

# TRADING IN AN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT : THE CASE OF MALAYSIA

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## *1. Background to the Study*

With globalisation and internationalisation, it is inevitable that trade encounters between peoples of different nationalities, ethnicities and languages will further increase. As English is an important second language in multilingual Malaysia it is anticipated that there should be minimal problems for outsiders when communicating with Malaysians.

This research sets out to determine who initiates the discourse in a trade setting which is across ethnic groups, cultures and languages? Whose language will be used in such trade transactions? Is it the vendors' language that dominates the trade transaction or the buyers? With these questions in mind this research examines the linguistic choices made by Malaysian buyers and sellers in service encounters in Malaysia.

The concepts of linguistic strategies of convergence and divergence (Giles, Taylor and Bourhis, 1973) will be used to analyse the choice of language/s used in such trading encounters. Language convergence refers to speakers becoming more similar to their listeners in terms of the language(s) they use, while language divergence refers to interlocutors maintaining the use of their own languages. In a related study of language choices in street encounters in Tunisia street vendors were found to address potential customers in the customers' own language i.e. the vendors converge linguistically. Such a strategy of convergence is used as it may yield "significant rewards" to the vendor (Lawson-Sako and Sachdev, 1996). This study argues that these "significant rewards" can accrue to both parties i.e. the vendor and the buyer.

Apart from the significant rewards argument, other reasons have been cited for linguistic convergence. Giles and Johnson (1981) and Sachdev and Bourhis (1990) argue that in multilingual settings language may become one of the most salient dimensions of group identity and as such can be used to reduce, create or maintain intergroup boundaries. In fact, according to the Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al, 1987) divergence is a function of a speaker's desire for a distinctive self-image, to disassociate from the interlocutor and to define the encounter in intergroup terms. The choice of a language has many implications as it connotes and signifies in-group solidarity or can be used as a distancing strategy and or to signify status and power. As people of diverse ethnicities live in Malaysia, a subsidiary objective of this study was to determine if awareness of "the other" and of "the self" is reflected in language choices in service encounters.

## ***2. The Setting : Background***

Malaysia is made of many ethnic groups and has a rich linguistic heritage. The majority ethnic group are the Malays: 52%) followed by the Chinese (38%) and the Indians (10%) (Population Census 1991). These communities are not homogenous and within each major ethnic group subgroups exist. For instance, the Indian sub-group consists of both North and South Indians. The Punjabis, Gujeratis, Bengalis Sindhis etc make up the former while the Tamils, Malayalees, Telegus etc make up the latter. Each subgroup can then be further distinguished on the basis of religion, for example, there are Punjabi Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in the country (David, 1996). The Malaysian Chinese community is also not a homogenous subgroup and there are Chinese who speak Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka etc and other dialects. Mandarin is the medium of instruction in Chinese medium schools. Members of the Chinese community who have studied in such vernacular schools tend to use this language in intra-community interaction(see David, 1999c).The definition of a Malay given by the Malaysian Constitution i.e. a native who practises the Islamic religion, speaks Malay and practises Malay customs has meant that peoples of Javanese, Bugis and Menankabau stock are considered Malays too( see Mohamad Subakir, 1998).

Malay, the national language, and English, an international language, are both considered primary languages in Malaysia and are used both for intragroup and intergroup communication (Omar, 1987). It must be pointed out that a number of varieties of both Malay (Omar, 1977) and English (Platt and Weber, 1980) are spoken. Apart from the standard Malay i.e. the high variety used in schools a low variety i.e. Bazaar Malay is also used informally and in addition there are many dialectal varieties of Malay. Similarly, the variety of English used in Malaysia ranges from the educated Malaysian variety (the acrolect i.e. the high variety ) which is taught in schools to a colloquial or basilectal variety (Baskaran 1987). According to Morais 1998, Malaysians from the lower socio-economic levels who have not studied the language formally use a basilectal variety of English.

Abdullah Hassan 1987 : 1, states that Bahasa Malaysia i.e. the Malay language is a lingua franca in Malaysia as Chinese or Indians in non-formal situations in intergroup interactions are likely to use a mesolectal or basilectal variety of Malay. In a study of a car plant in Malaysia, Morais's 1998:89 finds that a bazaar or colloquial variety of Malay is used as the language of everyday informal communication in varying degrees by members of all ethnic groups. In the Malay used by older members of the minority communities i.e. the Chinese and Tamil communities, pronunciation and intonation also varies as a result of the influence of the first or ethnic language. Moreover, the use of Malay by non-Malays is at times a codemixed variety where lexical items of the minority language/s and also English are inserted in the dominant Malay used.

