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Examining my own Codeswitching practices

Chinese and English

In my family, English is associated with young people, progress, and modernity while Chinese is a language of tradition. One key observation in language use is that my mother would speak in Chinese, and my sister and I would reply in English. A conversation could unravel, as both sides understand each other but still stick to their comfort languages in communication.

[L9-L17] My sister first joined the conversation using inter-sentential codeswitching by saying “Yes” in Chinese before continuing the conversation entirely in English. In the same conversation, my mother was speaking primarily in Chinese but used word-level intra-sentential codeswitching to English.

Then, whether a code is marked depends not on the situation, but the speaker. For my sister, the unmarked matrix code was English. Codeswitching to the marked embedded language of Chinese served the social purpose of connecting with my mother. However, since she is not as fluent in Chinese, she reverted to using English for the rest of the conversation for the cognitive purpose of being able to better express her thoughts.

On the other hand, I posit that my mother and aunt used the unmarked code Chinese not out of a cognitive need but rather a cultural desire to preserve the language tradition.

[L63] My mother used English words to connect the sentence clauses together, suggesting that she was structuring the thought process in English. However, there were many instances of word-level codeswitching to Chinese. This behaviour implies that there was a conscious effort to simultaneously codeswitch to Chinese lexical terms even when the sentence was crafted using English grammar.

[L82-L85] My aunt was initially talking to my cousin. However, my mother interrupted the conversation to share about how to pronounce a Chinese word. She spoke to my aunt in Chinese, but in a way where the conversation was not directed at my aunt only but for

everyone in the room to hear. This interjection could be due to my mother's desire to introduce more Chinese to the conversation, especially since my cousin showed difficulty in understanding a Chinese phrase earlier [L78].

Despite this traditional valuation of using Chinese, my mother and aunt would codeswitch to English to accommodate the language preferences of the younger generation. These instances of situational codeswitching to English occurred when they were inviting a response from us.

[L71] My mother asked my cousin about her school. In the first part, she was thinking to herself aloud in Chinese. Then, when directing a question at my cousin, she used English to accommodate my cousin. However, in the last part of her monologue, she metaphorically codeswitched back to Chinese to sound more assertive when reprimanding my cousin for not responding to her.

[L80] Similarly, my aunt lightly reprimanded my cousin in Chinese, before codeswitching to English to sound more friendly and invite her to respond.

However, my mother's codeswitching to English was not entirely a social act, but also a functional one. When operating the oven, she used many English terms like "degree" [L9], "turn" [L11] and "stop" [L11] and "set" [L39]. Even though my mother did not have a lexical gap, household items in Singapore are commonly marketed in English. This marketing means she could be mentally operating the oven in English, making it cognitively easier to codeswitch to English. This codeswitch is one done out of convenience that to convey any meaning; it is more habitual than strategic.

The preference for Chinese over English was also present in my father's speech patterns. When speaking with my mother, my father exclusively used Chinese [L40, L50]. However, he made sentence-level codeswitching to English when conversing with my sister and I [L7, L43, L50].

[L43] However, he was not always successful in expressing his thoughts in English, which cut off his participation in the conversations. In this utterance, we can see the linguistic interference of his L1 (Chinese). He was doing a word-for-word translation from a Chinese sentence to an English sentence, preserving Chinese grammar but using English words.

Nevertheless, his lack of fluency in English also made any effort to codeswitch to English meaningful. The codeswitch (and not the new code) represented his willingness to cross out of his comfort language. This humbling persona juxtaposes starkly against his usual stern and patriarchal mannerism when speaking in Chinese.

[L40] My father asserted himself, as he asked my mother if she wanted to take a spoon for him. While phrased as a question, the utterance was closer to a passive-aggressive demand.

In this situation, the codeswitch was meaningful because my family does not see my father as a legitimate producer of English. However, should his English ability improve over time due to language shift, then the meaning in the codeswitch could fa

Different registers of English

While I spoke entirely in English, I codeswitched between different registers of English. I metaphorically codeswitched to a more informal and Singlish-like tone to take on a more approachable and friendly persona.

