Singapore Mandarin: Its Positioning, Internal Structure and Corpus Planning

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Abstract: This paper investigates the positioning of the Chinese language used in Singapore in the context of world languages, identifies the different registers of usage, and evaluates the trend of its corpus planning. Singapore Mandarin is similar to *Putonghua* (Standard Chinese) in every linguistic aspect, though it has some unique features in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. It should be seen as a variety of Modern Chinese, rather than nonstandard Chinese. Singapore Mandarin can be further divided into two subvarieties: Standard Singapore Mandarin and Folk Singapore Mandarin. With regard to its corpus planning, it is suggested that a specialized institution be established to codify the language to complement the government's macro planning measures.
Key Words: Singapore Mandarin; *Putonghua*; variety; standardization; corpus planning

I. Introduction

Singapore is a multiracial city-state in Southeast Asia with a total population of 5.18 million, with ethnic Chinese accounting for 74.1% (2011 statistics). In this multilingual country, there are four official languages, namely English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. Among them, English functions as the language of education, administration, trade and international relations. It is also the *de facto* national language in Singapore.

According to Singapore's bilingual education policy, every Singaporean student must learn English Language (EL) and their mother tongue languages (MTLs). Chinese Language (CL), commonly known as *Huayu*, is the designated MTL of ethnic Chinese. As such, CL is required to be learnt by all Chinese students in order to appreciate and reserve their cultural traditions and values. The renowned "Speak Mandarin Movement", since first launched in 1979, has continued for over 40 years, which has promoted the role of Mandarin as a communicative language in Singapore. However, given the dominant role of EL, children with CL as home language are decreasing rapidly, and their attitude towards CL is far from optimistic (MOE, 2011).

CL is a subject taught in Singapore's primary, secondary and junior college levels. However, the Chinese language used in textbooks and mass media, generally conceived as standard Chinese, differs from *Putonghua* (Standard Chinese in Mainland China) in many aspects, causing much confusion for CL users and educators. This has necessitated the standardization of CL in Singapore.

This study investigates the linguistic features of Singapore Mandarin and its sub-varieties, which will help us understand the positioning of Singapore Mandarin in linguistics and its internal structures. Putonghua is used as a variety for comparison in the analysis. Moreover, this paper will review the Chinese language planning efforts in Singapore, and point out the direction of corpus planning in order to properly codify this emerging Chinese language variety.

II. Singapore Mandarin: Linguistic Features

The Mandarin spoken in Singapore is similar to Mainland China's Putonghua (Standard Chinese) in every linguistic aspect. However, it has some tangible differences from Putonghua in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar (Chen, 1983, 1986, 2003; Lock, 1986; Ng, 1997; Li and Chow, 2002; Lu, Zhang and Qian, 2002; Wang, 2002; Xu and Wang, 2007; Goh, 2010). In this study, the term "Singapore Mandarin" is used to refer to the spoken and written Chinese language used in Singapore.

2.1 Pronunciation

The pronunciation of Singapore Mandarin, including phonics and tones, are generally similar to Putonghua. The CL pronunciation in the TV and radio broadcasts is almost the same to Mainland China. *Hanyu Pinyin Fang'an* "scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet" is explicitly adopted in Singapore's CL textbooks. However, some typical features in Singapore Mandarin pronunciation should be noted. For instance, retroflection and neutral tone are rare in daily speech; the difference between the second and third tone is not so clear as Putonghua; the two nasal voices [n] and [ŋ] are not markedly differentiated; and the so-called "fifth tone" (Chen, 1983) still exists.

2.2 Chinese Characters

In Singapore, simplified Chinese characters are used in almost all contexts, which is the same to Mainland China's script. Traditional Chinese characters are only seen in the name

plates of some companies and shops. Except for a few characters uniquely found in Singapore (e.g., 榴梿 "durian" and 峇厘 "Bali", written as 榴莲 and 巴厘 respectively in Mainland China), the vast majority of characters are identical to their counterparts in Mainland China.