The varieties of Malay and English used in Malaysia may be viewed as indicators of the membership of speakers in different socio-economic and ethnic networks. The choice and variety of language signifies many motivations like ingroup solidarity, status symbols and distancing strategies. The language and variety used also indicate socio-economic levels (Morais, 1998).

Apart from stand alone English or Malay a common language phenomena in Malaysia is codeswitching, be it English/Malay (David, 1997, 1999a, 1999b), Hokkien/Malay/English, Tamil/Malay/English etc. Jamaliah (1995) states that Malaysians in urban areas sometimes codeswitch between three languages

namely English, Malay and the ethnic language. Many terms have been used to describe the mixing of two languages which is a common feature of conversation in bilingual communities. Examples of such terms are code-switching, code-mixing, language mixing and language alternation. Codeswitching has been defined as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical system or subsystems" (Gumperz, 1982 : 59). Put simply, codeswitching may be defined as the alternative use of two languages at the word, phrase, clause or sentence level ( Valdes 1981 : 95). Codeswitching for the purposes of this research will include code mixes, codeswitches and code alternation and are explained below :

- ❖ codemixing (use of two languages in a turn but only a token use of the second language see IS's second turn in Extract 5);
- ❖ codeswitching i.e. use of more than one language can occur within a turn or utterance, and
- ❖ code alternation. When the same speaker code switches between turns . For example a speaker uses language A in one turn and Language B in another turn (see Extract 9 where MB alternates between Malay and English using Malay, her ethnic language in her first turn and English in her second))

The phenomena of codeswitching has been much researched (see Heller, 1988). Some researchers view codeswitching as a norm in some immigrant communities like the Puerto Rican community in New York (Fishman and Greenfield, 1970; Torres, 1989), and argue that such a variety indicates a high level of language proficiency while others like Singh (1994) take a diametrically opposite view and argue that highly proficient speakers will not codeswitch. Nor Hashim (1991) investigating language choice in a small town, Kuala Kangsar in Malaysia finds that the use of codeswitches of Javanese and standard Malay by the Javanese community is due to a low proficiency in Javanese while De Bot and Clyne (1994) also found codeswitching among Dutch immigrants in Australia to be a feature of low proficiency.

Codeswitching serves many functions and research on different communities reveals that the reasons for codeswitching vary

(Gumperz, 1964; Kachru, 1979 ; Poplack, 1988 ; Heller, 1988). Gumperz's pioneering work reveals code switching to be a resource by which a range of social meanings is expressed. Gumperz (1964, 1982) provides examples of metaphorical or discourse related codeswitches. This includes switching to mitigate a face-threatening act, switching to withhold information, switching as a distancing strategy and for intimacy. When there is communication breakdown, codeswitches can be employed as repair strategies. The importance of code switching is also probably due to its ability simultaneously to connote status by the use of an international language, English and solidarity or awareness of being members of the same ethnic community by the use of the ethnic language. This paper sees codeswitching as an socio-psychological accommodative strategy where both buyers and sellers, despite not having much proficiency in the other's language, may attempt by the use of this linguistic device to some extent to identify with the customers' ethnicity and language preferences.

Yet despite the many functions codeswitching serves, according to Li (Li, 1995 personal communication), in a monolingual setting codeswitching may be viewed "as instances of deviant speech." This paper argues that in multilingual Malaysia codeswitching has many functions and is a valuable resource in both intra and inter ethnic interactions.

### ***3. Data Base and Analytical Framework***

In multiethnic Malaysia inter and intragroup encounters occur frequently in service encounters. A total of 17 grocery/corner shops and eating places in the Petaling Jaya area were targeted as the service encounters. Such shops keep longer opening hours than the supermarkets and are operated by Malay, Chinese and Indian owners and sales staff. The sample of shop owners observed is therefore drawn from the major ethnic groups in the country (table 1). The clientele (n = 27) of such shops tend to be multiethnic and consist of residents living in the vicinity. The language of the buyer with a number of sellers was recorded until the transaction in each case was completed. The analysis thus involved a number of turns. Such turns tend to be short and goal oriented. Romaine (1989) and Gumperz (1982) point out that code-changing often follows a change of addressee. Each shopkeeper was observed for an hour

so that his/her linguistic choices with a range of clients of varying ethnicities and socio-economic standing could be determined.