[L28-L39] When I first joined the meal in L31, I started off with a light-hearted Singlish opening.

[L47-L49] I was upset about the pineapples and wanted to throw them away. Here, I expressed my unhappiness by using more formal and distancing English. However, I did not want to appear rude or willful, so I explained my actions in the next sentence by codeswitching to a more informal register.

In the same way, my sister codeswitched to a more formal register of English and used longer sentences to assert dominance. A more formal register of English became a “we” code that the young could understand, alienating users of the “they” code of informal English.

[L18] My sister was annoyed at my mother taking very long with the oven. From a more casual conversation where she spoke in Chinese and more light-hearted English [L9-L17], she suddenly used a full English sentence.

[L46] My sister was annoyed when my father made a joke about putting chicken in the oven. She started a long monologue in English, which my father already expressed difficulty in earlier [L43].

Codeswitching to a more formal register of English re-keyed the situation to place my sister in a position of power in the conversation. However, not all her uses of a more formal register of English were meant to express disapproval. For instance, when conversing with me [L54-L59], we knew our preferred language was English. This preference defined the new unmarked code to be English.

Singlish

Besides the primary languages of English and Chinese, our family conversation featured very small amounts of borrowing of Singlish terms.

The Singlish terms were mostly uttered by my mother. Examples include “sekali” [L8], “chaota” [L8], “balik” [L27]. These words had a more cognitive function because they expressed their meanings more efficiently than using English or Chinese. Furthermore, there may not even be conversational equivalents of these terms in English and Chinese, as in the case of “balik”.

However, these words did not feature prominently in the entirety of the conversation because our household does not usually use Singlish terms. Nevertheless, when there was a topic around the words, then there was reciprocation in using the words and even in using Singlish mannerisms.

[L50-L51] My father first talked about wanting to scrape off the burnt parts of the pizza. I then offered to help him eat the burnt parts to not waste the food. However, I did not just reciprocate the use of the word “chaota”. I also codeswitched to Singlish grammar, and said I would eat the “chaota”. Even though “chaota” is normally used as an adjective, I adopted Singlish mannerisms and used it as a noun.

[L53] In this open state of talk, my sister attempted to mix “chaota” with its westernised pronunciation, singing it as “chaoda” in a mocking way. Here, she could be satirising my previous use of the word “chaota” as a noun.

Cantonese

Lastly, our family conversations feature very small amounts of Cantonese. The Cantonese parts are mostly family names we have for each other, such as “father”, “sister” and “aunt”. For me, they are used as a borrowed term rather than a codeswitch since Cantonese is only used in this exclusive manner.

However, my mother usually speaks Cantonese to her friends and our relatives. Cantonese for her invokes a sense of nostalgia and family. She very rarely speaks Cantonese in my nuclear family, but very surprisingly used a Cantonese word in this conversation.

[L65] She used the Cantonese word “mou”, which means “don’t have”. Unlike the other Cantonese words in the conversation, this word does not exist in Chinese.

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Seeing the situation invoked a motherly persona to show concern for my sister. This scene then triggered memories of her own childhood and how her mother would speak to her in Cantonese. The change in persona induced a change in code, and my mother used the Cantonese word “mou”. However, she was still aware that we would not understand Cantonese well, so she used the Cantonese sentence with Chinese vocabulary.

