Clear /l/ and the Malays in Singapore: origin, social meanings, and ethnic identity

Linguistic features that emerged from language contact/acquisition can come to gain social-indexical meanings, and may become increasingly enregistered to a particular sociodemographic context. As people experience the sociolinguistic world differently, the interpretation of social meanings can vary between members and non-members of a speech community[1], or even between members[2]. This study focused on the use of coda clear-L, a Malay-derived phonetic trait, in the English speech of English-Malay bilinguals in Singapore[3]. Through a modified matched-guise test (MGT) and metalinguistic talk, it explored the socio-indexical properties of, and Singaporeans' attitudes towards the variant, in relation to more mainstream variants, vocalised-L and dark-L[4].

101 native Singaporeans from the three main ethnic groups (i.e. Chinese, Malays and Indians) took part in the MGT, which involved manipulated monosyllabic tokens of female speakers that differed mainly in their coda /l/. Informants evaluated the three variants on a list of traits, and described the community they thought the speaker belonged to. 12 Malay Singaporeans were further interviewed about the use of clear-L, and whether and how this variant was associated with certain sub-groups/sub-cultures.

Overall, informants regarded the guises with clear-L as casual and friendly, but less educated, from a lower social class and Malay-dominant. However, they indexed distinct but related social types based on the varied experiences of the informants: *mat*/*minahrep* (Malay delinquents), *pakciks*/*makciks* (middle-aged Malays) and *mat jiwang* (one who is always love-struck/sentimental and listens to Malay soft-rock love ballads). Malay respondents who do not belong to these sub-groups revealed that they would use clear-L and a 'Malay' accent to fit in. The discussion explores the relationship of these social meanings, and examines the social significance of the use and maintenance of clear-L and a distinctly Malay-accented English repertoire, through an understanding of the socio-cultural norms of the Malay community.

References

[1] Johnstone, B., & Kiesling, S. F. (2008). Indexicality and experience: Exploring the meanings of /aw/-monophthongization in Pittsburgh. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(1), 5–33. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2008.00351.x

[2] Campbell-Kibler, K. (2008). I'll be the judge of that: Diversity in social perceptions of (ING). *Language in Society*, 37(5), 637–659. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404508080974

[3] Sim, J. H. (2019). "But you don't sound Malay!": Language dominance and variation in the accents of English-Malay bilinguals in Singapore. *English World-Wide*, 40(1), 79–108.

[4] Deterding, D. (2007). *Singapore English*. Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748625444.001.0001