2.3 Vocabulary

In comparison to other linguistic aspects, the vocabulary in Singapore Mandarin overtly differs from Putonghua. Wang (1999) compiled a dictionary of specific words in Singapore Mandarin, collecting thousands of words found or differently used in Singapore. Since such words are widely recognized by the Singapore community, there is academic consensus that the vocabulary variation in Singapore Mandarin should be tolerated.

2.4 Grammar

In the literature, there are some explorations of the grammatical features of Singapore Mandarin (e.g., Chen, 1986; Goh, 1986; Lu, et al., 2002; Chow, 2008). The grammatical difference between Singapore Mandarin and Putonghua is assumed to be slight (Loo, 1984; Li and Chow, 2002). However, these grammatical differences are far from trivial. In the following, we will illustrate the contrasts with some simple examples.

2.4.1 Word order

The word order in Singapore Mandarin is more flexible than Putonghua. That is, apart from the linear sequence in Putonghua, alternative sequence is also acceptable.

1) *chi duo yi ge ba*. (SM)

   duo chi yi ge ba. (MC)

   'Eat one more, please.'

2) *ni zou xian*. (SM)

   ni xian zou. (MC)

   'You go first' or 'After you.'

3) *ta yijing hui qu zhongguo le*. (SM)

   ta yijing hui zhongguo qu le. (MC)

   'She has returned to China.'

2.4.2 Discourse particles

There are many different discourse particles seen in Singapore Mandarin to show the speaker's attitude, like *meh*, *leh*, *ho*, *loh*, *la*.

4) *ni bu dong meh*? (SM)

   ni bu dong ma? (MC)

   'Don't you know that?'

5) *ta hen mei limao leh*. (SM)

   ta hen mei limao. (MC)

   'He is rather rude.'

2.4.3 Grammatical constructions

In Singapore Mandarin, there are some grammatical constructions that are not found in Putonghua. For instance, the construction with *you* 'have' is used to express experiential aspect.

6) *ni you chi ma*? (SM)

   ni chi le ma? (MC)

   'Did you eat it?'

Moreover, the negation marker *mei* is often used where only *bu* is possible in Putonghua.

7) *ni mingtian meiyou shangban meh*? (SM)

   ni mingtian bu   shangban ma? (MC)

   'Won't you work tomorrow?'

In addition, the comparison construction in Singapore Mandarin often contains *guo*.

8) *ta gao guo wo*. (SM)

   ta bi wo gao. (MC)

   'She is taller than me.'

2.5 Summary

From the analysis above, it can be seen that although Singapore Mandarin is similar to Putonghua in most linguistic aspects, showing that they are offspring of the same parent language, it demonstrates some distinctive linguistic features, particularly in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. In order to fully understand the linguistic characteristics of Singapore Mandarin, more exploratory efforts are needed. The reasons for the variation may include: 1) the lack of spoken Mandarin as the basis for developing Standard Mandarin; 2) the subtle

influence of Southern Chinese dialects; 3) extensive contact with other languages like English and Malay.

III. Singapore Mandarin: Positioning and Subcategorization

Singapore Mandarin is widely recognized as an important variety of modern Chinese due to its linguistic variation (Chen, 1986; Wang, 2002; Lu, et al., 2002; Chow, 2002; Zhu, 2008). Wang (2002:27), for example, states clearly that Singapore Mandarin is a "regional variety of Putonghua nurtured in Singapore's soil". However, there are also scholars who object to regarding Singapore Mandarin as a variety of Putonghua. Loo (1984), for instance, doubts the linguistic positioning of Singapore Mandarin, arguing that the trivial differences between Singapore Mandarin and Putonghua are not sufficient to make Singapore Mandarin a language variety of CL. Moreover, folk ideas are that Singapore Mandarin is non-standard Chinese, full of grammatical errors.