*Table 1: Ethnic Group of Buyers/Sellers*

	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Others
Total				
Ethnic group of Customer	9	11	4	3
27				
Ethnic group of shopkeeper	6	6	5	-
17				

The variables that were analysed were buyers and sellers' ethnicity, the choice of language in the first turn, and the language of the response to this turn. The replies in the response turn were coded into one of four categories- convergence © where they replied exclusively in the language in which they had been addressed, codeswitching (CS), where two languages were used and there was more than one single lexical item in the other language, codemixing (CM) where they replied using at least one word in a second language and divergence (D) where they replied solely in the other language.

In analysing the data the concept of codeswitches and the accommodation theory were used. The functional use of codeswitches have earlier been described. The communication accommodation theory accounts for diverse socio-psychological processes that impinge on the selection of language codes and their interactional consequences (Coupland and Jaworski 1997 : 241). According to Bradac et al. (1989) the accommodation theory is the predominant model at the interface of sociolinguistics, communication and social psychology. This theory has been made use of in many empirical investigations concerned with intergroup interactions in multilingual settings. The theory investigates speech convergence and divergence. Speech convergence has been defined as a general strategy by which individuals adapt to each other's speech and non-verbal behaviours on many dimensions including language choice. The notion of speech convergence is based on the belief that it reflects a speaker's motivation to gain social approval. In fact, Giles and Coupland empirically determined that "the more effort in convergence a speaker was perceived to

have made...the more favourably the speaker was evaluated, and the more the listener would converge in return" (Giles and Coupland 1991 : 63). A number of studies (see Berger and Bradac, 1982) have shown that convergence does bring the positive social benefits that speakers anticipate. Convergence may not however always bring the desired positive results. At times, attempts to converge may be viewed negatively. For instance, when Malay was used by an upper income car owner with a Malay petrol attendant the latter shifted to English and stated that he could speak English (personal experience). In such an instance, the convergence was viewed as a "put me down" as English has elite connotations .

#### ***4. Results and Discussion***

In the discussion the three ethno linguistic groups have been abbreviated to M (Malays), C (Chinese) and I (Indians) and the gender as male ( M) and female (F). The buyer is (B) and the seller(S).

##### *Initiation of discourse and Emergence of Mixed discourse*

Table 2 shows that in such service encounters it is generally the clientele who initiates the conversation. Of the total interactions (44) the clientele or buyer initiated 27 (62%) and the shopkeeper 17 (38%).

*Table 2 : Initiating discourse*

	Number	Percentage
Buyer	27	62
Seller	17	38
Total	44	100

The overall findings of the first response to the buyer show that not only did the sellers (72%) converge to the language used by the buyers but buyers (28%) also tended to converge to the language of the sellers (Table 3). The relationship between buyer and seller and their needs of each other is such that both will attempt to accommodate the other. Sellers will respond in the language used by the buyer in order to make a sale and buyers do likewise so that price will be reduced, or to get goods on credit. This constant and

vigilant seesawing to each other's language choices has resulted in the emergence of a mixed discourse. Such a mixed discourse (see Extract 1) consists of constant switching, (lines 1-3) mixing (line 5) and alternating (lines 2 and 6 and 1 and 7) in the linguistic interaction. In line 1 (see Extract 1) the Chinese waiter accommodates to the ethnicity of the Malay clientele by shifting to a standard variety of Malay in his greeting and then within the same utterance switches to English, to enquire how he may be of service. The setting being an American eatery (Macdonalds) the clientele tends to be from the mid and high income group and English, viewed as a high variety language, is a language often heard in such establishments. The clientele or customer responds by starting the discourse in English with the use of a single lexical item "Yes" as an acknowledgment to the English used by the waiter and reverts to standard Malay, the variety used by the waiter in the greeting ritual. The client then switches back again to the English pronoun "I" (the English lexical item "I" is often used in the Malay of urban Malays as it tends to equalise relationships (see Nik Safiah, 1988) and then reverts to a spoken variety of Malay for the action verb *nak dua* (want to), switches to English for the food he wants i.e. "sets value meal No 2" then shifts to Malay for the units (*satu*-one and *empat* -four) and finally switches to English for the food ("ice-cream"). Thus in one short utterance (line 2) the client has moved from English to Malay four times and concludes in English. The waiter converges to this mixed code and responds in a Malay/English utterance thus displaying his bilingual ability as he accommodates to the mixed language choice of his Malay client. The client then reinforces her ethnic identity by reverting to Malay in line 4 and the waiter responds to this by using only one English lexical item and more Malay (line 5). The customer then, in line 8 uses only English - a high status language when she discusses the payment. and in response the waiter also accommodates and reverts to the monolingual use of English (line 7). The client brings the talk to a close in English (line 8).

