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Singlish *can* and speech accommodation in Singapore English

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ABSTRACT: For Singaporeans it is very natural to switch between ‘Singapore Standard English’ (SSE) and Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), namely, Singlish,. The employment of different varieties of a language between speaker turns can be accounted for using the communication accommodation theory. Are Singaporeans responsive to the varieties of English used by people around them? Does language convergence or divergence in a SSE-SCE conversation affect a speaker’s perceived social image? Participants were asked to listen to different variations of a SSE-SCE service encounter dialogue before rating the traits of the featured salesman and customer. Generally, Singaporeans awarded higher ratings to the customer when he/she complied with the language standards set by the salesman rather than when he/she deviated from that set by the salesman. These results were contrary to the common belief that ‘the customer is always right’.

INTRODUCTION

Accounting for bilinguals’ use of different languages in a conversation has been the subject of many studies worldwide. The communication accommodation theory (CAT) (Giles et al., 1991) has been used successfully to account for bilinguals’ employment of different language combinations in the same sentence, between sentences and even between speaker turns (Sachdev & Giles, 2006). This study focuses on the speech accommodation of Singaporeans in the employment of their two English varieties, namely, ‘Singapore Standard English’ (SSE) and ‘Singapore Colloquial English’ (SCE), commonly known as ‘Singlish’. The term ‘Standard’ here is used to signify a more standardized variety of English that is used by more educated Singaporeans in contrast to the colloquial variety (see Cavallaro et al., this issue). The communicative behaviour of Singaporeans was monitored specifically through the modification of the language used between speaker turns. In addition to investigating Singaporeans’ responsiveness to speech accommodation in SSE-SCE conversations, this study also seeks to find out whether the perceived social image of a speaker is affected when language convergence or divergence takes place during a SSE-SCE conversation.

The following sections of the paper will present models explaining bilinguals’ language choice then go on to review studies on speech accommodation. Research frameworks of Singapore English and the backgrounds of Standard Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English will also be introduced followed by an elaboration on the significance of the present study.

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EXPLAINING BILINGUALS' LANGUAGE CHOICES

The politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987) and markedness model (Myers-Scotton 2006) are two well-documented pragmatic models for explaining bilinguals' language choice. According to Burt (1994), both models predict language convergence to be soci-opragmatically ambiguous. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain people's choices of what or how to say something according to the concepts of 'negative face' and 'positive face' as the basic wants desired by members of the society and which are in their general interests to satisfy. The 'negative face' represents a member's autonomy to act and be free from imposition while the 'positive face' represents every member's desire to be well regarded by others (Brown & Levinson 1987: 62). In bilingual communication, each speaker is assumed to possess a 'negative face' in wanting to speak one's preferred language without inhibition. At the same time, each speaker is also assumed to possess a 'positive face' in wanting to speak the interlocutor's language so as to gain approval from the interlocutor. However, there is uncertainty as to which face would be stronger at the point of communication. There is constant conflict between a bilingual's 'negative face' and 'positive face' as speaking one language or another necessarily comes at the expense of either faces.

From a different perspective, the markedness model (Myers-Scotton 1983; 2006: 159) attempts to establish 'a principled procedure that both speakers and listeners use to judge any linguistic choice that they might make or hear as more or less marked, given the interaction in which it occurs'. Language choices are representative of sets of rights and obligations (RO sets) for each interaction. The unmarked choice is reflective of the specific RO set in a specific context of interaction. In contrast, the marked choice is one that is not predicted given the specific RO set expected in a particular context. A switch in language choice implies a speaker's desire to change the operative RO set of the context. The deference maxim and virtuosity maxim are two maxims in the markedness model that may be used to interpret language choices. The deference maxim prompts the speaker to 'show deference in your code choice to those from whom you desire something' (Myers-Scotton 1983: 123) while the virtuosity maxim prompts the speaker to 'make an otherwise marked choice whenever the linguistic ability of either S (the speaker) or A (the addressee) makes the unmarked choice for the unmarked RO set in a conventionalised exchange infelicitous'. Bilinguals may infer their interlocutor's intent based on these two maxims. Burt (1994) points out that in the situation where each bilingual speaker is a second language speaker of the other's native language, whichever language is chosen would appear to cast speaker intention in a soci-opragmatically ambiguous light.

