

Socio-cognitive functions of codeswitching between English, Mandarin and Singlish

To examine the cognitive and social roles of codeswitching in my interaction with my peers in an informal setting, I have collected audio data with parts of the transcript attached in the appendix. The recorded speech event was during a 30-minute trip from a residential college to the various convenience stores in UTown, NUS, in order to purchase food for a late-night supper session. All three interlocutors, including me, are close friends of the same age, and fluent speakers of standard English, Singaporean English (Singlish) and Mandarin Chinese. The other two interlocutors were unaware that this recording would be used for codeswitching analysis. Throughout the entire speech event, the unmarked language of our conversations was largely standard English with an informal register, interspersed with Singlish expressions. At the same time, there were frequent instances of codeswitching to and from Mandarin, which I will focus on analysing in this essay. I propose that many instances of our codeswitching to Mandarin provided us with an easily accessible repertoire of cognitive resources to fulfil our expressional needs, and in the process of retrieving such cognitive resources, codeswitching served multi-layered social functions that characterised our interaction.

Firstly, an interesting observation from the data is that switches to Singlish and Mandarin tended to induce and complement each other. Codeswitching to Mandarin was often preceded by a Singlish expression. And conversely, the utterance of Singlish phrases was likely to induce more Mandarin expressions among other interlocutors in subsequent conversations. For example:

...
 Z: Actually she has been busy the whole day.
 L: **Ya lor.**
 (lift bell rings)
 B: Eh go , 快[quick] , 快[quick]!
 B: 你们有[you guys have] right?
 Z: 有什么[have what]?

...
 In this conversation, the Singlish phrase “*ya lor*” was a switch from standard English to Singlish. This introduction of Singlish acted as a bridge to the following few sentences in which other interlocutors codeswitched to Mandarin. Codeswitching to Mandarin also had similar impact in the opposite direction. For example:

...
 L: So what, what are you analysing from this?
 Z: Analysing, analysing L's (unclear) (laughter)...
 B: (laughter) There's gonna be so much 杂音[noise] **eh.**
 L: **Yeah there is eh...** I bet you can't even hear properly.
 ...

Here, the mixing of a Mandarin word “*noise*” in a previously English conversation led to more Singlish expressions subsequently. These instances constitute metaphorical codeswitching, where the transient use of a language “serves as a ‘metaphor’ for another social relationship regularly associated with it” (Woolard, 2004, p.76). The use of Singlish and Mandarin is

conventionally associated with informal social settings among Singaporean Chinese. Its deployment may suggest closeness of relationship between interlocutors. Since the interlocutors were conscious of this typical association, they took this implicit social cue and directed the conversation towards a more informal tone, deviating further from the quotidian use of standard English in the college environment. Other than social functions, the tendency for Singlish to serve as a transition to Mandarin and vice versa could arise out of cognitive reasons. Singlish is much closer to Mandarin in terms of syntactic structures than it is to English. Many Singlish phrases have direct word-for-word translations to Mandarin. When an interlocutor introduces a Singlish phrase, other interlocutors may be primed to parse this phrase using the grammar shared by both Singlish and Mandarin. Consequently, it becomes more convenient and cognitively easier to access such grammar in subsequent constructions of utterances. In a more formal setting, speakers may have the need to suppress expressions that deviate from standard English. However, since such a need was not present in our informal speech event, we were more likely to codeswitch due to this cognitive convenience. This viewpoint may be further strengthened by the observation that the interlocutors frequently switched between Singlish and Mandarin multiple times within the same sentence. For example:

...
 B: So we must what, 加肉啊 [*add meat*]? 自己加肉 [*add meat ourselves*].
 Z: 我不要 [*I don't want*] vegetarian.
 B: 你要不要加肉 [*Do you want to add meat*]?
 L: 要 [*(I) want*] but **where got** 肉 [*meat*]?
 Z: Wait do they have (interrupted)
 B: 去那个 [*go that*] Super Snack 那边买炸鸡 [*there (to) buy fried chicken*],
 要不要 [*(do you) want*]? 要不要 [*(do you) want*]?
 Z: Wait do they have non-vegetarian, I wanna ...
 L: Let's go find 肉 [*meat*].
 ...

