

Multilingual speech levels among ethnic Chinese Indonesians in Surabaya, Indonesia.

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Being multilingual and/or multidialectal in Indonesia, has, not surprisingly, always been an advantage to people from this archipelagic nation. In some cases multilingualism is an indispensable requirement for getting by and fitting in especially among people of different origins. These people are the new settlers from other parts of Indonesia who came to stay or those such as the Arabs, the Indians and the Chinese who migrated from other parts of the world. In informal interethnic or interracial encounters especially, using a lingua franca which is a second or third language for the speaker is a normal practice, and indeed, is often expected in some situations.

Among the ethnic Chinese communities in Surabaya, having language repertoires that contain many different codes used in different domains both private and public, in the wider multilingual society is perceived as a necessity to get by. Given the degree of communal bi-/multilingualism, the practice of using two or more languages/language varieties or dialects in conversation and alternating between them in a switching manner is common. In most encounters, a speaker has to exercise a quick mental calculation to decide which code is the 'proper' or most proper choice for addressing particular classes of interlocutors on particular occasions for particular purposes.

This paper presents a Chinese family of four generations whose code choice behaviour shows that different age cohorts employ different codes to different interlocutors for different reasons. The speakers consider that some particular codes are more polite for use with particular speakers of particular generations. Taking into account the age distance between interlocutors, their family status (role-relations), their language behaviour and attitude towards their addressees from different generations, their code choice behaviour reflects degrees of formality which exist between different pairs of speakers-interlocutors. I argue that in their interpersonal interaction, speakers choose codes that are associated with high formality and prestige to index a high degree of politeness towards some addressees. On the other hand, speakers choose codes identified with relative informality to index solidarity and familiarity with addressees. This use of different codes to index degrees of politeness to different interlocutors can be seen as directly analogous with the use of speech levels in a language like Javanese.

In this paper, the subjects' practice of using different codes as speech levels concentrates mostly on interactions within the family domain. I also pay attention to the domains of work and friendship for some members of the transitional generation: those who went to both Chinese and Indonesian schools, in which these people practice their multilingual speech levels with the interlocutors outside the family domain. This transitional generation usually has richer and more stable multilingualism, and therefore they have more than one set of codes (languages) functioning as speech levels. The language(s) and/or language varieties involved among others are standard Indonesian, colloquial Indonesian, Javanese, Hakka, Mandarin, Chinese Malay/Indonesian and English.