As aforementioned, communication accommodation theory is another viable model in accounting for bilinguals' language choice and is the framework used in the study presented in this paper. Before continuing, it is essential to gain an understanding of the few major assumptions behind CAT (Sachdev & Giles 2006). First, bilingual communication is influenced by features of the immediate situation, interlocutors' initial orientations and the embedded socio-historical context of an interaction. Second, negotiations of social category memberships often take place during bilingual interactions. Third, interlocutors hold 'expectations regarding optimal levels of bilingual accommodation' and these expectations may be reliant on their 'stereotypes about outgroup members, ways of conducting appropriate intergroup business, and the prevailing social and situational norms' (Sachdev & Giles 2006: 355). According to Giles et al. (1991: 7–8), language convergence occurs when an individual alters his/her communicative behaviour (through linguistic, prosodic

or non-verbal features) to comply with that of the other interlocutor. Conversely, language divergence occurs when differences in communicative behaviour are emphasised through the deviation of one's communicative behaviour from the other party. The CAT proposes that language convergence, as a form of behavioural similarity, illustrates a speaker's desire for social approval and identification with the other party (Giles et al., 1991: 18–19). Apart from gaining social approval and getting into an interlocutor's good books, other motivations for bilinguals' language convergence include improving the effectiveness of communication and displaying acculturation to an interlocutor's culture values (Sachdev & Giles 2006: 356, 357). On the other hand, motivations for language divergence include emphasising intergroup distinctiveness and shaping listeners' attributions and feelings (Sachdev & Giles 206: 357, 358).

STUDIES OF SPEECH ACCOMMODATION

Often in the investigation of speech accommodation, naive listeners are instructed to provide evaluations of simulated speech, thereby allowing experimenters greater control over experimental variables (Platt & Weber, 1984: 132). Making use of tape recordings of picture descriptions, Giles et al. (1973) investigated the process of speech accommodation between English-Canadians (EC) and French-Canadians (FC). When the FC speakers were perceived by the EC listeners to be putting more effort into accommodation, it was found that the EC listeners rated them more favourably (in terms of the FC speaker's considerateness and effort in bridging the cultural gap) and were in turn more likely to fully accommodate back to the FC speaker when it was their turn to record a message for the FC speaker. These findings were once again verified in a subsequent study by Simard et al. (1976), this time using EC speakers and FC listeners. Furthermore, Simard et al. (1976) took their study one step further by proving that accommodation to another's language may not always result in positive evaluations and reciprocal accommodation. Specifically, listeners are less prepared to reciprocate accommodation when their speakers' accommodation is attributed to external pressures rather than voluntary effort on speakers' part. Although non-accommodation from speakers is likely to induce unfavourable evaluations from their listeners, this may not be the case if speakers' non-accommodation is perceived to be attributed to external pressures or their lack of language ability. Acknowledging that language accommodation by an interlocutor is motivated by a variety of reasons, Burt (1994) concluded that accommodation strategies are soci-opragmatically ambiguous, even between speakers from ethnic groups sharing harmonious relations. Such a conclusion was drawn after varied listener evaluations were obtained from American and German subjects based on matched guise audio recordings depicting compliance (using the speaker's second language) and convergence (using the language previously used).

Meanwhile, Genesee and Bourhis (1982) examined how the interaction of four factors (situational norms, socio-cultural status of language, ingroup favouritism and interpersonal speech accommodation) affected observers' evaluative reactions to code-switching in a cross-cultural encounter based in the bilingual setting of Montreal. Targeting monolingual English-Canadian, monolingual French-Canadian and bilingual English-Canadian subjects, the researchers developed a segmented speech dialogue technique to monitor the respective subject group's ratings of speakers in a salesman-customer encounter after every speaker turn. A French-Canadian speaker and English-Canadian speaker took turns playing the role of the salesman and customer in sets of recorded dialogue in which they

each alternated between English and French during their required speaker turns. Overall, role-related situation norms was primarily subjects' initial basis for evaluating the speakers and subsequently, the process of interpersonal accommodation was used as a basis. In addition, ingroup favouritism and the influence of the socio-cultural context were also determinants of the subjects' evaluative reactions subjects. Later on, in hopes of replicating major findings of their Montreal study, Genesee and Bourhis (1988) conducted a similar study, this time in the monolingual French setting of Quebec City. Unlike the Montreal study, interpersonal accommodation was adopted as the basis for subjects' evaluations earlier in the dialogue. Furthermore, subjects of the Quebec study generally gave favourable ratings to customers whose language choice was French. Such differences were attributed to the French dominance in Quebec City which posed less conflict to Quebec subjects when they were making evaluations.