| Legend: Chinese English/ Singlish Borrowed Singlish words Cantonese | | |
|---|--------|--|
| [Mum just came back from the supermarket and is heating the instant pizza.] | | |
| 1 | Mum | 你吃饱了吗? (<i>Have you eaten?</i>) |
| 2 | Me | Ah. (<i>Yes.</i>) What happen? |
| 3 | Mum | 没有 la 我不会用而已嘛 (<i>It's nothing, I just don't know how to use it [the oven].</i>) |
| 4 | Me | Orh. Ask 妹妹 (<i>younger sister</i>) |
| [The oven timer rings.] | | |
| 5 | Mum | 我 set 我 set. 七分钟了。还没有好 leh 他讲 brown ma, 还没有 brown. (<i>I was the one who set the timer! It's already 7 minutes. But it seems like it's not done. He [the instructions] says brown, but it's not yet brown.</i>) |
| 6 | Sister | How you see one?! |
| 7 | Father | Can see can see. |
| 8 | Mum | 我拿出来了。Sekali 等一下 chaota 死掉。等一下弄到 chaota 全部死掉 (<i>I took it out already. What if it burns and dies later? When it's burnt everything dies.</i>) |
| [After awhile, Mum heats a second pizza.] | | |
| 9 | Mum | 他没有讲 degree. (<i>He [the instructions] didn't say the degree.</i>) [Examines oven] 没有声音 (<i>There is no sound.</i>) |
| 10 | Sister | 有啊 (<i>Yes there is.</i>) |
| 11 | Mum | 刚才就是 turn turn turn, then suddenly 没有灯黑去 then 我就 stop 掉他。 (<i>Earlier on I was turning the knob and suddenly the lights went out so I stopped the oven.</i>) |
| 12 | Sister | What's this for? [holds up pizza cutter] |
| 13 | Mum | Orh neh, 那个刀。 (<i>Oh it's the knife.</i>) [Mimic pizza cutting] 我刚刚切比较容易 (<i>I was using it to cut earlier and it was easier.</i>) |
| 14 | Sister | oooooh, How you keep? [closes pizza cutter] |
| 15 | Mum | Erm harlor, 就是这样 lor. [gibberish] I don't know how to open. Flip flip flip 他在旁边这样 lor. 我也不懂是什么。 (<i>Yes just like this. I'm not sure how to open it again. Maybe it's something on the side. I don't know what it is.</i>) |
| 16 | Sister | Sharp or not? (<i>Is it sharp?</i>) [she tries to use the pizza cutter on her own hand] |
| 17 | Mum | Ey! 我不知道不要玩 la 你吓死人这样 roll. 以前给阿姨觉得比较好的。 (<i>Hey I don't know! Don't play with it! You're scaring people to death by rolling it like this. In the past I gave one to aunt and it felt better.</i>) |
| [Mum checks oven.] | | |
| 18 | Sister | It's running. Relaaax. You need to wait another 10 minutes. |
| 19 | Mum | 现在没有声音。刚才有声音。 (<i>There is no sound now. There was sound earlier on.</i>) |
| 20 | Sister | 有啊 (<i>Yes there is.</i>) |
| 21 | Mum | 没有, 刚才 mmm 现在没有。很小声 (<i>No, earlier there was humming noises but now there isn't. It's very soft.</i>) |
| 22 | Sister | Cos' it's different mode. Where's the box? [grabs box to read] 200 to 220 degrees. |
| 23 | Mum | Huh! 有放 degree ah? 没有看到 leh (<i>There is degree on the box? I didn't see it.</i>) |
| 24 | Sister | Bake for 9 to 11 minutes |
| 25 | Mum | Oh 是这个 leh [points to box] (<i>No, I read this part of the instruction instead.</i>) |
| 26 | Sister | Ours is oven! Oven toaster is 9 to 11. 这个是我们以前的 microwave (<i>This is for microwaves like the one we had last time.</i>) |
| 27 | Mum | Orh sorry 我不懂啊。呢个是什么啊? (<i>Oh I didn't know. Then what is it?</i>) balik 那个名字叫什么啊? (<i>Wait. What is that called?</i>) convention oven ah? 我们以前那个是 convention oven? (<i>Is that what we had last time?</i>) |
| [They continue to talk. The pizza is done and they make another.] | | |