In this short burst of Singlish-Mandarin expressions, the lexicons of English and Mandarin were weaved seamlessly into a coherent conversation that was largely structured by the shared syntax of Singlish and Mandarin. At this moment, since the cognitive resources required to interpret these two languages were active, the speakers might have found it cognitively more convenient to maintain the intermixing of Singlish and Mandarin. Thus, Singlish and Mandarin often complemented each other in our codeswitching.

Codeswitching to Mandarin also provided the interlocutors with the cognitive function to encode certain aspect into verbs. Analysis of localised instances of switches to Mandarin reveals that the interlocutors might have codeswitched in order to access cognitive resources to grammaticalise the delimitative/durative aspect into verbs which English was unable to provide. For example:

...
 Z: (unclear) 那么暴力 [*so violent*] , 整天告我告我 [(*wanna*) sue me the whole day]!
 L: 三更半夜吵来吵去 [*In the middle of the night, (you're) making so much noise around*]!
 ...

The first underlined Mandarin phrase literally translates to “*sue me sue me*”, whereas the second one is “*make noise here make noise there*”. These phrases are instances of verb

reduplication to mark the delimitative aspect, which denotes that an action only lasts for some amount of time (Zhou, 1998, p.8). Although English can approximately encode this information by appending the phrase “for a while” after a verb, Mandarin is able to encode it directly in the verb form itself. This grammatical feature is an easily accessible cognitive resource that Mandarin speakers have access to. Slobin (1991, p.7) proposed that the acquisition of a language requires the adoption of “a particular framework for schematizing experience”, by encoding meaning into grammar. As bilinguals, the interlocutors were free to choose from the repertoires of English and Mandarin syntactic frameworks to encode meaning. Codeswitching to Mandarin allowed them to employ the cognitive resources of an aspectual marker unavailable in English. This usage augmented the intensity of the verb phrases and added to the intended rhetorical effect of apparent aggression, albeit in a jocular manner.

The use of Mandarin noun phrases to represent certain things may reflect that the cognitive representations of some concepts in Mandarin were favoured by the interlocutors as compared to their rough counterparts in English. Codeswitching allowed the speakers to access these representations. Consider this snippet of conversation:

...
L: Oh no (laughter) the person turned around.
Z: The person? **Where got person?**
B: Where where where where?!
L: No I'm pointing downstairs!
B: (laughter)
Z: Oh, 还以为有“不干净的东西” [*I thought there was “unclean stuff”*].

...
Here, “*unclean stuff*” is an idiomatic expression in Mandarin that metaphorically refers to supernatural phenomena such as spirits and ghosts. Cognitively, the representation of such a concept may be more readily available through Mandarin, as there is much discussion of supernatural references in Chinese superstitions, folk literature and television shows. Even though there are English phrases to convey similar meanings, the speaker might have found the concept represented by the Mandarin idiom closer to his own mental representation. With regards to the social aspect, evoking this idiom also served to specifically conjure up the mental imagery of ghosts in Chinese folktales. This *double-voiced* phrase infuses the speaker's utterance and intentions (to refer to supernatural beings) into the dialogue with the voice and social intentions of others who have uttered the same forms (to describe ghost stories) (Woolard, 2004, p.87).

Another social purpose of our metaphorical codeswitching between English and Mandarin was to make conversations more casual and amusing, often to dramatic effects. For instance:

...
B: Oi! 你够了啊你这个... [*You, enough! You this...*] , 我告你啊[*I'm gonna sue you*]! (laughter)
Z: (unclear) 那么暴力[*so violent*] , 整天告我告我 [(*wanna*) *sue me the whole day*].