*Extract 1 : constant switching, mixing and alternating in the linguistic interaction*

1. ChineseWaiter : * <i>Selamat tengah hari puan, can I help you?</i> (Good morning maam)
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2. Malay Customer : **Yes, selamat tengah hari. I nak dua sets value meal no 2, satu set value meal no 4, dan empat chocolate icecream** (Good morning I want ....and 4 chocolate icecream)
3. Chinese Waiter : *Puan nak makan di sini or having outside?* ( Do you want to eat in or...)
4. Customer : *Makan sini* (eat in)
5. Waiter : **Allright puan semuanya \$20.39**(it all comes to...)
6. Customer : I don't have change, can I give you \$ 50?
7. Waiter : Sure...and this is your change
8. Customer : You're welcome

\* Malay is in italics

# English in codemixed and codeswitched utterances is in bold.

+ Standalone English (lines 6 : 8) is in normal print.

The need to accommodate to each other has resulted in constant switching and a mixed code of Malay/English which has become a common phenomena in intergroup communication. This mixed code, we believe should be seen as a language in its own right and serves the functions of accommodation and convergence in a nation made up of multiple ethnicities. The higher percentage of accommodation by the shopkeepers (in the example above when the customer shifts to English in line 6 the waiter also shifts to English) is also understandable given that most discourse (61%) is generally initiated by the client.

*Table 3 : Initiating Convergence*

Convergence initiated by	Number	Percentage
Seller	13	72
Buyer	5	28

### Choice of Languages

Given that Malay is the national language and a lingua franca for Malaysians it was expected that the preferred language of intergroup service encounters i. e. between Malaysians of different ethnicities would be Malay, albeit an informal variety of the language and not the standard variety which is taught in schools.

Table 4 shows the languages mainly used in the service encounter. Malay, the national language and lingua franca of Malaysians is most commonly used. The use of the national language does to some extent validate the success of the language planning policy. However, English, which has officially always been considered as an important second language is also used. A smaller number of shopkeepers (16%) used English as compared to 27% of the clientele who used English.

*Table 4 : Languages used in Interactions*

Malay	English	Tamil	
32	7	2	Shopkeeper
30	12	1	Client

It must be emphasised that the ethnic language is not necessarily always used in intergroup interactions as younger members of minority communities and languages appear to be losing linguistic competence and shifting away from the traditional ethnic language (David, 1992, 1996; 1999a; David and Noor, 1999b; Lim, 1997; Rajagopal, 1987; Mohamad Subakir, 1998). For instance in this study while two of the Tamil shopkeepers used Tamil with Tamil clients (Table 5) only one client accommodated and used the ethnic language (Tamil) in the intragroup interaction, while the other diverged and shifted to English. Lack of proficiency in the ethnic language can account for a shift away from the use of vernacular languages like Tamil and the local Chinese dialects and it is not uncommon to see members of the same minority ethnic group communicating either in the national language, Malay or an international language, English or a codeswitched variety comprising English, Malay and a few lexical items from the vernacular languages. Apart from the fact that English has overtones of status it has become for some ethnic minorities the new mother tongue (David 1996, David and Noor 1999) and for other minorities like the Babas (Tan 1980) and the Chitty communities (Ravichandran 1996) of Malacca a variety of Malay has become their mother tongue.

*Table 5 : Language Choices in intra and cross-cultural communication*

Shopkeeper	Malay	English	Tamil
Malay with Malay customer	6		
Malay with Indian customer	7		
Malay with Chinese customer	7	3	
Indian with Chinese customer	5	2	
Indian with Indian customer			2
Bangladeshi with Indian customer	1		
Arab with Indian customer	1		
Chinese with Chinese customer	2	1	

A distinct language choice of Malaysians is the use of a mixed code. In multilingual settings the mixed code can achieve two goals simultaneously that of convergence and of status. Malaysians, whether in the role of buyer or seller appear to be sensitive and accommodate to language preferences of their interlocutors in the speech event especially if the languages are known languages like Malay and English. Such sensitivities are manifested in *codeswitching*. 52% of the extracts reveal relatively high figures for both code-mixing and code-switching (Table 6).