| | | |
|---|--------|--|
| 28 | Mum | 难得你爸爸想吃 pizza leh. 他自己还要买的 leh <i>(It's rare that your father wants to eat pizza. He even wanted to buy it himself.)</i> |
| 29 | Sister | Ya lor I surprise. |
| 30 | Mum | 来先吃这个 <i>(Come and eat this [pizza] first.)</i> |
| 31 | Me | We eat this before is it? |
| 32 | Sister | Last time we buy before |
| 33 | Me | So small sia |
| 34 | Mum | 不够吃啊? <i>(Is there not enough to eat?)</i> |
| 35 | Me | No it's very small leh did you not see |
| [My mum and sister continue talking about how to get the pizza out the oven. I walk away.] | | |
| 36 | Mum | [to Father] 你的女儿听到我, 问我 what happen, 我说我不会按, 一直按、stop、按、stop <i>(Your daughter heard me and asked me what happened. I said I didn't know how to use the oven. I kept pressing buttons to start and stop the oven.)</i> |
| 37 | Sister | I don't think she eat. [referring to the pizza and me] |
| 38 | Mum | Huh? 我 order crab 了。四点到七点送来。 <i>(I have ordered crab. It will be delivered anytime between 4pm and 7pm).</i> |
| [They continue to talk about the price of the crab my mum had ordered online. My dad makes another pizza and learns the functions of the oven.] | | |
| 39 | Mum | [to Father] 你要你可以 set. Neh... 我们有一个 turn。他们 set 上下的。可以转的 la <i>(You can adjust the settings as you need. Look, there is this knob. You can set up or down, and it can be turned.)</i> |
| 40 | Father | 两个都要的 meh? 上下都要啊? <i>(Must you have both? Both up and down?)</i> |
| 41 | Sister | Depends lor if you only choose the top one then the temperature only for the top one |
| 42 | Mum | 他 standard 两百度, then 你自己调。 <i>(The standard setting is 200 degrees. You can adjust it by yourself.)</i> |
| 43 | Father | Why.. why for oven need to for? <i>(What is this oven setting for?)</i> |
| 44 | Sister | See what you make. |
| 45 | Father | See what I making. Later I put the chicken how? |
| 46 | Sister | Erm obviously you will need to top and bottom if not your top is going to get burnt and your 下面 not cooked <i>(the bottom will not be cooked)</i> if you make like 烧肉 <i>(roasted pork)</i> that kind of thing then you want more heat on top then you can just use the one on top. 看你要怎么弄 <i>(It depends on how you want to adjust it.)</i> |
| 47 | Me | Are you eating with your hand? Is it all Hawaiian? Okay I'm going to take out my pineapple. |
| 48 | Sister | [to Me] I know. I told mummy you don't eat it. But she threw it on your plate. |
| 49 | Me | Got eat is got eat but like I am not a fan I don't want waste |
| 50 | Father | [to Mum] 帮我拿一个汤匙要吗 <i>(Do you want to get me a spoon?)</i> [I pass my dad a spoon] [to Me] Nevermind 黄莉 you take away I want er the chaota <i>(You can remove the pineapples I want to use the spoon to remove the burnt parts.)</i> |
| 51 | Me | I can eat the chaota <i>(burnt parts)</i> |
| 52 | Mum | 不要不要! no good <i>(No don't!)</i> |
| 53 | Sister | (singing) Chaoda, two chaoda <i>(Burnt, burnt)</i> |
| 54 | Me | How's the pizza? It looks like biscuit |
| 55 | Sister | It tastes like how it tasted years ago [pause] I don't know whose genius idea to have this for lunch |
| 56 | Me | Ok what! |
| 57 | Sister | It's not enough! |
| 58 | Mum | [to Sister] 难得你讲 not enough eh <i>(It's rare you say that it's not enough.)</i> |

