

A STUDY OF THE VARIABLE /sh/ IN SINGAPORE MANDARIN

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Singapore has been characterised by its heterogeneous society since its founding in 1819. The influx of Chinese immigrants in subsequent years made them the dominant racial group. In the 1980 census, the Chinese formed 76.9% of the total population of Singapore. The Chinese community in Singapore is a multidialectical one; the 1957 census listed 11 mother tongues spoken by the Chinese. Of these, Hokkien (30 per cent) Teochew (17 per cent) and Cantonese (15.1 per cent) are the predominant dialects. As a result of the relatively larger proportion of Hokkien speakers, Hokkien gradually came to be established as the lingua franca for inter-dialect group communication. Despite the wide-spread usage of Hokkien among the Chinese, Mandarin was made one of the four official languages as Hokkien was considered to be a low language. Mandarin was taught in schools and commonly referred to as the 'mother tongue'. However, the 1957 census indicates that only 0.1 per cent of the Chinese population claimed Mandarin as their mother tongue. Hence, for many Chinese in Singapore Mandarin is in fact a second language.

At this point, it is helpful briefly to discuss the existing Singapore educational policies which indirectly contribute to the cultivation of a distinctive Singapore Mandarin. During the prewar years, the British, then the unchallenged political power in Singapore, saw only English and Malay education as deserving official patronage. Despite the lack of funds, the Chinese community managed to develop both primary and secondary schools and managed to attract the largest enrolment until 1952. The teachers were mainly from Southern China. Hence, there existed a 'compartmentalised system of education' (Gopinathan 1976: 69) with each race pursuing their own private goals. This system strengthened racial and linguistic camps: the Chinese-educated and the English-educated. This system laid the foundations for socio-economic disparity biased favourably towards the English-educated. Among the various educational policies laid down to correct this schism was the bilingual policy which was implemented with increased urgency after the separation. In this policy, a Chinese student who enrolled in an English-medium school had to study a second language which would usually be Mandarin. Similarly, a Chinese student who enrolled in a Chinese-medium school would be taught Mandarin as the first language and English as the second language. The exposure time for both languages was approximately 70 per cent for the first language and 30 per cent for the second language. Because of the uneven exposure time accorded to the two languages, the students from Chinese-medium schools naturally became more competent in Mandarin than their peers from the English-medium schools.

The Southern Chinese dialect background of the Chinese in Singapore and the many educational policies all led to the emergence of a variety of Mandarin which has become increasingly distinct from standard Peking Mandarin. Chen Ching-Yu (1982) has observed the existence of a fifth tone in Singapore Mandarin not found

David Bradley, ed. *Papers in South-East Asian linguistics* No.9: *Language policy, language planning and sociolinguistics in South-East Asia*, 31-37. *Pacific Linguistics*, A-67, 1985.

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in Peking Mandarin. There are also substantial differences in pronunciation, lexicon and syntax; for example, /sh/, /ü/, /r/ and /h/ are all pronounced differently in Singapore.

The intention of this paper¹ is to show that the retroflex /sh/ (all transcriptions are given in Pinyin) in Singapore Mandarin is a linguistic variable, with the retroflex pronunciation reduced as compared to Peking Mandarin for Singapore Mandarin speakers. Retroflexes are absent in all the southern dialects. Consequently, most Singaporean Chinese have considerable difficulty with retroflexes. This factor could have been reinforced by a tradition of teachers who usually do not make a distinction between retroflexes and non-retroflexes in their normal speech. Even when a retroflex is produced by a Singapore Mandarin speaker, the degree of retroflexion will not be as extreme as in Peking Mandarin. /zh/ and /ch/ will also be looked at to reveal environmental constraints on variation in retroflexion. /zh/, /ch/ and /sh/ in Singapore Mandarin have the alternative realisations as alveolars /z/, /c/ and /s/. Sex differences are also studied, as sociolinguistic research has often shown females to use more standard forms than males. It is hypothesised that females will produce more retroflexes than males.

Ten subjects were interviewed, five males and five females. All were Singaporeans and all possess a reasonable level of competence in Mandarin. As varying educational background due to changes in educational policies is a considerable factor in Singapore Mandarin, the subjects are all between 20 and 25 years of age and are all pursuing a tertiary education in Australia. All the subjects have a basically similar socio-economic background, with parents who are businessmen. They could be categorised as middle-class Singaporeans. Therefore, age, nationality and socio-economic background were controlled factors and sex and style of speech were the varying factors.