Is Singapore Mandarin a language variety? Hudson (1996) defines a variety of language as a set of linguistic items with similar distribution. Ferguson (1971) indicates that a variety is anybody of human speech patterns which is sufficiently homogeneous to be analyzed by available technique of synchronic description and which has a sufficiently large repertory of elements and their arrangement or process with broad enough semantic scope to function in all formal contexts of communication. Since Singapore Mandarin has numerous linguistic elements of its own, functions well in all contexts, and most linguistic form and patterns are widely accepted by the community, it is sufficient to be seen as a linguistic variety. Therefore, Singapore Mandarin should be positioned as a regional variety of Putonghua nurtured in Singapore's soil, and its usage should not be treated as linguistic errors of Putonghua.

With regard to its internal classification, Tan (1999) and Goh (2010) argue that Singapore Mandarin can be divided into four sub-varieties: Beijing Putonghua, Standard Mandarin, Colloquial Mandarin and 'Rojak' Mandarin. However, a close examination shows that this classification is problematic because the Beijing Putonghua variety does not exist at all, and the colloquial Mandarin and 'Rojak' Mandarin are hard to be distinguished.

We propose that a classification of Standard Singapore Mandarin (SSM) and Folk Singapore Mandarin (FSM) might be more feasible. SSM is basically the same to Putonghua except that it

contains some Singapore-specific vocabulary. It is a high variety (Fishman, 1967) used in areas such as mass media, textbooks and formal contexts. FSM, by contrast, is the Mandarin vernacular widely used by Chinese speakers in daily communication. Its linguistic profile, including pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, is tangibly different from Putonghua. One of the typical features of FSM is code-mixing. Generally speaking, the higher one's Chinese language proficiency is, the closer his/her linguistic profile is to the SSM. Frequent code-switching is seen when one's Chinese language proficiency is low.

Although the two subvarieties are not specified in many situations, it is possible to identify the distinctions between SSM and FSM. For instance, in the "Speak Mandarin Movement", the government encourages people to speak SSM, whereas in grammatical study of Singapore's CL, the referent is most probably the FSM.

IV. Singapore Mandarin: Corpus Planning

Language planning is a deliberate effort to influence the function, structure, or acquisition of languages or language variety within a speech community (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997). There are two significant types of planning: status planning and corpus planning. Corpus planning refers to the prescriptive intervention in the forms of a language, whereby planning decisions are made to engineer changes in the structure of the language (Fergusson, 2006).

In Singapore, the government has done a lot of work to change the Chinese language itself, such as adopting *Hanyu Pinyin Fang'an*, simplifying Chinese characters, standardizing the translated terms (Loo, 1984; Tian, 1994; Xie, 2000). One of the typical characteristics of Singapore's corpus planning is "following the Mainland China's language standard in an implicit manner". When linguistic adjustments are made, Singapore authority never announces that it is in response to Mainland China's language modification, no matter how clear the traces are. The other characteristic of Singapore's CL corpus planning is implementing macro planning while ignoring micro planning. That is, Singapore government adjusts phonetic annotation system (adopting *Hanyu Pinyin Fang'an*), script types and so on because these aspects reflect the overall linguistic orientation of the state. The micro aspects such as grammar and the uses and pronunciation of specific words are out of the purview of the government planning. The

lack of explicit standard for CL uses, often leads to confusion for CL educators and authors: Putonghua or Singapore Mandarin Standard?

Our suggestion is to establish an agency specialized in Chinese Language corpus planning in Singapore. Its major work is to codify the Chinese Language, and make explicit standard for CL uses. These micro planning efforts can be a complement to the government's macro planning, and resolve the language users' confusions.

V. Conclusion

This paper has explored some issues closely related to the positioning and planning of Singapore Mandarin. Singapore Mandarin is a regional variety of *Putonghua* nurtured in Singapore community. Rather than being non-standard usage of Modern Chinese, Singapore Mandarin has equal status as other language varieties like Mainland China's *Putonghua*, Taiwai's *Guoyu*, etc. It can be further divided into two subvarities: Standard Singapore Mandarin and Folk Singapore Mandarin, functioning as high variety and low variety of CL in Singapore. Singapore's CL corpus planning is a macro, standard-implicit intervention, which has caused some confusion for CL users about the standard to follow. This paper suggests that a specialized agency be established to complement the government's planning efforts. Finally, it should be emphasized that the planning should be anchored to the SSM variety rather than the FSM variety.

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