Urumqi Dialect of Chinese ESL Students: Some Teaching Implications

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of Urumqi Chinese dialect, which is the variety of Mandarin spoken in Xinjiang in Northwest China. The case study method is adopted to investigate the use of Urumqi Chinese dialect in light of standard Mandarin. The data were gathered from Urumqi Chinese native speakers, who are currently studying at universities in Brisbane, Australia. Data consists of an interview, observation and follow-up questions. The findings indicate that a number of variables define this particular speech community and differentiate it from the standard Mandarin speech community, as shown in the participants’ productions of apical sounds confusion and nasal sounds confusion in Urumqi Chinese dialect. The findings further indicate that the sociolinguistic context impacts the participants’ use of Urumqi Chinese dialect; the greater the period of time students have been away from Urumqi, the fewer number of Urumqi Chinese dialect sounds are produced in conversation. So, the findings contribute to our knowledge of Urumqi Chinese dialect speakers; particularly those who study English in Australia. They also contribute to our understandings on the standardisation of students’ spoken Chinese Mandarin, which has implications for educators, members of the Urumqi Chinese dialect community, and others.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the Urumqi Chinese dialect from Xinjiang Chinese dialect; a dialect spoken in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Northwest China. It explores a conversation in which three Urumqi Chinese native-speakers are discussing a range of topics about their lives as students in Australia. The investigation looks at some aspects relating to their production of Urumqi Chinese dialect in Australia; an English speaking environment, and one in which standard Mandarin is also used, with different dialects, and among other languages. It also looks at the standardisation of students’ spoken Chinese Mandarin, and is interested in the improvement of related sounds in English learning and some other assumed variables, which can be drawn on from the conversation to help enhance participants’ English communicative competence.
2. Literature Review

Originally, the Chinese Han came from all corners of China and spoke different dialects. In October 1955, the Chinese government popularised Chinese Mandarin and people from multi-dialect areas responded, which ensured the smooth flow of a standard dialect across the country (Gao, 2000 and Ren, 2007). So, people under the age of fifty all speak Chinese Mandarin, which is standard Chinese, “taking Beijing dialect as the basic pronunciation, the Northern dialects as the basis and the modern Chinese vernacular writings as grammar standards” (Chen, 2002: 1501). Very close to standard Mandarin is Xinjiang Chinese mandarin; a dialect mostly spoken by Han people who live in Xinjiang (Huang, 2000).

Although Chinese dialect was first studied by Zhang, Xinjiang Chinese was not included as an area of investigation until 1934 (Ou, 2008). Xinjiang Mandarin dialect is not standard Chinese Mandarin, however it shares a number of linguistic similarities (Huang, 2000), as Liu (unknown wherefrom), the first person to deal with the study of Xinjiang Chinese dialect, showed in his publication, What is the Difference in Phonetics Between Xinjiang Chinese and Beijing Chinese (1958). There, he gave a sketch of the origin of Xinjiang Chinese, compared it with Beijing Mandarin and described the characteristics of Xinjiang dialect (Ma, 2002).


Over the period 1983 to 1985, the first well-organized, large-scale dialect survey was held by a group of twenty-five faculties from Xinjiang Normal University, who had traveled to more than eighty counties in Xinjiang and completed over sixty research reports. The representative work became the Division of Xinjiang Chinese Dialect, and included: the summary; Xinjiang Chinese dialect division; differentiating criteria and the characteristics of each area; and word-sound comparisons. Liu, an outstanding researcher, had twenty-three theses published from 1986 to 2007 (Ma, 2002; Ou, 2008), all of which looked at Urumqi dialect. Zhou also compiled a dictionary, Dictionary of Urumqi Dialect (Zhou, 1994).

A number of others examined the sound system of Urumqi Chinese (including, Liu, 1995, Huang and Chang, 2000, Ma, 1999). For instance, Li (2007) analysed each
grade of phonetic features of the dialect, which had been collected from the Mandarin Proficiency Test - Tutonghua Shuiping Ceshi (PSC). This dealt with the phonetic perspective by describing each grade of phonetic feature in a very precise way. Zhang (2002) conducted teaching research on pronunciation correction in phonetics. Jian (1996) studied effective Mandarin training based on the intonation characteristics of Xinjiang Chinese dialect. Fei (2008) published On the Construction of Xinjiang Chinese Dialect Pronunciation Corpus to improve research methods.