...
Besides the informal connotation of the act of speaking Mandarin in a predominantly English conversation as mentioned in the second paragraph, this metaphorical codeswitching to Mandarin here added another layer of dramatic effect. The Mandarin phrases here largely

resemble common lines in a stereotypical Chinese television drama. This usage is yet another case of double voicing. The interlocutors jocularly infused their apparent emotions of annoyance and aggression into the dramatic lines uttered by antagonistic parties in a typical drama, making the conversation more amusing and comical. This effect is also accompanied by the observation of increased laughter when these switches happened.

In addition to informal occasions between close friends, codeswitching to Mandarin also generally occurs in family settings among the Mandarin-speaking Singaporean Chinese community. Thus, switches to Mandarin can in some cases create the effect of transiently altering the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. Consider this example:

...
(looking at laminated posters at FairPrice)
Z: Do you have this?
B: 你有没有“态度” [*Do you have “attitude”*] (laughter)?
(referring to a poster with the word “ATTITUDE” on it)
Z: This one is like
B: I have this actually... as my ... as my table mat.
Z: Like last century ...
B: Eh! 没礼貌 [*No manners*]!

...
The underlined portions may remind one of a typical Chinese parent’s admonitions to a child. Besides the metaphorical sense of a parental reprimand, these sentences transiently changed the interactional *footing* of the utterer (Goffman, 1981, cited in Woolard, 2004, p.86), from a peer to someone of a higher status in the family. The subtle shift in footing allowed the speaker to temporarily gain the social capacity to criticise others in a top-down manner. Due to the absurdity of the establishment of an actual parent-child relationship between peers, coupled with the social norms governing the interaction between the interlocutors, such remarks did not come across as more offensive than entertaining.

In conclusion, codeswitching between the base language English, Mandarin and Singlish in our speech event served many cognitive roles, such as providing convenient syntactic structures, aspectual marker and idiomatic representations. The retrieval of these cognitive resources, together with other instances of metaphorical codeswitching, served diverse social functions, making conversations more dramatic and amusing for close friends. Overall, it is observed that Singlish and Mandarin induced and complemented each other in our codeswitching from English, and many switches concurrently served the dual roles of social and cognitive functions.

Bibliography

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Appendix: Transcript

Interlocutors:

Z: Zechu

B: Zechu's Friend 1

L: Zechu's Friend 2

Explanatory notes:

1. Original speech is unitalicized, unbolded, unbracketed, and written in its original language.
2. English gloss is [*italicized in square brackets*], following the original Chinese text.
3. Expressions that are clearly Singlish are **bolded**.
4. Unless otherwise stated, all the occurrences of Chinese refer to Mandarin Chinese.
5. Explanatory notes are in (parentheses). They are not part of the speech. In particular, (unclear) indicates that this part of the audio could not be transcribed, and (laughter) is used when one or more interlocutors were laughing.

...

0:50

L: Is this for Narratives?

Z: I realized they like to analyse this kind of (unclear)

B: 真是没事找事做 [*lit. This is really looking for things to do when there's nothing to do*].

Z: 你才没事找事做 [*lit. You are the one that looks for things to do when there's nothing*].

...

1:48

Z: Actually she has been busy the whole day.

L: **Ya lor.**

(lift bell rings)

B: Eh go, 快[*quick*], 快[*quick*]!

B: 你们有[*you guys have*] right?

Z: 有什么[*have what*]?

B: 我没有带我[*I didn't bring my*] lanyard, 所以我没有钱 [*so I don't have money*], 也没有身份[*also don't have identity*].

Z: 钱 [*money*], I thought 钱 [*money*] is here.

(pointing to Z's phone)

B: 可以啦, 可以是可以 [*Well, I mean you can*].

Z: Who's on this floor?

Z: Wah their floor is so ... decorated.

...

(enter the lift)

B: 有种烟味 [*there's some smoke smell*].

Z: Yeah.

L: 有诶 [*Yeah there is*].

Z: Some smokers took this lift **is it**?

B: Maybe it's ANON1.

L: What, ANON1 smokes?

Z: Yeah.

