying or Burying in 6 Cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Hong Kong</th>
<th>Macao</th>
<th>Taiwan</th>
<th>Singapore</th>
<th>Shanghai</th>
<th>Beijing</th>
<th>Total Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>结账</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>13.45%</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>40.34%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>70.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>买单</td>
<td>3.45%</td>
<td>3.45%</td>
<td>51.72%</td>
<td>10.34%</td>
<td>24.14%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>17.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>埋单</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11.83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results show that the highest percentage of tokens used for ‘buying’ the bill were found in Taiwan and the most for ‘burying’ the bill were found in Hong Kong. The second result is not surprising, but the first, perhaps, is. It is also interesting to see that \textit{jie zhang} (结账, settle the account) was, at the time of the study, the most popular usage in all cities except for Hong Kong and Macao.

Table below summarizes the results of an on-line corpus survey conducted by the authors on May 20\textsuperscript{th} 2011. We looked for 买单, 埋单 and 结账 in article titles across two search engines (Google and Baidu) and three newspapers. Two of the newspapers, the \textit{Nanfang Daily} and the \textit{Yancheng Evening} are based in the Cantonese speaking province of Guangdong.

\textit{Table 5: Buying or Burying On-Line}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>买单</td>
<td>82000</td>
<td>363,000</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>2644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>埋单</td>
<td>62500</td>
<td>89,600</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>2176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>结账</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>55,700</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results show that, on this day at least, ‘buying’ the bill was by far the most popular usage, with it even being the most popular choice in the \textit{Nanfang Daily}. The only medium where ‘bury’ proved more popular than ‘buy’ was in the \textit{Yangcheng Evening} paper. The relatively small number of uses of \textit{jie zhang} is also noteworthy, as it shows a significant change from the usage reported by Tang in his 2001 study. It would seem that, in the ten years between these two studies, there has been a significant shift from \textit{jie zhang} (结账, settle the account) to “buy the bill”.

\section*{5. Conclusion}

To the two hypotheses that we sought to test were:

(i) \textit{Mǎi dan} (买单, buy the bill) has become the most popular way of asking for the bill.

(ii) When saying \textit{mai dan}, the majority will assume they are using the Putonghua for ‘buy the bill’ and not the Cantonese for ‘bury the bill’.

This involved seeking the answers to the following two questions.

(i) Has \textit{mǎi dan} (买单, buy the bill) indeed become the most common form of asking for the bill?

(ii) When people use the term \textit{mai dan}, are they saying ‘bury the bill’ or ‘buy the bill’?

On the strength of the responses given by those we surveyed, we can say that both hypotheses have been supported. And in answer to the two research questions, again, given the responses
of the people we surveyed, we can say that, yes, mǎi dan (买单, buy the bill) has indeed become the most common form of asking for the bill, and that the majority of our respondents also indicated that when saying mai dan they were speaking Putonghua ‘buy the bill’ rather than Cantonese ‘bury the bill’. Even in Cantonese speaking Guangzhou, there was an overwhelming preference for ‘buy the bill’ (88 respondents), over the original Cantonese expression, ‘bury the bill’ (20 respondents).

From this we argue that this is evidence of language change. First, the previously popular Putonghua expression jie zhang, has been replaced by Putonghua mǎi (买, buy) the bill as the most common form of asking for the bill, although it must be stressed that jie zhang remains common in many of the sites we tested, and was the most popular option in Sichuan.

More interestingly, however, is that this language change appears to have been caused by the mishearing of the Cantonese expression ‘bury’ the bill. The mái (埋, bury) of the Cantonese carries the fourth tone and it is likely that this has been misheard by non-Cantonese speakers as Putonghua, buy the bill, where the Putonghua mǎi (买, buy) carries the third tone. The fact that the Putonghua ‘buy the bill’ sounds appropriate in the context has also, we suggest, played an important role in this language change. It is also striking to note that many Cantonese speakers have now adopted the Putonghua expression.

The results of our survey provide further evidence that one answer to the question ‘How do linguistic norms change?’ (Lassiter 2008: 629) is through mishearing and re-interpretations. Indeed, we also have evidence here that the use of the mishearing and re-interpretation ‘buy the bill’ has not only become more popular than the original Cantonese (bury the bill) but that it has also replaced a third expression ‘settle the account’ (jie zhang) as the most popular way of asking for the bill in most parts of China. Finally, we note that this linguistic change in Putonghua is itself the cause of linguistic change in Cantonese, as the use of ‘buy the bill’ is becoming increasingly popular, even among some Mainland Cantonese speakers (and writers). The traditional ‘bury the bill’ is still heard throughout Hong Kong.

This suggests that those bloggers who argued that ‘bury’ the bill would be likely to win out are probably overly optimistic and that Professor Li was simply heralding an inexorable trend when he asked to ‘buy the bill’ in the restaurant in Beijing some ten years ago.