Elsewhere, research on the language choices of multilingual Chinese Foochows in Sarawak has indicated that such choices are often guided by both socio-cultural factors and ingroup favouritism (Su-Hie & Sussex, 2002). For example, socially viable languages with higher status (e.g. Malay and English) are used in transactional and employment domains whereas use of Foochow is usually reserved for ingroup communication among the Foochows. Callahan (2006) examined speech accommodation between English and Spanish during service encounters occurring in New York City, where Latinos make up a quarter of the population. During anonymous service encounters, fieldworkers collected information through brief face-to-face interactions with service workers (the informants), addressing the informants in Spanish and then noting their language of response. Overall, in 86% of the service encounters, the informants, accommodated to the speech of the fieldworkers at their first possible speech turn after the fieldworker spoke in Spanish. However, younger informants (aged under 30 years old) answered in English at a significantly higher rate than the older informants (aged over 30 years old).

In other contexts, studies have looked at the impact of code-switching on the persuasiveness of marketing strategies. In a study conducted on Spanish-English bilinguals, Luna and Peracchio (2005) verified that slogans switching from the majority language to the minority language (majority-to-minority) led to lower product evaluations in comparison to slogans switching from the minority to the majority language (minority-to-majority). However, in the case of an individual possessing a positive attitude towards the minority language, higher product evaluations would instead be derived from majority-to-minority slogans. On the other hand, Nerghes's (2011) study confirmed that switching between Dutch and English influences native Dutch speakers' systematic processing of messages, especially when strong arguments are present. However, code-switching did not result in changes to her participants' attitudes or behavioural intentions.

RESEARCH ON SINGAPORE ENGLISH

Different analyses regarding the variation of Singapore English have been put forth by researchers. Viewing Singapore English as a continuum, Platt and Weber (1984: 136) described Singapore Colloquial English as a basilectal form of Singapore English which is commonly associated with those having lower levels of English-medium education. At the other end of the continuum we find a more standardized variety of Singapore English (from now on we will use the term 'Standard Singapore English' to refer to this variety) as an acrolect used in formal occasions and is often associated with those possessing 'high

Table 1. Features of the two orientations in COM (Alsagoff 2007: 39)

	ISE Globalism	LSE Localism
a.	Economic capital	Socio-cultural capital
b.	Authority	Camaderie
c.	Formality	Informality
d.	Distance	Closeness
e.	Educational attainment	Community membership

ISE = International Singapore English, LSE = Local Singapore English.

levels of English-medium education and higher socioeconomic status' (Platt & Weber 1984: 136).

In contrast, Gupta (1989) argued that the closely related varieties of Standard Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English are in diglossia, with distinct domains governing the use of SSE, the High (H) variety, and SCE, the Low (L) variety. A number of studies conducted locally appear to support Gupta's analysis of the diglossic situation in Singapore. Responses collected from primary school students (Rubdy 2007: 316) reflect this internalisation of separate domains from a young age. The students responded that Standard Singapore English should be used in professional and formal settings such as education while Singapore Colloquial English would be their natural language choice in informal settings when talking to family and friends. Likewise, Harada (2009) found that Singaporean adults preferred Singapore Colloquial English when talking to intimate persons whereas Standard Singapore English was favoured when conversing with superiors and foreigners. Alsagoff (2007) has suggested that the cultural orientation model (COM) is a viable alternative model for analysing the variation in Singaporeans' English. According to her, the variation in Singapore English is attributed to the negotiation between the two macro-cultural orientations of a global(ist) perspective or a local(ist) perspective. In Alsagoff's terms, the global(ist) perspective is associated with International Singapore English (ISE), broadly equivalent to Standard Singapore English, and the local(ist) perspective is associated with Local Singapore English (LSE) or Singapore Colloquial English. Speaking in Standard Singapore English signals a shift towards the global(ist) orientation, while speaking in Singapore Colloquial English indicates a shift towards the local(ist) orientation. As shown in Table 1, each perspective is represented with referential features relating to culture, capital and identity (Alsagoff 2007: 39).