B: Yeah yeah yeah! It was that time we went to celebrate someone's birthday. Then he was late already, was past mid-night. Then we were like, who are we waiting for, oh then ANON2 was like, ANON1 **still having** smoke break.

Z: I thought it was a joke.

B: I think it was for real though.

Z: No no no, like that time I thought it was a joke. Then y'all seemed to be very serious. Then I was like oh ok.

...

{monolingual conversation in English about dental checks}

...

5:25

L: So what, what are you analysing from this?

(referring to the recording)

Z: Analysing, analysing L's (unclear) (laughter)...

B: (laughter) There's gonna be so much 杂音[*noise*] **eh**.

L: **Yeah there is eh**... I bet you can't even hear properly.

Z: How about every time if someone speaks, I'll point the mike to the person.

B: 我不要 [*I don't want this*].

L: Like, 我自己... [*I myself ...*](unclear)

B: **Eh, FairPrice** 还是 [*or*] **Cheers ah**?

L: FairPrice right? What are we buying actually I don't understand what is the pot?

B: It's the, I know what it is, but like 不知道在哪里 [*don't know where it is*].

B: Oi! 你够了啊你这个... [*You, enough! You this...*], 我告你啊[*I'm gonna sue you*]! (laughter)

Z: (unclear) 那么暴力[*so violent*], 整天告我告我 [(*wanna*) *sue me the whole day*]!

L: 三更半夜吵来吵去 [*In the middle of the night, (you're) making so much noise around*]!

B: 告你啊 [*I'm suing you!*] (laughter)

Z: 告[*sue*] **lor!**

B: **Eh wait ah**.

L: (laughter) **record some more record some more!**

B: 这样会[(*you*) *know so well how to*] record 当记者啦 [*just go become a reporter*], huh! (laughter)

(indistinguishable speech)

Z: I'm scared I can't hear anything **eh**.

B: **Sorry ah**, but 你这个放到这样近 [*you put this* (referring to Z's phone) *so close (to my mouth)*], 是 [*is it*] ... smoker's ears? (laughter)

Z: Smoker's ears? What a concept.

...

B: Oh my god yeah! There's, there's the snacks store.

L: (unclear)

B: **Can** 加料[*add food*], 加料 [*add food*].

Z: Wait why is it so dim, so shady.

B: No no no, it's just the glass you know, it's tinted. So if you go in it will be quite bright.

L: This?

....

7:50

B: Yeah man record these insightful insights.

Z: Insightful insights.

B: That's right.

L: Actually I'm not very hungry but (unclear).

B: **I am eh**.

Z: (unclear)

B: **Eh how ah, I think it's not enough to just buy that one bowl sia**, it's clearly not (unclear).

Z: **Then you buy two bowls lor**.

B: But really what if it's not nice ...

B: Then 你到底是要买 [*So do you want to buy*], 还是不要买 [*or don't want to buy*]?

Z: Don't put all the eggs inside the same basket. We buy two baskets.

B: This is not putting inside the same basket, it's about buying different kinds of eggs ok, you can have like ostrich eggs ... you can have like ... wait no...

Z: Dinosaur eggs.

B: **You go and buy for me ah**.

....

8:38

(looking at laminated posters at FairPrice)

Z: Do you have this?

B: 你有没有态度[*Do you have "attitude"*] (laughter)?

(referring to a poster with the word "ATTITUDE" on it)

Z: This one is like

B: I have this actually... as my ... as my table mat.

Z: Like last century ...

B: Eh! 没礼貌 [*No manners*]!

Z: 你才没礼貌 [*You're the one with no manners*]. 我是一个 [*I'm a*] (unclear)...

L: This (unclear) meme font.

...

(walking inside FairPrice)

...

B: This is eight dollars.

Z: 麻辣香锅 [*numbing and spicy fragrant hot pot*], **eh they have** 麻辣香锅 [*numbing and spicy fragrant hot pot*] **eh**.

...