Xu looked into the influence of the Uyghur language on Chinese local dialect in Xinjiang in terms of syntax, metamorphoses, affixes and ellipsis (Xu, 2006). Liao, Fan and Wang studied a large number of lexical borrowings from Uyghur and found that they exist in Xinjiang Chinese. Wang studied the special meanings and usages of the word “再 (Zai)” (Wang, 2001); Peng, the semantic correspondence between Uyghur “verb+sa/se+ personal” forms, which convey unconditional meanings and “sa”; an auxiliary word that indicates mood in Xinjiang Chinese dialect in the Urumqi dialect (Peng, 2008). Chen (2008) explored the use of the noun suffix “子” among the Urumqi citizens, as well as some of the socio-linguistic aspects of the dialect.

Whereas Chen (2008) explored the social, cultural and psychological factors from the view of sociolinguistics, a number of others have also adopted a socio-linguistic focus from which to explore the Xinjiang Chinese dialect. For instance, Dong and Guo (2006) summarized its origins and evolution in line with the diversity of its speakers, who come from across China. They found that Xinjiang Chinese dialect closely reflects the Chinese culture from the central plains of China, which was in keeping with its speakers of the Han dialects in Xinjiang, who were descendants of migrating people from inland provinces of China (Zhang, 2006). While a great number of studies have been conducted on the Urumqi Chinese dialect, no research of which the researcher is aware has reported on its use in a foreign context, such as Australia.

3. Methodology

The case study method provides a detailed contextual analysis of a number of conditions and their relationships (Yin, 1984). It is applied in this paper to examine the dialect of three university students from Urumqi city in China, who are currently studying in Australia. The participants have been in Australia for different lengths of time.

Further, the data for this study were collected through face-to-face interview observation and follow-up questionnaires. This enabled the researcher “to cross check results obtained from observation and recorded in field notes” (Sanday, 1979;
21), and to produce evidence from “contemporary real-life situations” (Yin, 1984: 23) that leads to proposing teaching implications in both Mandarin and English communication improvement.

4. Research Design

4.1 Participants

Three university students volunteered to participate in the study; Peter, Ian and Andy sessions. All three participants are male, and were born and raised in Urumqi China. All three speak Urumqi Chinese dialect as a first language. The participants arrived in Australia at different times to begin their studies.

Peter, 20, has been in Australia for six weeks. He finished high school in Urumqi China, and is currently in Australia where he is studying English to gain entry into an Australian university. He hopes to major in commercial business.

Ian, 21, has been in Australia for twenty-four months. He finished high school in Urumqi China. Since arriving in Australia, he has completed a fourteen-week English language training program, and is currently enrolled in a diploma course in property management.

Andy, who is also 20, has been in Australia for the longest period: thirty-two months. He finished year 10 in Urumqi China, then came to Australia with his father and mother, where he completed years 11 and 12. He is a first-year student at a local university, where he is studying medical science.

4.2 Data

The data were collected over a period of six-week in the middle of the semester from three aspects; face-to-face interview; observation; and follow-up questionnaires. Before the conversation was recorded, the participants were interviewed about their ages; their educational background back in China and their study in Australia. Next, their conversations were recorded. They spoke on a range of topics relevant to their experiences living and studying in Australia; from food, and teaching styles, and refunds for faulty goods, and so on. After that, the conversation was transcribed into Chinese and then translated into English for the English readers’ sake, with the help of an English Second Language (ESL) teacher and Beijing Chinese speaker, Pam. Some of the results of the study are presented below.
5. Results

The results presented below in Table 1 have been developed in accordance with the study of phonetic characteristics of Urumqi Chinese dialect by Liu (1995), Ma (1999), Huang and Chang (2000), Zhang (2002), Yang (2007), Li (2007) and Fei (2008). Close and repeated listening to the data made it possible for the Urumqi Chinese dialect sounds to be heard and prescribed in Chinese Pinyin, then double checked from the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary [Chinese-English Edition] (2002) and then marked with the closest IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) sound based on Fromkin’s phoneme list for Australian English from An Introduction to Language (2007).

In Table 1 (next page), the Urumqi Chinese dialects produced by participants are identified and presented in seven columns: (i) Sound type; (ii) Chinese character; (iii) Chinese standard Pinyin, Chinese dictionary & IPA; (iv) Sound of Urumqi Chinese dialect heard & IPA; (v) English word (equivalent); (vi) Number of times produced by participants; and (vii) Lines in transcription. Note, the participants are represented by initials – ‘P’ (Peter), ‘A’ (Andy) and ‘I’ (Ian).

