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### **Codeswitching Practices of Three Penang Bilinguals**

In this paper, I will examine the codeswitching practices of three bilinguals from Penang, Malaysia. I will argue that these codeswitching practices serve certain social functions, and that we can infer a certain language ideology to be driving these codeswitching practices.

#### **1. PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND**

The three participants whose codeswitching behaviour is examined, are all bilinguals from Penang, Malaysia who are fluent in both Chinese and English. They also have a certain level of fluency in Malay, and dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese. Additionally, all 3 participants have similar educational backgrounds, and moved to Singapore in 2016 to further their studies in NUS.

#### **2. DATA COLLECTION**

The conversational data comes from two video recordings. The first video recording involves an informal, face-to-face conversation with me, and participants LS and WS. The second video recording involves another informal, face-to-face conversation with only me and participant JY.

### 3. SOCIAL PURPOSE OF CODESWITCHING

#### 3.1 SITUATIONAL CODESWITCHING

Participants were initially under the impression that they were being interviewed for an academic project. This is true, however, this has lead to participants LS and WS to speak only in English for the first 13 minutes of the video. This phenomena of English being the ‘proper’ language is more obvious in the second video, where an interesting conversation about the ‘marked’ language goes as follows:

(1)

1 Walter: The first question is, how would you describe your socioeconomic background compared to the average Singaporean student... like, uh, like do you feel like 你要做的东西 比较难 or 比较贵-

(The first question is, how would you describe your socioeconomic background compared to the average Singaporean student... like, uh, like do you feel like **it is more difficult to do the things you want or it's more expensive-**)

2 JY : Hah, can speak Chinese meh?

3 Walter: Ya, ya. No no, as in, like, speak naturally. Cause like, like, for, for, I, I feel like most-

4 JY: Never mind I speak English la

5 Walter: No no no English is, you don't normally speak English right

6 JY: Oh yeah. Half half lo

7 Walter: Half half la, 随便 la, up to you  
(Half half la, **doesn't matter** la, up to you)

8 JY: When I speak to you is half half la

In line 1, I begin by asking my first question and codeswitching halfway (on purpose) to Chinese. Interestingly, participant JY notices this and in line 2, explicitly inquires about the appropriateness of the usage of Chinese in such a setting.

There is a possible ideology at play here: For academic settings, English is the appropriate language or code. This is more obvious in line 3, where participant JY says that he is fine with speaking in English. Implicit here is that participant JY is concerned that using Chinese might cause my data to be rejected by the university or my professor.

In line 6, JY also mentions that for more informal settings (day-to-day conversation), it is more normal for him to speak in ‘half Chinese and half English’. That is, codeswitching between Chinese and English codes is very common when speaking informally to other fellow Malaysians. This is more obvious in the following example with participants LS and WS:

(2)

1 LS: So, 在Malaysia没有 experience过 hall life 啦 没有住过宿舍啦。And then like 这里住宿舍, okay, 给我给一点 comparison with local uni 的宿舍跟这边的宿舍。我觉得这里的宿舍比较 shag. 因为我看了照片啦, 朋友在宿舍。他们有一点events but 他们 actually 是参他们的 uni 的 CCA 然后如果有, like, achievement 就可以住在宿舍。他们的, 自己宿舍没有所有的CCA. But 他们的一些宿舍有搞一些event也是啦。呢你每次看那些照片啊。他们穿一些coat很美啊。Like, 做pose and then 放 like, 什么 Chinese, 什么 Mid Autumn Festival bla bla bla and then like 叫大家一起来那种东西。

(So, in Malaysia **never** experience **before** hall life **la never lived in a hall la**. And then like **living in halls here**, okay, **to give a small** comparison with local uni **hall and the hall here**. I feel that **hall life here is more** shag. **Because when I look at pictures of my friends in their halls back home**. They have events but **they actually are joining their uni's CCA and then if they have any**, like, achievement, **they can stay in their hall**. **Their halls don't have any of their own CCA**. But **their halls also do organize some event of their own**. You know every time you look at their pictures. They wear those coat **that looks nice**. Like, **do** pose and then **put** like, **what** Chinese, **what** Mid Autumn Festival bla bla bla and then like **call everyone to join that kinda thing**)