References


Han Ke., 2006. “‘To call a taxi’, ‘to bury the bill’—where are they from?” Trade Union Financial Affairs of China (4):50

Jin Jing. 2006. “‘Mái dan’ and ‘mǎi dan’”. The Chinese Teaching and Research (15): 55


Appendix A: The Questionnaire

1a The Chinese Version

我们正在进行一项有关“餐馆” 言语行为的研究， 非常希望您能够提供一些帮助。我们保证对您提供的信息保密，并仅用于此项研究。问卷大约需要 3-5 分钟。

(请将您所选的项 涂黑)

A 个人信息

1. 您在北京住了多久了？
   a. 少于五年    b. 5 至 10 年    c. 多于 10 年

2. 您的籍贯是哪里？
   省份：___________ 城市：___________ 其它：___________

3. 普通话是您的第一语言吗？
   是  否

4. 请列出您会说的其它汉语方言。
   a.            b.           c.              d.          

5. 如果普通话不是您的第一语言，那么哪个方言是呢？
   方言：

6. 您的年龄是…？
   a. 15-25      b. 26-35      c. 36-45    d. 46-55      e. over 56

7. 您的性别？
   男    女

8. 您现在是一名？
   a. 学生    b. 教研人员    c. 行政人员    d. 工友
9. 如果您是一名学生，请回答：
   您所学的专业是：______________
   您所在的年级是：______________
   您是本科生吗？ 是 否
   您是研究生吗？ 是 否
   其他（请注明）：______________

10. 如果您是教研人员，请说明您在哪个学院（或系，中心等）工作。
    工作单位：______________

11. 如果您是行政管理人员，请说明您的工作性质。
    工作性质：______________

12. 如果您是一名工友，请说明您的工作性质。
    工作性质：______________

B At the restaurant 在餐馆
假设你在北京的一家餐馆吃饭
1a 您经常说什么话来叫
   a. 男服务员？“______________”
   b. 女服务员？“______________”

1b 如果您不是北京人，您在老家的餐馆吃饭时会说相同的话来叫服务员吗？
   是 否

1c 如果说的不是相同的话，那您一般会怎样说呢？
   “______________”

2a 在点菜时，您是习惯按菜单点呢，还是不看菜单直接点自己想要的菜？
   a. 看着菜单点
   b. 不看菜单点

2b 如果您需要菜单，一般您怎样和服务员说？
   “______________”

2c 如果您不是北京人，您在老家的餐馆吃饭要菜单时会说相同的话吗？
   是 否

2d 如果说的不是同样的话，那您一般怎样说呢？
   “______________”

3 大家一起聚餐时，一般谁来点菜？
   a. 由一个人点
   b. 每个人都点
   如果您选的是“由一个人点”，那么是如何确定由谁来点菜呢？
   “______________”

4a 吃完饭要付钱时，一般您怎样和服务员说呢？
   “______________”

4b 如果您不是北京人，您在老家的餐馆吃饭要菜单时会说相同的话吗？
   是 否

4c 如果说的不是相同的话，那您一般怎样说呢？
   “______________”

5 大家聚餐时，一般谁来付钱？
   a. 由一个人付
   b. 大家 AA 制
   如果您选的是“由一个人付”，是如何确定由哪个人付钱呢？
   “______________”
1b: The English translation
We are doing some research on ‘restaurant’ behaviour and would be very grateful if you could answer these questions. This survey should only take 5-10 minutes to complete.

A Background
1. How long have you been living in Beijing? (please choose one)
   Less than five years: 5-10 years; more than 10 years.

2. What is your hometown and province?
   Hometown: 
   Province: 

3. Is Putonghua your first language?

4. Please list the other dialects of Chinese you speak?

5. If Putonghua is not your first language/dialect which one is?

6. How old are you? (please choose one)
   15-25  25-35  35-45  45-55  over 55

7. Are you? Male? Female?

8. Are you? (please choose one)
   a student; a member of academic staff; a member of admin staff; a campus worker

9. If you are a student, please indicate:
   your major; your year level; undergraduate; postgraduate

10. If you are a member of academic staff, please indicate which department you work in:

11. If you are a member of administrative staff, please indicate what you main job is:

12. If you are a campus worker, please indicate what your main job is:

B At the restaurant
Please assume that you are in a local Chinese restaurant in Beijing

1a What do you say to attract the attention of:
(i) A waiter?
(ii) A waitress?

1b If you are not from Beijing, would you use the same language in a restaurant in your hometown?

1c If not, what would you say?

2a You want to order some food. Do you ask for the menu or do you order what you want?

2b If you want the menu, how would you ask for it?

2c If you are not from Beijing, would you use the same language in a restaurant in your hometown?

2d If not, what would you say?

3 You are in a group. Who would normally decide on what food to order?
   (i) one of the group?
   (ii) the group as a whole?
   (iii) if your answer is ‘one of the group’, please say how this person would be chosen

4a What do you say to the waiter to signal that you are ready to pay for the meal.

4b If you are not from Beijing, would you use the same language in a restaurant in your hometown?

4c If not, what would you say?

5 You are in a group. Who would normally pay?
   (i) one of the group?
   (ii) the group as a whole?
   (iii) if your answer is one of the group, please say how this would be chosen

That is the end of the survey. Thank you very much for your help.

Authors’ Addresses

Andy Kirkpatrick, Languages and Linguistics, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Road, Nathan, Queensland 4111, Australia (a.kirkpatrick@griffith.edu.au)

SU Heng, School of Foreign Language, Beihang University, Beijing, 100191, P. R. China, (suheng@buaa.edu.cn)