STANDARD SINGAPORE ENGLISH AND SINGAPORE COLLOQUIAL ENGLISH

In the past, being a bilingual in Singapore meant being proficient in two or more of the various language varieties. Now, being a bilingual in Singapore increasingly means having proficiency in English as well as in another official language (usually one's ethnic mother tongue). This has been referred to as English-knowing bilingualism (Pakir 1993)

Switching between the more standardized variety of Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English is commonplace in Singapore. Most primary and secondary students in Singapore have the ability to switch between Standard Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English (Rubdy 2007; Tan & Tan 2008). Supplementing Pakir's (1993) observation of English-knowing bilingualism in Singapore, Chua (2011) suggests how

the local permeation of Singapore Colloquial English has instead led to a phenomenon of E(Si)nglish-knowing bilingualism where bilinguals converse in Singapore Colloquial English instead of the expected Standard Singapore English.

Apart from containing locally restricted lexical terms (e.g. ERP for electronic road pricing, MCE for Marina Coastal Expressway, etc.) and having locally-attached semantics to existing terms (e.g. slippers meaning 'flip-flops' rather than warm footwear used in colder climates), Standard Singapore English does not differ much from other versions of Standard English in the world (Leimgruber 2011: 2). It is used as the medium of instruction in education and also in government and administration. On the other hand, Singapore Colloquial English is an English-based creole which differs from Standard Singapore English in terms of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary and may be unintelligible to native speakers of English in other parts of the world (Ho 2006: 2). Emphasising that Singapore Colloquial English is an unmarked lingua franca for intra-communication spoken by all levels of people (both the less educated and highly-educated) in Singapore, Ho (2006: 19) suggests that Singapore Colloquial English is possibly used by Singaporeans to display 'solidarity, comradeship and intimacy' in spite of their background differences. This view is echoed by local students who do not see Singapore Colloquial English as 'bad' English but instead as a form of prominent Singaporean identity maker, as well as an effective communicative tool to 'reduce social distance and establish group affinity' (Tan & Tan 2008: 476). Notably, Singapore Colloquial English has appeared in TV shows (e.g. *Phua Chu Kang*, *Under One Roof*) and films (e.g. *I Not Stupid*, *Talking Cock the Movie*) depicting popular Singaporean culture (Yoong 2010: 5–6). On the contrary, Cavallaro and Ng (2009) examined local tertiary students' language attitudes towards Standard Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English and found that Standard Singapore English was rated more favourably than Singapore Colloquial English across most status and solidarity traits, questioning the widely held view that Singapore Colloquial English is a high solidarity language.

Concerns about the erosion of Standard Singapore English resulting from the widespread use of Singapore Colloquial English have been raised (Dolven 1999: 32; Wee 2005: 10; Leimgruber 2011: 11). In 2000, The Speak Good English Movement was initiated as a national campaign to discourage the use of Singapore Colloquial English and promote the use of Standard Singapore English (Rubdy 2001: 341). The lack of Singapore Colloquial English's international intelligibility has been viewed as a threat to Singapore's global competitiveness given the economy's heavy reliance on world trade (Chng 2003: 46). In general, anti-SCE advocates striving for 'economic pragmatism' call for the abolition of Singapore Colloquial English while pro-SCE advocates viewing Singapore Colloquial English as an identity marker and 'communal membership' oppose such calls (Yoong 2010: 2).

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

To date, few studies have been carried in Singapore on the language accommodation practices involving Standard Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English. The focus of See's (2012) study was the divergence and convergence between English and Mandarin of a hundred salespersons during service encounters in Singapore. See's study revealed that a significant proportion of salespersons exhibited linguistic accommodation from English to Mandarin. Notably, See observed that linguistic divergence was only

exhibited by salespersons in their early twenties. Platt and Weber (1984) conducted a study on the inappropriate speech accommodation strategies used in Singapore when code-switching between Standard Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English. In the study, an attempt at speech accommodation was considered inappropriate when a speaker had the intention to accommodate his speech to one's interlocutor to achieve a certain aim, which eventually was not achieved or only partly achieved. Specifically in Singapore, inappropriate speech accommodation strategies were attributed to 'interference from background languages and from cultural strategies appropriate in ethnic intragroup communication' as well as from the speaker's insufficient 'knowledge of communicative strategies and/or stylistic variations within the other speech variety' (Platt & Weber 1984: 125).