The interviews were conducted on a modified Labovian method and five styles were elicited. A spoken interview lasting for approximately 20 minutes was recorded and this provided the data for the free speech, Style A/B. Subjects were asked to express their first impressions of Australia and Australians, then they were asked to recount an unforgettable experience. In the next style, Style C, the subjects were asked to read a dialogue between two persons gossiping in a restaurant. The dialogue is used instead of a paragraphed passage to create a relaxed atmosphere and a more spontaneous style of reading. The dialogue contains a high concentration of both variables. The fourth style of speech is elicited by presenting subjects with a word list of the variable under study (Style D₁), minimal pairs (Style D₂) and finally two tongue twisters which will be termed Style D₃. The word list consisted of minimal pairs presented in scrambled order while in Style D₂ they were presented in pairs. To avoid a guessing strategy the order of the presentation of the word that contains the variables is randomised within the minimal pair. Style D₃, the two tongue twisters, has an extremely high concentration of each variable. These five styles were intended to elicit an increasingly formal style of speech. The experimenter tried to provide constant stimuli across the five styles by consciously producing all retroflexes during the interviews. The environment for each interview was kept as constant as possible. All the subjects were naive to the aim of the experiment.

The variables are all coded in Pinyin. The alternative realisations of the variable are classified in the following way:

- (a) (sh - 1) - /sh/
- (b) (sh - 0) - /s/

The figures for (a) and (b) were then converted into percentages. There was also a substantial amount of hypercorrection: Singapore Mandarin speakers frequently use /sh/ in words with /s/ in Peking Mandarin. The instances of hypercorrection were noted and quantified as a percentage of Peking Mandarin /s/. An example of hypercorrection which was noted during the free speech interview when the subject produced /shuǒyǐ/ for /suǒyǐ/ *therefore* and did so for the entire interview. There is, however, no set pattern in the lexical distribution of hypercorrection. One may hazard a guess that it will occur more frequently in less frequent words than in words with high usage frequency as less exposure reduces the opportunities for the speaker to learn the proper pronunciation.

Speaker	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
STYLE	sh s	sh s	sh s	sh s	sh s	sh s	sh s	sh s	sh s	sh s
A/B	86 40	24 0	55 0	11 0	2 0	0 0	0 0	0 0	0 0	0 0
C	93 100	62 65	90 35	68 100	14 0	0 0	0 0	0 0	0 0	21 0
D ₁	75 50	93 88	75 13	50 63	50 50	17 0	0 0	42 38	16 25	17 0
D ₂	80 60	60 60	70 30	50 10	40 30	30 20	0 0	10 60	50 80	50 30
D ₃	83 86	83 100	92 0	75 7	96 7	17 0	46 7	63 29	79 100	25 50

Table 1: Percentages of /sh/ non-reflexion and /s/ retroflexion

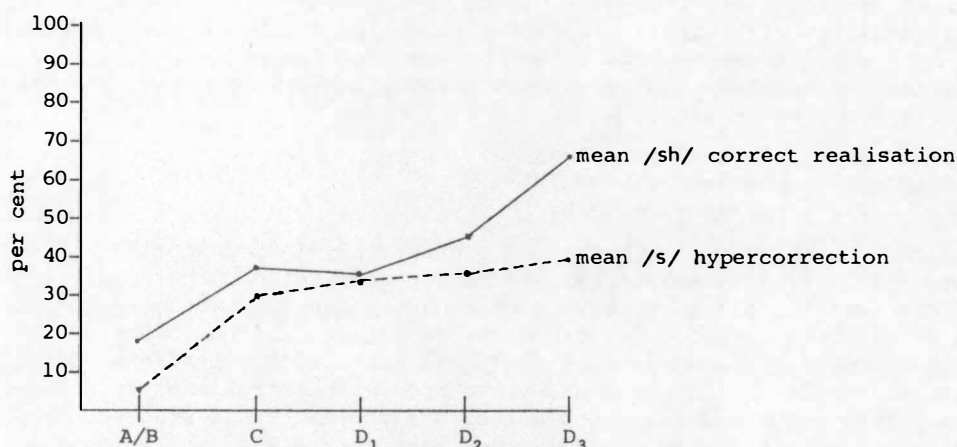


Figure 1: Mean group percentage of the correct realisation of /sh/ and the hypercorrection of /s/

