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 dis-
tinctive 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 in-
creased 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

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 paper[1] 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 D_1), minimal pairs (Style D_2) and finally two tongue twisters which will be termed Style D_3. The word list consisted of minimal pairs presented in scrambled order while in Style D_2 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 D_3, 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 hyper-correction 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

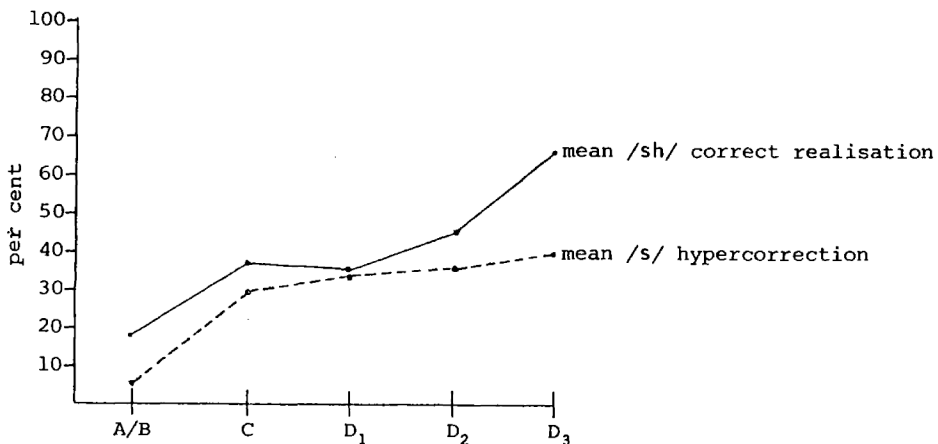Table 1: Percentages of /sh/ non-reflexion and /s/ retroflexion

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 D_3 (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 D_3. 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.