This study aims to find out if Singaporeans are responsive to divergence and convergence between Standard Singapore English-Singapore Colloquial English conversations, as well as how language convergence or divergence exhibited in a Standard Singapore English-Singapore Colloquial English conversation would affect Singaporeans' evaluative reactions towards the speakers involved.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 80 Singaporean Chinese bilinguals participated in this study. They were tertiary students from Nanyang Technological University who were aged between 18 to 35 years old. Out of the 80 target participants, 40 males and 40 females were recruited. Genesee and Bourhis's (1982) segmented speech dialogue technique was adapted for this study. In the recording of the simulated salesman-customer Standard Singapore English-Singapore Colloquial English dialogues, one male speaker consistently played the role of the salesman whereas another male and one female speaker consistently played the role of the male and female customer respectively. All speakers were selected based on their competency in Standard Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English, as well as their ability to provide a realistic and authentic portrayal of their respective roles. The recordings were carried out in a sound booth using a Zoom H2 Handy Recorder. Each speaker made two recordings, one in Standard Singapore English and the other in Singapore Colloquial English, based on a scripted salesman-customer dialogue. To prevent strongly opinionated responses from the participants, the scripted dialogue was kept neutral in content. The speakers were all given the script beforehand to allow familiarisation and preparation before the actual recording. Four variations of stimulus dialogue, each consisting of five speech turns, were generated using Audacity, a free audio editor application.¹ The manipulations of the language used in each speech turn were aimed at simulating language convergence and divergence carried out by the respective salesman and customer. Table 2 shows the four variations of the stimulus dialogue designed for the experiment.

Procedure

Before the experiment, participants were briefed that they would be listening to a dialogue between a salesman and a customer. They were told to form impressions of the respective speakers based on the recordings heard. Using earphones, each participant listened to only one variation of the dialogue twice (once with the male customer and the other with the female customer). The sequence in which the participants heard the

Table 2. Variations of segmented speech dialogue

Variations	Speakers					Participants	
	Salesman	Customer	Salesman	Customer	Salesman	Female	Male
A	SE	CE	SE	CE	SE	10	10
B	SE	CE	CE	SE	SE	10	10
C	SE	SE	CE	CE	CE	10	10
D	SE	CE	CE	CE	CE	10	10

SE = Standard Singapore English, CE = Singapore Colloquial English.

Table 3. Procedure of experimental administration

Salesman/Customer	–	S	S	C	C	S	S	C	C	S	S
Set	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Turn	–	1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5
Listen (L) / rate (R)	L	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R

variations was randomised. Each variation consisted of the two sets: Set 1 consisted of a continuous dialogue played without intermission and Set 2 consisted of the dialogue played with intermissions inserted after every speech turn. Each participant listened to Set 1 followed by Set 2. They were instructed to rate the respective speakers during the intermissions of Set 2. The procedure of experimental administration is shown in Table 3.

The respective speakers were rated by participants based on both personal and interpersonal relations traits. Personality traits and attributes assessed were similar for both the salesman and the customer and consisted of the following five traits: friendly; kind; considerate, competent; and intelligent. In terms of interpersonal relation traits, the salesman was rated on whether he: feels pleased, feels insulted, feels comfortable, likes the customer and respects the customer. On the other hand, interpersonal relation traits the customer was rated on consisted of whether he/she: is comfortable, is confident, likes the salesman and respects the salesman. Participants carried out the ratings based on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 representing that the participant strongly disagrees with the trait mentioned, 4 representing a neutral stand and 7 representing that the participant strongly agrees with the trait mentioned. After which, the background information of the participants was collected through the administration of a Language Identity Questionnaire. This was to obtain their relevant particulars and ensure that they sufficiently met the criteria for participant selection.