From the results it is evident that the retroflex /sh/ is not very frequent in Singapore Mandarin. However, /sh/ seems to be the retroflex that is most likely to be pronounced in Singapore Mandarin. Out of ten subjects interviewed, only two subjects pronounced the retroflex for /ch/ and /zh/. Even then, the percentage was quite low compared to the percentage of the retroflex pronounced for /sh/.

	sh	zh	ch
Subject 1	95%	62%	17%
Subject 2	90%	0%	41%

Table 2: /sh/, /zh/ and /ch/ variation (per cent retroflex)

This could be due to the more common occurrence of words with /sh/ compared to /zh/ or /ch/. Hence it is unlikely for a speaker of Singapore Mandarin to produce retroflexes for /zh/ and /ch/ if the retroflex is not observed in /sh/ for the same subjects.

The variables are also sensitive to contextual styles as shown in the graph. Increasing formality does elicit more standard (Peking Mandarin) pronunciation. From this experiment it seems that Style D₃ (the tongue twisters) is a more formal context for Mandarin as there was an increase in correct responses. Most of the subjects have not come across the tongue twisters before, therefore familiarity is not a factor. However, tongue twisters usually contain repeated simpler and more frequent words which would be easily recognised by the subjects.

The style shifts in this experiment would indicate that the subjects are aware of the stigma attached to failure to distinguish between retroflexes and non-retroflexes. However, the distinction between these two sounds has not been fully internalised resulting in increased confusion as the contexts become more formal. One subject avoided the stigma by refusing to proceed to Style D₃. Some subjects reacted by producing hypercorrect retroflexes when Peking Mandarin has non-retroflexes. For example:

colour /sè/ realised as /shè/
temple /sì/ realised as /shì/
sour /sì/ realised as /shì/

This tendency to hypercorrect increased consistently in more formal styles; less frequent words were also more likely to be hypercorrected. The hypercorrections are not the same for all subjects. Some subjects hypercorrect more than others and the words hypercorrected vary from one subject to another. One of the subjects pronounced all the words in the minimal pairs with retroflexes despite the fact that only half of the words are pronounced with retroflexes in Peking Mandarin. This hypercorrection could indicate the fact that Singapore Mandarin speakers are not aware which lexical items have retroflexes and which have non-reflexes, but they are aware of the stigma involved.

	male		female	
	sh	s	sh	s
A/B	5	0	30	8
C	19	13	50	47
D ₁	25	40	43	25
D ₂	42	52	46	18
D ₃	69	57	61	20

Table 3: Sex differences in /sh/ non-reflexion and /s/ retroflexion (in percentage)

Sex differences can also be observed in the data. The females produce more retroflexes than the males for style A/B, C, D₁ and D₂. However, at Style D₃, the males produce more retroflexes than the females; moreover this increase is also accompanied by 57 per cent hypercorrection. On the whole, the results indicate a tendency for the males to hypercorrect more than the females; males also show a much greater style shift.

As the subjects come from both English and Chinese education media, there was an opportunity to see if education medium has any effect on the instances of retroflexes observed. As it turned out, those from the English medium use more retroflexes than those from the Chinese medium. This could be due to the fact that the English-medium educated subjects rarely speak Mandarin and hence are more conscious of the standard language. Speakers from both education media hypercorrect and there is no significant difference in their percentage of hypercorrection.

The cross-over by the males over the females at style D₃ is an interesting phenomenon. Labov (1972:117) mentioned that a wide range of stylistic variation and cross-over patterns are an indication of linguistic insecurity for the lower-middle class in New York, and others have shown that this pattern occurs in many cities. Both male and female speakers of Singapore Mandarin showed a substantial style shift, especially the group which shows a distinct cross-over pattern. This might indicate that the male speakers of Singapore Mandarin are more linguistically insecure than the female speakers. Their higher proportion of hypercorrection could also indicate this tendency. It would be interesting to do an accurate measure of linguistic attitudes for speakers of Singapore Mandarin.

