Social Class, Ethnicity and Language Choice: Language Use in Major Shopping Areas in Singapore

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In multilingual nations such as Singapore, language choice and language use show a remarkable complexity. Not only do aspects of individual multilingualism interact with societal multilingualism but, furthermore, there are many facets to societal multilingualism itself. Code choice is often determined by a number of societal factors, sometimes in hierarchical order, which interact and sometimes counteract one another.

Elsewhere (Platt 1980a) I have made the distinction between an individual's verbal repertoire, i.e., the language varieties of which he or she has an active or passive knowledge and the speech repertoire, which consists of the codes needed in order to function effectively as a member of the speech community. It is quite possible for an individual's own verbal repertoire to contain codes which he or she may not need for everyday activities in the community, e.g., German in Singapore. On the other hand, it is quite possible for his or her speech repertoire not to contain all the codes used in the wider speech community. For example, a Singaporean Chinese may be able to communicate perfectly well without a knowledge of Tamil, although Tamil must be considered as a societal code within the total Singapore speech community. Such a person may use Singapore English and Hokkien for most of his communicative needs as well as some Mandarin, Cantonese and Bazaar Malay. Thus speech repertoires which are "incomplete" in one sense — and within a polyethnic community they often are — can nevertheless be perfectly functional.

I have mentioned earlier that there are many facets to societal multilingualism. One facet is the language-domain relationship, i.e., the code or codes which are used in a particular domain, which I use here in the sense of class or group of related speech situations. Some important domains are, for example, Government, Religion, Education, Family, Friendship and Transactions. The other facet, often linked to domain use, is the status of societal codes, e.g., the more prestigious and public the domain the higher the status of the code or codes which are connected with it (Platt 1977, 1978).

Language use in any society is usually related to the speaker's ethnicity and his or her socio-economic and educational background. And with changing educational policies over decades and changing economic prosperity in a community or nation, the age of the speakers may also play a part in language use. As far as the language user's
background is concerned, the two concepts of the personal verbal repertoire and the societally conditioned speech repertoire often merge, as the one is closely dependent on the other.

In a multilingual nation, there are always codes for intra-group communication, e.g., the Chinese dialects among the Singapore Chinese, as well as inter-group codes used for wider communication. In Singapore, the two main interethnic codes are English and Bazaar Malay (Kuo 1976, 1980, Platt and Weber 1980). I shall discuss the role of Malay in interethnic communication more closely later on. Actually there are three Malay-based codes in Singapore: Malay itself, Bazaar Malay and Baba Malay. Bazaar Malay, a pidginized Malay, was once widely used for interethnic communication. It is now gradually being replaced by Singapore English. Baba Malay, the creole Malay which was the “native” language of the Peranakan Chinese, is still spoken by some older generation Peranakans. Naturally, the three types of Malay are related but nevertheless, Bazaar Malay and Baba Malay differ considerably from Malay (Bahasa Melayu) even in its colloquial form (Lim 1981). It is a pity that the census figures for Singapore often throw them all together, giving a rather skewed and highly exaggerated picture of the use of Malay in Singapore.2

In addition to the various factors mentioned above, I feel that a further factor influences code selection — namely the locality. By locality, I do not mean an abstract concept such as a school for the Education Domain or a government office for the Government Domain but an actual locality which has in itself a certain status in the community, high or low, and certain societal rules and conditions which stipulate, like an unwritten law as it were, the use or at least the preference for a certain code or codes. How these locality or area codes and rules interact with other societal code selection rules determined by the factors I have discussed earlier, and what hierarchy of code selection these area code rules bring forth, seemed worth investigating, particularly with reference to participant class and ethnicity on the one hand and inter- or intra-group communication on the other.

I considered suitable areas for this type of investigation to be some of the major shopping areas. Most of the speech situations in these areas belong to three domains. Some belong to what I have referred to (Platt and Weber 1980) as the Transactions Domain, i.e., buying, selling, and transactions of other types conducted, for example, at the counters of post offices and banks. However, not all exchanges of speech in shopping areas can be classed as transactions. Shoppers, shop assistants, bank tellers, etc. all talk to each other before and after, or even during transactions. These exchanges must be classed as belonging to either the Friendship Domain, taking here colleagues as belonging to this domain, or the Family Domain, i.e., verbal exchanges taking place between members of a family dyad or group.

I chose four major shopping areas in Singapore. By “shopping areas” I do not mean merely a big shopping complex under one roof such as Lucky Plaza, but rather a wide area, which may include a shopping complex and a market but also groups of smaller shops clustering around larger complexes. The following areas were chosen:

A. The Scotts Road Area  
(From the Far Eastern Shopping Centre to C.K. Tang)
B. The Katong Shopping Area  
(including the Katong Shopping Centre and the shops in its vicinity)