L: Croissant (kʷwa.sã, French pronunciation)

Z: Croissant (kʷwa.sã)

L: Croissant (kʷwa.sã)

Z: Croissant (kʷwa.sã)

...

L: It is a different kind of flavour.

B: **Yeah it is eh.**

Z: Wait is this new one.

L: It's all vegetarian.

Z: 海底捞 [*Haidilao* (a type of Chinese hotpot)].

B: So we must what, 加肉啊 [*add meat*]? 自己加肉 [*add meat ourselves*].

Z: 我不要 [*I don't want*] vegetarian.

B: 你要不要加肉 [*Do you want to add meat*]?

L: 要 [*I want*] but **where got** 肉 [*meat*]?

Z: Wait do they have (interrupted)

B: 去那个 [*go that*] Super Snack 那边买炸鸡 [*there (to) buy fried chicken*], 要不要 [(*do you*) want]? 要不要 [(*do you*) want]?

Z: Wait do they have non-vegetarian, I wanna ...

L: Let's go find 肉 [*meat*].

Z: But I don't want vegetarian.

B: What do you mean by you don't want vegetarian!

Z: They have non-vegetarian one right?

B: No! obviously! You get the box.

L: Wait wait wait, so we buy this, then we go there and buy that .

B: Yeah 加料 [*add food*].

B: **Is one enough ah, we are clearly hungry now eh.**

L: It depends on whether ANON3 wakes up.

... (monolingual)

B: How about we get her a coffee? Anyone wants to pool money to get ANON3 a coffee?

Z: Later she cannot fall asleep.

L: Yeah.

B: No no no as in coffee for tomorrow.

L: **Oh ok ok can.**

B: As a 朋友的支持 (friends' support).

B: **Actually what's nice ah?** Latte? Latte sounds very classic.

11:10

...

16:27

L: Why are we climbing the stairs?

B: If not how do you get to Food Clique?

L: Uhhhhhhhhh! (very loud and sharp sound)

B: How do you get to Food Clique without climbing the stairs?

L: Oh no (laughter) the person turned around.

Z: The person? **Where got person?**

B: Where where where where?!

L: No I'm pointing downstairs!

B: (laughter)

Z: Oh, 还以为有“不干净的东西” [*I thought there was “unclean stuff”* (referring to supernatural phenomena)].

L: I think he's more scared of us than we are scared of him.

B: 不干净的东西 [*“unclean stuff”*] (laughter).

L: We are the 不干净的东西 [*“unclean stuff”*].

...

16:58

Z: I think the, what's that called, *bak chor mee's* [*minced meat noodles*] still open.

...

Z: I don't mind.

Z: How about we order like noodles then we mix inside like...

B: Huh?

L: (unclear)

B: No you just ... **ya lor.**

Z: Minced meat, how about we just buy minced meat?

B: No, no one sells minced meat what. **Fish ball more** 可能 (possible) **leh.**

Z: 肉脞面 [*minced meat noodles*] **means got minced meat.**

B: Then you don't want the 面 [*noodles*]?

Z: Yeah, just the meat, the 肉脞 [*minced meat*].

B: How about we just get fish balls, or you want 肉脞 [*minced meat*], **aiyo, I don't know ah.**

Z: But, is there anything at Cheers?

L: Fine Food **also**.

B: Fine Food is not open right?

Z: No, not open.

B: How about we just get the artificial meat **lor**.

Z: Artificial meat?

B: Unless you get wanton, you get the ... 鲜虾 [*fresh prawns*]...

Z: 鲜虾 [*fresh prawns*]?

L: What's that?

B: 云吞 [*wanton*]...

Z: 云吞 [*wanton*]?

B: Yeah it's the ...

Z: 鲜虾云吞 [*fresh prawn wanton*](in Cantonese)

B: It's the microwavable...

Z: 新鲜滚热辣嘅鲜虾云吞 [*fresh, boiling, hot, spicy fresh prawn wanton*] (in Cantonese)

B: 痴线 [*crazy*]!(in Cantonese)

18:28

...