There is also an attitude factor involved in the study of retroflexes in Singapore Mandarin. Many Singaporeans have expressed the opinion that the usage of retroflexes is an undesirable affectation. One subject actually refused to co-operate with the tongue twister task. This subject thinks that speaking with retroflexes is an attempt to speak like a foreigner, hence a very 'snobbish' way of talking. There are yet others who though not so extreme in their point of view still prefer to use fewer retroflexes whenever possible as they feel that it is more natural and blends in better with the local environment. Paradoxically, despite their convictions, there are some subjects who are also very aware of the stigma involved when a retroflex is left out which may account for the style shifts in these data.

In actual fact, the attitude factor which is highly significant is not as simple as it seems to be. It is complexly interwoven with the interlocutor effect. From the experimenter's observation, it has been noted that Singapore Mandarin speakers tend to use more retroflexes when speaking to a Peking Mandarin speaker. The subjects have also reported similar observations themselves, saying that in such a situation, they actually feel pressurised into producing retroflexes. When a Singaporean speaks to another Singaporean in a non-formal conversational situation, relatively fewer retroflexes are used. In this experiment, the Singapore Mandarin interviewer deliberately used retroflexes during the interviews. Several subjects did comment on this fact. In this case, the interlocutor-interviewer effect could have induced a higher percentage of retroflexes.

As educational policies change, attitudes change as well. The Ministry of Education felt that the bilingual program was not as successful as it should have been for the Chinese community as most of them speak a dialect as mother tongue and hence are functionally learning two second languages (that is, English and Mandarin) when they go to school. This is cited as a reason for their poor performance in school. In a bid to remedy this situation, the Prime Minister, Mr Lee launched the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' in 1979. With that event, the scenario has been slightly altered. The usage of Mandarin was intensively promoted in both the public and private sectors. Through the media, press and education, great pains have been taken to encourage competent usage of Mandarin instead of dialects. Lessons in Pinyin, which had previously been neglected, have now been emphasised in the school syllabus. Much attention was drawn to the standard pronunciation of words with the introduction of Pinyin. This also saw the names of the school-going population changed to Pinyin instead of their dialect versions. For example, Ng Kong Leong in Pinyin becomes Huáng Jǐng-Lóng. All this might pave the way for a new generation of Singaporean speakers with a dialect not characterised by the variation in the retroflex and non-retroflex distinction.

Apart from the retroflexes, this study also turned up other interesting findings. The variable /ü/ was also investigated; examples were drawn primarily from the syllable /yü/ with various tones. It was found that the distinction between the rounded high front vowel and the unrounded high front vowel which is strictly maintained in Peking Mandarin is not completely distinguished in Singapore Mandarin. These pairs of words were some of the many examples in the data that were confirmed:

/yüè/	<i>moon</i>	and	/yè/	<i>night</i>
/yüàn/	<i>wish</i>	and	/yàn/	<i>tired</i>
/yǔ/	<i>fish</i>	and	/yí/	<i>suspect</i>
/qū/	<i>go</i>	and	/qì/	<i>angry</i>

There were several instances where the lip rounding was either absent or reduced in Singapore Mandarin. There was also increasing hypercorrection of /yí/ to /yü/ with increasing formality in styles. This shows a similar pattern of style shift to the /sh/ variable. The only difference is that this variable seems more well-learned by the Singaporeans as there was a relatively higher percentage of usage like that of Peking Mandarin.

Another difference from Peking Mandarin is that the rhotic /r/ in words such as /rán/ *correct*, /rè/ *hot*, /rì/ *sun*, /ruò/ *like* is often realised as an approximant in Singapore Mandarin, unlike the fricative of Peking Mandarin.

Chen-Ching Li (1982) pointed out several features of Taiwanese Mandarin which would similarly be conceived as deviant from Peking Mandarin. Her study

on trends and developments in Taiwanese Mandarin has also found that retroflexes have gradually merged with alveolars. The findings of the present study indicate that Singapore Mandarin seems to show a similar trend. The variation in this study is also similar to variation in other language situations showing style shift, sex differences and hypercorrections. The fusion of dialect interference, education policies and a complex pattern of attitudes have thus created a distinctive variety of Mandarin spoken in Singapore.

NOTE

1. This is a revised version of a paper for the sociolinguistics course at LaTrobe University in 1983.

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