RESULTS

An independent samples *t*-test was performed on the data collected. The number of counts of language divergence was used to broadly categorise the four variations of stimulus dialogue into language divergence variations or language convergence variations. The categorisation of the variations is shown in Table 4.

To investigate how language divergence or convergence affects the perceived social image of speakers, the main variables used in the comparison of results were: (i) the degree

Table 4. Categorisation of variations

Language Divergence	Language Convergence
Variation A (4 counts of divergence, both salesman and customer)	Variation C (1 count of divergence, salesman divergence)
Variation B (2 counts of divergence, customer divergence)	Variation D (1 count of divergence, customer divergence)

Table 5. Group statistics and *t*-test results between variation A and variation C

	Variation A mean	Standard deviation	Variation C mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>
Salesman traits					
Competent	4.90	1.024	4.47	1.334	2.822***
Intelligent	4.54	0.961	4.21	0.986	2.652***
Respects the customer	4.97	0.914	4.26	1.290	4.031***
Customer traits					
Considerate	4.09	0.860	4.49	1.302	-2.293*
Intelligent	3.96	0.818	4.35	1.038	-2.646***
Confident	4.42	1.128	4.79	1.027	-2.162*

*** = $p < 0.01$ Sig. (2-tailed), * = $p < 0.05$ Sig. (2-tailed).

Table 6. Group statistics and *t*-test results between variation A and variation D

	Variation A mean	Standard deviation	Variation D mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>
Salesman traits					
Considerate	5.04	0.938	4.74	1.260	2.092*
Insulted	2.98	1.222	3.41	1.166	-2.317*
Respects the customer	4.97	0.914	4.43	1.220	3.228***

*** = $p < 0.01$ Sig. (2-tailed), * = $p < 0.05$ Sig. (2-tailed).

of language divergence of the salesman and (ii) the degree of language divergence of the customer. Comparisons were carried out between language divergence variations and language convergence variations. In the following Tables 5–8, statistically significant traits ($p < 0.05$) are categorised according to the speaker (salesman or customer).

Comparing the results between variations A and C in Table 5 shows that the salesman was perceived to be more competent, more intelligent and bearing greater respect for the customer when he diverged from the language of the speaker. The customer was also felt to be more considerate, more intelligent and more confident when he/she converged to the language of the salesman.

The results for Variations A and D, (Table 6) show that the salesman was perceived to be more considerate, less insulting and bearing greater respect for the customer when he diverged from the language of the customer.

Table 7. Group statistics and t-test results between variation B and variation C

	Variation B mean	Standard deviation	Variation C mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>
Customer traits					
Intelligent	4.01	0.764	4.35	1.038	-2.345*
Confident	4.40	1.098	4.79	1.027	-2.305*

*** = $p < 0.01$ Sig. (2-tailed), * = $p < 0.05$ Sig. (2-tailed).

Table 8. Group statistics and t-test results between Variation B and Variation D

	Variation B mean	Standard deviation	Variation D mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>
Salesman traits					
Comfortable	4.70	1.017	4.30	1.148	2.274*
Customer traits					
Friendly	4.60	1.026	4.22	1.242	2.081*
Kind	4.49	0.890	4.13	0.905	2.589*
Comfortable	4.89	1.031	4.43	1.394	2.386*
Likes the salesman	4.46	0.927	4.03	1.113	2.701***
Respects the salesman	4.51	1.169	4.00	1.136	2.812***

*** = $p < 0.01$ Sig. (2-tailed), * = $p < 0.05$ Sig. (2-tailed).

A comparison of results between variation B and variation C (shown in Table 7) indicates that the customer was perceived to be more intelligent and more confident when he/she converged to the language of the salesman.

From Table 8 (variations B and D) we can see that the salesman was perceived to feel more comfortable when he diverged from the language of the customer. On the other hand, when the customer diverged from the language of the salesman, the customer was perceived to be friendlier, kinder, more comfortable, liking the salesman more as well as bearing greater respect for the salesman.