2 WS: But 他们的 CCA 很 limited as in 他们会参加 CCA 啦。But, 像我在USM 的朋友right, 他们也 quite, 有很多, 那种, activities啦, like, debate, then go let's say cultural exchange to thailand, then actually 他们的activity是quite fun 的啦 but 也不能讲他们的不 shag 啦。

(But **their CCA is limited as in they will join CCA la. But, like my USM friends right, they are quite, have a lot of, those, activities la, like debate, then go let's say cultural exchange to thailand, then actually their activity is quite fun la but we can't say that their isn't shag la**)

3 LS : 也是有很多工作  
(**they also have a lot of work**)

4 WS : 也是有很多东西做啦  
(**they also have a lot of things to do la**)

5 LS : But, 就是不懂为什么这里读做了很不爽。Especially AAC.  
(But, **what I don't understand is why it's not as nice here. Especially AAC**)

6 WS : 可能, 可能 就是讲你join的 CCA 比较 那种 functional and serious 的。Not like, 不是那种比较文化类型culture。像你跟他讲他们每次都去那种华文, 华文节。那种都是 for fun only 吗。现在你做 let's say, green comm, 你也要去种树。你叫一个 uni student 去种树你当然不爽咯。

(**Maybe, maybe because you join those CCA that are more functional and serious. Not like, not like those with more cultural type culture. Like you told them that they always go to those chinese, chinese events. Those are for fun only ma. Now you are doing let's say, green comm, you have to plant trees. You ask a uni student to plant trees of course not nice lo**)

Immediately obvious here is that there are a lot of codeswitchings going on between Chinese and English, and that the participants are very comfortable with these codeswitchings. What we are looking at seems similar to the integrated bilingualism norm described by Ag and Jorgensen (2012) in their paper about language ideologies. That is, participants LS and WS are able to use features from Chinese or English in the same production when appropriate.

What are the features that they are selecting and strategically using? It is interesting that many of the organisations or events associated with academic settings (e.g. in university) are mentioned using English words rather than Chinese words. For example, words such as ‘hall life’, ‘local uni’, ‘events’, ‘CCA’, ‘Mid Autumn Festival’, ‘Cultural Exchange to Thailand’ and ‘green comm’. Note that this seems to be a motivated switch rather than a lexical gap as the participants not only claim to be more fluent in Chinese, but they also know the ‘Chinese version’ of those words when prompted. If they know the Chinese words that mean the same thing, and they also claim to be more fluent in Chinese, why codeswitch at all? What sort of meanings are they bringing in when using English words to describe these things?

I argue that the language ideology “English is the appropriate code for academic settings in Singapore” is motivating these codeswitchings. Ag and Jorgensen (2012) talks about how ideologies not only associate values with linguistic features, but also construct relations between linguistic features and languages. In this case, academic values are being associated with the linguistic features that are tied to English. On this point, I am on the same page as Ag and Jorgensen (2012) in my belief that the participants are not really using “English”, but rather, they use linguistic features which are associated with “English”. This ideology is used to motivate extended normativity with respect to language practices even outside of academic settings, as we have seen. This is even more obvious in one example of participant WS talking about his midterm paper:

(3)

1        WS : Actually 我quite chill 的 then, 那种 senior 讲那个 midterm 会很难 then 分数 expected 就是 median 大概就在, mean啊 mean在 one quarter of the total mark. Then, then, “eh, why ah”

(Actually, **I am** quite chill **one** then, **that** senior **told me that** midterm **will be very hard** then **the marks** expected **is the** median **roughly at**, mean **ah** mean **at** one quarter of the total mark. Then, then, “eh, why ah”)

Here, WS uses English terms to describe things that are very obviously related to an academic setting such as, ‘senior’, ‘midterm’, ‘median’, ‘mean’, and ‘one quarter of the total mark’.

It is also interesting to look at the codeswitch to Chinese from when they were initially speaking in ‘purely’ English. In both videos, participants only switched to speaking in Chinese when they realized that the setting is an informal one. Now, an important question is, how do we know that the situation determines the proper code, rather than the codeswitching redefining the situation? We can observe this from my failed attempts at getting participants LS and WS to codeswitch:

(4)

1       Walter: The first question is, how would you describe your socioeconomic background compared to the average Singaporean student... like, do you feel like 你要做的东西很难做因为你 like 没有钱 or something like that, you know what I mean?  
(The first question is, how would you describe your socioeconomic background compared to the average Singaporean student... like, do you feel like **the things you want to do are more difficult to do because you like have not a lot of money** or something like that, you know what I mean?)