Table 1 shows that eleven single characters from the transcription were identified as Urumqi dialect. They were classified into two apical consonants, ‘sh’ [ʃ] and ‘s’ [s] before vowels and front or back nasal sound following vowels. For example, the Chinese character, “说”, can be presented in Pinyin as “Shuō”, with the equivalent IPA “ʃuə”. In contrast, the Urumqi dialect pronunciation for “说” is “fō”, with equivalent IPA “fə”.

**Table 1: Urumqi Chinese Dialect Summary of the Conversation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sound type</th>
<th>Chinese standard Pinyin, Chinese dictionary &amp; IPA</th>
<th>Sound of Urumqi Chinese dialect heard &amp; IPA</th>
<th>English word</th>
<th>Number of times produced by participants</th>
<th>Lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apical consonant before vowels</td>
<td>啥 [ʃː]</td>
<td>Sá [s :]</td>
<td>what</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22, 26, 30, 53, 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>说 Shuō [ʃuə]</td>
<td>fō [fə]</td>
<td>Say</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>盯 dīng [dĭn]</td>
<td>dīn [din]</td>
<td>watch</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further, the Table shows that the participants produce back nasal consonants using front nasal endings (Liu, 1995; Ma, 1999; Huang and Chang, 2000; Zhang, 2002; Li, 2007). For example, there is variation on ‘[tʃən]’, which is pronounced with the front nasal consonant sounds, and not the correct back nasal consonant: ‘[tʃəŋ]’. The participants’ production of Urumqi dialect offers some interesting insights into pronunciation on both apical consonant sound and front and back nasal consonants ending sound. Some lines of the transcription are presented for the reader.

Table 2 below was taken from the interview information, transcribed data and Table 1 presents the information on variables such as the number of Urumqi Chinese dialect sounds recorded, and the percentage of Urumqi Chinese dialect spoken by individuals. It shows that the Urumqi dialect sounds produced over the total lines was fifty-five percent for Peter, twenty-two percent for Ian and fifteen percent for Andy. Peter, who has been in Australia for six weeks, produced the greatest number of Urumqi Chinese dialect sounds, compared with Ian, who has been in Australia for twenty-four months, and Andy, who produced the fewest number of Urumqi Chinese dialect sounds, and has been in Australia for the longest, thirty-two months.
Table 2: Urumqi Dialect Sounds Over Total Lines By Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>The total lines spoken</th>
<th>The Number of Urumqi dialect sounds recorded</th>
<th>Percentage of Urumqi dialect sounds spoken by the individual participant</th>
<th>Participant time away from Urumqi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>24 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>32 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study now focuses on the findings about Urumqi dialect from the aspects of both apical consonants before the vowels and the front/back nasal consonant as the word ending, by showing detailed lines from the transcribed data.

5.1.1 Initial Consonant ‘sh’ [/ʃ/]

In the extracts below, the first column gives the line number, and the second column gives the utterance. The first line presents the utterance in Chinese characters, with the identified Urumqi Chinese word in bold. The second line presents the utterance in Chinese standard Pinyin against the Chinese dictionary and IPA, followed by the sound of Urumqi Chinese dialect beside the IPA, with the English equivalent following. The third line is the English translation of the utterance. The extracts present the utterance in Urumqi dialect in bold characters Chinese characters, with the identified Urumqi Chinese word in bold and underlined, ‘国内东西啥都好吃呀’ (Extract 1.1). This is more closely examined in the following discussion.

The results indicate that, in Xinjiang Chinese dialect, the consonant “sh” (“[/ʃ/]”) before the vowels “a”, “ao”, “ai”, “i”, or “eng” is pronounced as ‘s’ [s], (Liu, 1995; Ma, 1999; Huang and Chang, 2000; Li, 2007). See the extract lines from the transcription data below:

Extract 1.1: Peter, Line 53

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>国内东西啥都好吃呀！哪个地方都有特色，特产。跑到这里啥都没有了</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shá[ʃɑː]→sá [sɑː] what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At home, all the food is delicious! Different places are peculiar of different food, have different local products. Running here, I can’t find anything.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Extract 1.2: Andy, Line 22

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>可以呀。那算体育课。体育课里边有讷个啥，讷个，还有写论文儿。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>shá[ʃɑ]→sá[s:]what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, those belong to Gym lessons. The Gym lesson, that, what, you also have to write essay!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When Peter and Andy were talking about school subjects and food difference, they both used the word “啥” (meaning “what”) with the sound “shá [ʃ ]” being pronounced “sá [s :]”. This pronunciation is examined and compared with the standard Chinese Mandarin dialect.