Summarising the results obtained, when he diverged from the language of the customer the salesman was rated more favourably and, in terms of personal traits and attributes, he was perceived to be more competent, intelligent and considerate. He was also perceived to feel more comfortable, less insulted and bearing greater respect for the customer in terms of interpersonal relation traits. At the same time, the customer was rated more favourably when he/she converged to the language of the salesman. In terms of personal traits and attributes, when the customer converged to the language of the salesman, he/she was perceived to be more considerate and intelligent, and in terms of interpersonal relation traits, the customer was also felt to be more confident. The only exception occurred in the comparison of results between Variations B and D, in which case the customer was rated more favourably when he/she diverged from the language of the salesman. The next section discusses the significance and implications of the results.

DISCUSSION

The present study has yielded several main findings. First, statistically significant differences in the ratings of speakers' traits across language divergence variations and language convergence variations suggest that Singaporeans are responsive to speech accommodation in Standard Singapore English-Singapore Colloquial English dialogues. Second, contrary to Giles et al.'s (1973) finding that a speaker would receive more positive evaluations when greater effort is perceived to be put into speech accommodation (in this case convergence to language of the speaker), the present results revealed that this is not always the case. Furthermore, the results obtained are in contrast with the interpretation of speech accommodation behaviour on the basis that 'the customer is always right'. Similar to Genesee and Bourhis's (1982; 1988) description of situational norms in salesman-customer interactions where salespersons are expected to switch to the native language of the customer, Callahan (2006: 31) describes the relationship between the service provider and consumer in the United States to be unreciprocal, where the service provider is obliged to comply with the consumer. In accordance with such situational norms, the salesman in this study should have been rated unfavourably when he diverged from the language of the customer. However, this was not observed.

Solomon et al. (1985) proposed role theory as a tool for understanding salesperson-customer interactions during service encounters. According to this theory, exchanges occurring in a service encounter develop according to the specific roles adopted by the salesperson and customer. These roles then determine the relevant 'service scripts', which are the respective sets of expected behaviour enacted by both roles (Guiry 1992: 667; Parker & Ward 2000). The results in this study suggest that participants apply different standards of language accommodation for the salesman and customer based on their respective societal roles. Generally, the customer received more favourable evaluations when he/she converged to the language of the salesman. The opposite was true of the salesman, who was rated more favourably in various personal and interpersonal relation traits when he diverged from the language of the customer. Even though Standard Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English may occur as mutually unintelligible language varieties to non-Singaporean English speakers (Ho 2006: 2), local participants in this study generally have no difficulty comprehending both varieties of English used in the stimulus dialogues. Putting themselves in the shoes of the customer, participants may have felt that the salesman's convergence to the language of the customer was uncalled for. Since the salesman always initiated the stimulus dialogue in Standard Singapore English, participants would have expected Standard Singapore English to be maintained by the salesman throughout the dialogue as a form of consistency in service standards. As such, the salesman was not expected to converge to the language of the customer and was therefore not penalised for diverging from the customer's language.

The use of one code over another by a service provider in a service encounter can be triggered by the following factors: language choice of customers, perceived linguistic affiliation of customers, as well as the perceived linguistic ability of the customer (Callahan, 2007: 16). Of the three factors, participants seemed to have placed greater emphasis on the latter two as their presumed reasons for the salesman's convergence of language. Notably, language convergence can sometimes be mistaken as an act of patronising or ridicule, especially when faulty membership is assigned (Platt & Weber, 1984). In other words, participants may have interpreted the salesman's language convergence as an implicit signal

of the salesman's categorisation of the customer as a less-fluent speaker of the language (i.e. Standard Singapore English) spoken by the salesman himself. The salesman's convergence to the language of the speaker may then be viewed as insulting the customer's level of Standard Singapore English comprehension. This could possibly account for the lower ratings awarded when the salesman converged to the language of the customer.

Evidence from Callahan's (2006) and See's (2010) studies, shows that younger informants aged below thirty and in their early twenties respectively displayed higher frequencies of language divergence than older informants. Callahan (2006: 46) cites youths' greater psychosocial needs to establish boundaries and cultural identities, as well as a higher frequency of English used among youths in the United States as possible reasons to account for the trend observed in her study. Meanwhile, See (2010) suggests that the age of the customer (i.e. the experimenter herself in her early twenties at the point of conducting the study) may have led salespersons to draw assumptions about a customer's linguistic preference and proficiency, thereby resulting in language divergence by younger informants in her study. Although participants aged 18 to 35 years old were targeted for this study, the majority of them were in their early twenties. The participants' age might then be a possible factor in determining whether language divergence is perceived favourably. The more favourable ratings awarded to the salesman when he/she diverged is perhaps an indication of Singaporean youths' strong desire to not conform with the conventional role of the salesman being in a lower power status than the customer.