2       LS: Socioeconomic background?

3       Walter: Yeah socioeconomic background

4       LS: Uh, does my nationality-

5       Walter: Yeah as a Malaysian la

6       LS: Ok

7 Walter: Or a penangite, whatever you identify as

8 LS: So, as I come from Malaysia, I would say that, uh, I, my spending power is quite limited so I can't buy stuff. I can't buy anything that I want. Usually when I go out with my friends I will try to buy like, to save money

Despite my intentional codeswitch to Chinese, participants LS and WS did not codeswitch to Chinese at all, and only started codeswitching when I explicitly redefined the situation. Thus, it seems that it is the situation that determines the proper code, at least, for these Malaysian participants.

### 3.2 EMOTIONS

Participants LS and WS also seem to codeswitch when trying to express certain 'emotions'. For example:

(5)

1 LS : Like for example 我, actually 我前天我应该有跟你讲过。我那个 Japanese 的 project. Then 我很爽的是, 我问那个学生, 他, like, 觉得 NUS 很亮, like, 他觉得 NUS 很好应为你去外面找工的时候他们都一直要拉 NUS 的 student (Like for example **I, actually I should have told you already the other day. My Japanese project. Then the thing that I like is, I ask that student, he, like, feels that NUS is really bright, like, he feels that NUS is really good because if you go outside and look for a job they will try to get an NUS student**)

2 WS: You sure or not?

3 LS : 我听他这样子讲啦。At least in Japan 啦。  
(**That's what I heard him say la. At least in Japan la**)

4 WS: *Mi gui* 啦  
(hokkien for "What nonsense is this")

5 LS: 我听了就觉得哇很爽哦。应为 at least for 日本 他们很喜欢拿 NUS 的学生。

(When I heard it I felt really good. Because at least for **japan** they really want to get NUS students)

In lines 2 and 4, we see participant WS codeswitching to English and Hokkien to express a sort of disbelief in what LS is saying. In examples (2) and (3), we also see participants LS and WS codeswitching to English to express emotions like chill and shag. Do they feel different when speaking in different languages?

Participants LS and WS describe themselves as feeling the same when speaking in either Chinese or English. For example:

(6)

Walter: Do you feel pressured to act or like speak in certain ways in Singapore compared to in your hometown like Penang? Or maybe in Penang you feel 比较 natural, you know what I mean?

(Do you feel pressured to act or like speak in certain ways in Singapore compared to in your hometown like Penang? Or maybe in Penang you feel **more** natural, you know what I mean?)

LS: Um

Walter: 这边会比较 different 吗? Like weird  
(Here is it **more** different **ma**? Like weird)

LS: Different in terms of the language we speak like, in Penang, I speak Chinese. I rarely speak English with my parents. In Singapore, I would say that the difference is just only the language. Aside from that, I'm still me, I still speak the way that I speak

Walter: Mmm. 你 leh?  
(Mmm. **You** leh?)

WS: I think it's about the same la. Because like the cultural is not too different and then uhh, so just the language lo



If they don't feel different, it's possible that the codeswitching here is to evoke a culture-specific conceptual representation of their emotion (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2012). That is, they feel the same, however, the preference for which word to use is possibly driven by what seems most appropriate in representing the feeling that they are trying to convey. What sort of culture are these emotions specific to? Possibly academic culture, and we can relate this with the ideology we have inferred earlier, "English is the appropriate code for academic settings in Singapore". I argue that the preference to codeswitch to English emotion terms such as 'shag' and 'chill' is ideologically driven. That is, participants LS and WS believe that 'pure' English should be spoken in academic settings in Singapore, and thus, have become habituated to associate those words with how they are feeling, rather than, say, other Chinese emotion terms.

English (or more precisely, Singlish) terms such as 'shag' and 'chill' are more typical in the scripts of participants LS, WS and JY. Expressions of disbelief, like the ones shown above, are much more uncommon. Additionally, it is difficult to see how codeswitching to express disbelief can be tied to the ideology we have inferred. However, what we have shown here is that, at the very least, emotional concepts seem to be a useful case in studying conceptual transfer from English to Chinese in Malaysian bilinguals.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Codeswitching seems to play an important role in bringing certain meanings in the daily interactions between these bilinguals from Penang and other Malaysians.

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