| | | |
|---|--------|--|
| 59 | Sister | No cos normally pizza the crust is very thick, so like that's where you get full from. But this one is so thin. I feel like I'm barely even eating. |
| [We continue the meal, and I get up to get a drink. On the way, I see a packet of chips.] | | |
| 60 | Me | [holding chips] This thing looks expensive |
| 61 | Mum | 不懂 eh, 这个在 Phoon Huat 买的。买了两包我给阿姨一包。她说很好吃 wor. <i>(I don't know. This was bought from Phoon Huat. I bought two packets and gave your aunt one. She says it's really good.)</i> |
| 62 | Me | How much? |
| 63 | Mum | I don't know. 我跟他去走走, after that 在 Bedok 去 shopping ma. <i>(I went out with her and we were at Bedok.)</i> Then after that 她就给我两包。买了 flour 的东西就给我 liao. <i>(Right after she bought flour she gave me two packets.)</i> 应该会贵 lor. Phoon Huat 的东西。只是我不懂他有卖 potato chip la. <i>(It should be expensive. Phoon Huat's items... I just didn't know they sold potato chips.)</i> |
| 64 | Me | I think it's at least seven dollars |
| 65 | Mum | [Seeing my sister pick up food from the table] 肮脏有? <i>(Is it not dirty?)</i> |
| 66 | Me | 妹 <i>(younger sister)</i> go and guess how much? |
| 67 | Sister | I say 6! I guess six dollars thirty-five |
| 68 | Me | For a packet or two? |
| 69 | Sister | One la |
| 70 | Me | [hands my sister a canned drink] Help me open very cold. |
| [After a while, my aunt comes over with my cousins. Jolin is very shy and seldom talks.] | | |
| 71 | Mum | [to Cousins] Next week 谁有上课? <i>(Who has lessons next week?)</i> [Jolin looks at Mum] What time is your school? (to Aunt) 我要带她顶耳洞, 她不要 <i>(I want to take her to pierce her ears but she doesn't want to.)</i> [Jolin stares at Mum] (to Everyone) 没有 la 没有空。十一月...然后 school holiday... 十一月中是吗? <i>(Okay I take that back. She's just not free now. Is the school holiday in mid-November?)</i> [long pause and looks at Jolin] 想这样久 <i>(Taking so long to think.)</i> |
| 72 | Jamie | It's so fast |
| 73 | Mum | 然后 sec 4. 然后这个 [points to Jolin] sec 1 liao <i>(And sec 4. Then this one sec 1.)</i> |
| 74 | Sister | [to Jamie] Do you have to go back for additional lessons during holiday? |
| 75 | Jamie | Ya like Monday ah |
| 76 | Sister | Oh like your holiday start already? |
| 77 | Jamie | Ya. [pointing to brochure] What does this mean? |
| 78 | Aunt | 黄俊杰小组补课。你不会读? <i>(Mr Ng's group tuition. You can't read it?)</i> |
| 79 | Jamie | I know but does it mean like it's only us? |
| 80 | Aunt | Small group la. 小组 ma. 六个人而已。 <i>(Yes it says small group and there will only be six people.)</i> [looks at circular] 为什么只有你们而已? <i>(Why is the class only for the few of you?)</i> The whole week is about Chinese ah? |
| 81 | Jamie | No there is history and all that after O levels |
| [My mum shows my aunt a word in the dictionary] | | |
| 82 | Aunt | 哎哟这个是读甯 ah? <i>(Oh wow this word is read as ning)</i> |
| 83 | Mum | Harlor. 有边读边。 <i>(Yes just read the word based on the way its written)</i> |
| 84 | Aunt | 做么要写到那么 cheem? 这样难写。 <i>(Why make it so complex? Hard to write.)</i> |
| 85 | Mum | Ya lor. Exam 要浪费时间。是美 la <i>(Wasting time in exams. But it's beautiful.)</i> |
| 86 | Jamie | [continuing earlier conversation] That means it's just all of us only and other students don't have to come. So sad but alright. |
| 87 | Aunt | Ya la. That means the teacher is trying to help what. |