Apart from the roles of the speakers, the deviation in the trend obtained from the comparison of Variations B and D suggests that the language that a speaker diverges to may affect whether language divergence is perceived positively or negatively. In variation B, the customer diverges to Singapore Colloquial English and Standard Singapore English respectively on the two counts of language divergence. On the other hand in variation D, there is only one count of language divergence towards Singapore Colloquial English. Unlike the general trend of the customer receiving more negative evaluations when diverging as compared to converging, the comparison of results between variations B and D shows that the customer is rated more favourably when he/she diverged in variation B. This may be attributed to the different socio-cultural status commonly associated with Standard Singapore English and Singapore Colloquial English. As reported by Cavallaro and Ng (2009), local tertiary students appear to favour users of Standard Singapore English, a language which is regarded with higher prestige and status. Thus, in the event of the customer diverging from the language of the salesman, more positive ratings would be received when he/she diverges to a language of higher status (i.e. Standard Singapore English) as compared to one of a lower status (i.e. Singapore Colloquial English). During service encounters, impression management is a critical determinant of customer satisfaction, which is in turn related to business benefits (Grandey et al. 2005). This study would be of interest to local service providers as it highlights how the language choice of a service provider may affect the impressions that customers form, thereby relating to the amount of customer satisfaction achieved. This study may provide insight on the criteria for the hiring and training of salesperson in business settings in order for local service providers to portray their desired social images to their valued customers.

Several limitations exist in this study. Despite the attempt at using a common public setting such as a sales encounter for the investigation of speech accommodation occurring between individuals, the findings obtained from this narrow scope of study may not be indicative of the general Standard Singapore English-Singapore Colloquial English speech

accommodation situation in daily interactions occurring in various local settings. Furthermore, only four variations of stimulus dialogue expected to yield more significant results were employed in this study. A more comprehensive overview of the Standard Singapore English-Singapore Colloquial English speech accommodation situation in Singapore could be obtained by sampling a larger population consisting of a wider demographic range, especially at different age groups.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the speech accommodation across Standard Singapore English-Singapore Colloquial English dialogues relevant to daily interactions in Singapore. The results of this research suggest that Singaporeans are generally responsive to role-related language convergence and divergence exhibited in Standard Singapore English-Singapore Colloquial English dialogues. The perceptions seem to be affected by the language a speaker diverges to, instead of the act of language divergence itself. The higher socio-cultural status of Standard Singapore English compared to Singapore Colloquial English points to a possible explanation for the more positive ratings received when the speakers diverged to Standard Singapore English as compared to Singapore Colloquial English. In particular, the salesman was rated more favourably when he diverged from the Singapore Colloquial English used by the customer as compared to when the customer diverged to the language of the salesman. This might be due to participants' interpretation of the salesman's language convergence as an act of degrading the customer's language ability and as a lack of consistency in service standards.

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NOTE

1. The Audacity application can be downloaded from: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

APPENDIX

English Script

Turn 1/ Salesperson: Good morning, how may I help you? Are you looking for anything specific?

Turn 2/ Customer: I'm looking for a pair of white or red coloured shorts. Do these shorts come in any other colours?

Turn 3/ Salesperson: I'm sorry, these shorts only come in black or brown. Maybe you would like to try other designs?

Turn 4/ Customer: Ok, do you have a size M for that pair of shorts?

Turn 5/ Salesperson: Please give me a moment, I'll check.

Singlish Script

Turn 1/ Salesperson: Good Morning! Anything you want? Turn 2/ Customer: Uhhh, I want to buy shorts, red or white one also can. Got other colours anot?

- Turn 3/ Salesperson: Eh paiseh, only got black or brown colour. Other designs can?
 Turn 4/ Customer: Liddat ar . . . Got M size for that one?
 Turn 5/ Salesperson: Wait ah . . . I go check.

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