5.1.2 Lines from the transcription for ‘front or back nasal consonant sound’

Using Urumqi Chinese dialect, participants cannot pronounce back nasal consonant endings properly. They use front nasal ending instead or vice versa (Liu, 1995; Ma, 1999; Huang and Chang, 2000; Zhang, 2002; Li, 2007). As shown in the extract lines below:

Extract 2.1: Peter, Lines 4, 11 & 60

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>然后老师给你布置作业，成天管着你，盯着你，看着你。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chéng [ʈʃəŋ]→chén [ʈʃəŋ] all day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Then, the teacher assigns the homework, controls you, looks after you, and watches you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>就是生活比较压抑，学习负担重，没办法；而这边就比较自由随意。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shēng [ʃəŋ]→shēn [ʃəŋ] life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>That is, life is stressful, you are overloaded with tasks, too much homework, you have no choice; while, here, you feel flexible and comfortable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>以前在家随便！心情好就做一点，心情不好就不做。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When I was in China, just pleased myself, if I felt well, I cooked, if not, I would not cook.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Extract 2.2: Andy, Line 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>自由性很大，噢。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>xìng [ʃin] → xìn [ʃin] noun suffix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You have more freedom, it’s more flexible. Yes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extract 2.3: Ian, Line 76

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>我喜欢这里可以退货，很人性化的。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>xìng [ʃin] → xìn [ʃin] noun suffix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I like here, you can have the refund for the goods you don’t like. It’s human-based.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Extracts 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 above, when the participants discuss the educational differences between China and Australia, there is variation on these words: chén [tʃən] (Extract 2.1, Line 4), shén [ʃən] (Extract 2.1, Line 11) and qín [ʃin] (Extract 2.1, Line 60), xìn [ʃin] (Extract 2.2, Line 8) pronounced with the front nasal consonant sounds respectively. These are pronounced in this way instead of the correct the back nasal consonant: 成 chéng [tʃəŋ], 生 shēng [ʃəŋ], 情 qíng [ʃin], 性 xìng [ʃin], as detailed in the extracts.

Based on the interview and the video transcription, the percentage of Urumqi dialect sounds recorded over the total lines spoken by the individual participant is: Peter, fifty-five percent; Ian, twenty-two percent; and Andy, fifteen percent, which are inversely proportional with their time away from Urumqi, six weeks, twenty-four months and thirty-two months respectively. It is seems that the longer time they are away from Urumqi, the fewer Urumqi Chinese dialect sounds they produce in interaction.

The next section will discuss further the above findings and then propose some implications for language teachers based on these variables.

6. Discussion

Under the influence of different dialects, most people in Xinjiang, including people who have advanced Chinese language, cannot distinguish words with a front nasal ending and words with a back nasal sound. This affects the quality of Mandarin pronunciation (Zhang, 2002). However, these front and back nasal sound confusions may not be immediately apparent in pronunciation and will not prevent the speaker
from understanding and being understood by other native speakers of Chinese; which is a good thing.

However, it is important to remember that Chinese character typing involves two steps - (i) typing Pinyin for all the characters with same pronunciation but different tones; (ii) selecting a character from lines or lists. This can be a problem, and the participants themselves were aware that the confusion of front and back nasal sound presents problems when typing certain words. This is because the particular word they want will not be contained in lists from which they can select. Even though most Chinese typing software packages allow the use of type phrases, the phrase will not “pop out” if the front nasal sound is typed as back nasal sound, or vice versa. Thus, their Chinese character typing speed dramatically slows down.

Further, skill with front and/or back nasal sounds is significant to the delivery of basic standard pronunciation in Chinese. Standard sounds and tones pleasant to the ear can arouse the interest of learners’ language learning as well, which is important to remember when considering the reception one receives in speaking Chinese (Kong, 2002). So, Zhang’s Concentrative Differentiation Method for front and back nasal sound practice are recommended, as it covers over one thousand Chinese characters divided into different columns according to different nasal sounds, which has been applied to many primary and senior Chinese teacher training programs and proved to be very effective (Zhang, 2002).

The second finding, “sá [s :]” and “shá [ʃ :]”, belong to apical sounds (z, c, s; zh, ch, shi), the former, front apical sound, the sound articulated with the apex, or tip, of the tongue touching the front teeth, the upper gum, or the hard palate, and the rear apical sound (Chen, 2002). Though only seven incorrect “sá [s :]” (instead of “shá [ʃ :]”) were spoken by Peter and Andy, not Ian in the conversation, Ian reported in follow-up interviews that he used to say that when he was in Urumqi. People from Urumqi also typically say “sā [sa]” which is the auxiliary word to indicate mood in Xinjiang Chinese dialect (Peng, 2008), but only under certain circumstances.

