

Codeswitching and indexicality: Chinese migrants' mediation of language ideologies and bilingual resources in Singapore

Following Woolard's (2004) charge to study codeswitching using indexicality (Silverstein, 1996) as an analytical tool, this paper examines the social indexicality of the employment of English and Mandarin in the multilingual city-state of Singapore. By analyzing naturalistic, self-recorded speech data of recent migrants from China, I study the ways in which English and Mandarin—the most commonly used languages by the majority ethnic Chinese population—are utilized in codeswitching.

Although Mandarin is the preferred language of most of the speakers in this study, English is used by a majority of them to varying extents in daily speech contexts. Those with some knowledge of English exhibit intra-sentential codeswitching or lexical insertion (cf. 1) (Muysken, 2000) and/or inter-sentential (cf. 2) codeswitching, which are highly productive practices among Singaporean speakers (Kamwangamalu and Lee, 1991). I also analyze instances where speakers “borrow” English words into Mandarin using non-English phonology (cf. 3).

- (1) Inserting English into Mandarin matrix:
zuihao fang newspaper *wo* suggest...
best put newspaper I suggest...
“I suggest it’s best to put newspaper [on table]...”
- (2) Codeswitching into Mandarin in English matrix discourse:
...you can just play the role, right, with, with virtual characters.
meiyou de, shi meiyou zhe zong dongxi de.
no particle be no this type thing particle
“there’s nothing, there’s no such thing.”
- (3) [zin], *wo jiu*...
“then, I just...”

I outline the relationship between the migrants’ and Singapore’s State ideologies vis-à-vis the language practices in Singapore and discuss the migrants’ reproduction of Singaporean codeswitching in terms of “iconization” and “fractal recursivity,” drawing on Irvine and Gal’s (2000) semiotic projection of language ideology. Annual, State-instituted movements (cf. “Speak Good English” and “Speak Mandarin” campaigns) indicate continual efforts by the State to promote higher proficiency among speakers; yet codeswitching remains neither condoned nor censured as a hindrance to that goal. The migrants’ assessments, obtained through interviews, parallel the State’s call for higher language standards and its ambivalent stance on codeswitching. I suggest that the migrants’ adoption of codeswitching, particularly the “atypical borrowing” in (3), is especially reflective of the iconicity of Singaporean codeswitching. As longtime speakers of Mandarin, these Chinese migrants also construct their ideologies about Mandarin differently from English. Hence, I discuss the extent to which, as newcomers to the speech community, they recursively construct and build on their adopted home’s language ideologies while mediating ideologies based on practices in their homeland.

Codeswitching can be analyzed as having meanings beyond those that are guided by social relations between speakers (Gal, 1987), as in a “we/they” distinction (Gumperz, 1982), or appealing to rights-and-obligations sets (Myers-Scotton, 1993) and situational changes (Blom

and Gumperz, 1972). This paper seeks to show that codeswitching by the Chinese migrants mediates and reproduces the indexical relationship between societal ideologies and codeswitching. In turn, the new ways in which they codeswitch (i.e., “borrow”) contributes to the construction of additional social meanings of codeswitching for the Singaporean linguistic context, hence demonstrating that the dialectic nature of indexicality can be useful for investigating the interactive function of codeswitching.

498 words

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