To summarise the above findings: the longer the time they are away from Urumqi, the fewer Urumqi Chinese dialect sounds the participants used. Peter has been in Australia for only six-weeks and has had limited opportunities to communicate with students from different parts of China. He spends most of his time with former classmates (Andy and Ian), and showed the highest percentage of using Urumqi Chinese dialect. Andy has the lowest percentage of Urumqi Chinese dialect sounds recorded over total lines spoken, despite the fact that he has been living with his mother and father, also from Urumqi, since he arrived in Australia. Interestingly, Ian has been living in a shared house with students from other
provinces in China, and has potentially had greater exposure to other dialects of Chinese.

When responding to follow-up questionnaires, Andy and Ian both said they had changed a lot because of communicative needs; the need to talk to people, many of whom use different dialects. As Spolsky stated “[i]t was long obvious, and sometimes troubling, that people who spoke what they considered the same language had … different pronunciations for the same word” (Spolsky, 1998: 27). So “there is geographical mobility – people move from one place to another, taking their dialects with them” then “modify them in the course of time to fit their new surroundings” (Hudson, 1996: 41). This may be to avoid confusion, miscommunication, even embarrassment.

6.1 Some Implications for Educators

Finally, the answers to the follow-up questionnaires were analysed to confirm the identified variables for the purpose of proposing some teaching implications for both Mandarin and ESL teachers, and to understand what these variables mean to language teachers. “One of the most often cited and cherished goals of language teaching is the promotion of international and cross-cultural understanding” (Loveday, 1982: 49), considering the culture shock, shown from the content of their conversation, which “is a common experience for a person learning a second language in a second culture” (Brown, 2002: 170). “Thus, the teacher has to be a skilled and sensitive cross-culture interpreter capable of reducing the learners’ ethnocentricism without damaging their self-image” (Loveday, 1982: 49) or face which “is closely related to a person’s sense of identity or self-concept” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 14).

Knowing variables in Urumqi Chinese dialect, the teacher can focus on practicing English words with the alveolar sounds [s], [n] and the velar sound [ŋ] (Fromkin, Rodman, Hyams, Collins and Amberber, 2007) to distinguish, for example, “sign” from “shine” or “thin” from “thing”. Of course, the teacher should also basically know some other sounds which do not exist in most Chinese dialects, such as, the voiceless or voiced consonant ending [b], [d], [g] and [t], [p], [k]; the labiodental sound [v]; the interdental sounds [θ] and [ð] and also the palatal sounds [tʃ] and [dʒ] (see, Commonwealth of Australia, 1983). Knowing some basic differences between Chinese and English language might be a means of making the learning of English a more enjoyable experience and a way to encourage students to learn (Kong, 2003).

Further, Allan’s tape journal for pronunciation improvement (Hedge, 2002) is also recommended here for self-correction and raising the awareness of autonomous
learning. The participants themselves should, raise the awareness of the improvement in standardizing Chinese mandarin based on the variables analysed and, at the same time, raise the awareness of enhancing English communicative competence as the famous linguist Lu Shuxiang suggests: Yang and Li “believe, the most useful way for Chinese students to learn English is to identify the differences between English and Chinese, especially in specific items”, (Zhu, 2007: 93), such as pronunciation, grammar and social use of language so they can ‘draw on their communicative repertoire to participate appropriately in any given context” (McKay and Hornberger, 1996: 454).

Then, how about their communicative competence in English? When asked to speak English the participants felt uncomfortable and not confident among themselves, so no data in English was collected.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, Urumqi Chinese dialect spoken mainly by Chinese Han is characteristic of the pronunciation and intonation of dialects of Northern provinces in China as well as those of the minority groups, such as Uyghur. Similar to what their grandparents did in 1950-60s when they carried their dialect and culture to a new place, Urumqi, to support to develop this remote region, these three participants from Urumqi, China, carry their dialect and culture to a foreign country, Australia to further their education.

Adopting the case study method to investigate the participants use of Urumqi Chinese, the study found that a number of variables define this particular speech community and differentiate it from the standard Mandarin speech community, as was revealed in the participants’ productions of apical sounds. The study further found that the sociolinguistic context impacts the participants’ use of Urumqi Chinese dialect; the greater the period of time students have been away from Urumqi, the fewer the number of Urumqi Chinese dialect sounds produced in conversation.

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