*Table 6 : Occurrences of Codemixing and Codeswitching*

Codeswitching	Codemixing	Total (n)	Percentage
13	10	23	52

There is a high level of code switching especially between English and Malay. This is understandable given Malay is the National language and English is an important second language in Malaysia. English/Malay codeswitching occurs not only in inter-group encounters but also in intragroup encounters. The use of codeswitching can be viewed as an accommodative strategy. However, it must not be discounted that the extent of use of one language over another in codeswitches may also reflect a speaker's higher/lower proficiency and greater/less ease with a particular language. Older speakers who underwent an English medium of

instruction are generally more comfortable in English while younger urbanites who have had Malay as the medium of instruction and English as an important second language appear to mix both languages in their discourse.

It must be emphasised that codeswitching between Malay and English does not occur only across ethnic groups but also in intra group interactions. Urban Malays in discourse with other urban Malays constantly use Malay-English codeswitches (see also Nik Saffiah, 1988). In such codeswitches however, the dominant language tends to be Malay and English is the token language. See Extracts 2a and b.

*Extract 2a : Malay/English Codemix in intragroup interaction*

<p><b>MMB (Male Malay Buyer) and MFS (Female Malay Seller)</b> MFS : <i>Cari kain apa bang?</i> (Which material do you want?) MMB : <i>Baju ini cantik tak ?</i> (Is this dress pretty?) MFS : Oh...cantik, untuk <b>girlfriend?</b> (It is pretty for your girlfriend?)</p>
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*Extract 2b : Malay/English Codemix in intragroup interaction*

<p><b>FMB (Female Malay Buyer) and FMS (Female Malay Seller)</b> FMS: <i>Banyak yang adik dah try. Nak ambil mana satu?</i> (You have tried many. Which one do you want? )</p>
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Such Malay-English codeswitches in intraethnic interaction has different functions. For instance the use of "girlfriend" used by the lady seller in Extract 2a could be a distancing strategy from ethnic Malay culture. David (1997) noted that a group of young Malay secretaries who were using Malay during a meal switched to English when they discussed their Malay employer in negative terms. This is also a distancing strategy - a distancing from one's own actions as one is using a language that is not one's habitual language. In Extract 2b the use of "try" in a dominant Malay discourse implies annoyance on the part of the Malay sales staff at the customer who has not selected an item of clothing despite trying many. The use of try is another example of a distancing strategy used by the speaker as she distances herself from the act of annoyance by shifting from the language normally used with ethnic members of the community.

Apart from Malay-English codeswitches amongst the Malay speech community another speech shift is that of dialect shift. The codeswitch for the Malay community does not only entail a switch between two languages but also a switch between dialects of Malay. For instance, when a young Malay student of the University of Malaya attempted to purchase some goods she used standard Malay with the Malay shopkeeper. However, when he responded in a Trengganu (a state in the east coast of Peninsular Malaya) variety of Malay the buyer quickly shifted to that variety. The buyer admitted that the dialectal accommodation was intentional with the hope of getting a reduction. In such a situation language has "symbolic power" (Bourdieu, 1994) and the function of the codeswitch was metaphorical.

Apart from dialect use, the variety of Malay used may vary. Educated Malays tend to use the standard variety learnt in schools whilst those who had no or limited formal education tend to use a dialect or a colloquial form of Malay. Language convergence even amongst varieties of a language were noted in the data. For instance, in one service encounter, the younger Malay seller in his last turn, switched to the bazaar variety of Malay and accommodated to the older Malay buyer's linguistic style. He uses *kasi* (give) instead of *memberi* (standard Malay). Such accommodation and language convergence, on the part of the younger client was, it is hypothesised to show respect and deference to an older interlocutor. Respect to elders is deeply rooted in the Asian psyche and Jan and David (1996) have documented the degree of politeness and indirectness used by Malay students. Thus, although there is reciprocal use of language in the sense that both the buyer and seller are using a common language, in this case Malay, the variety varies and in that sense there is some degree of divergence. Codes alternation is noted in the final turn as the younger speaker accommodates to the variety of the language used by the buyer finally resulting in reciprocal use of the variety of the language used.

As for the Indian community, as mentioned earlier, in intragroup discourse amongst the Malaysian Indian community, the ethnic language was not necessarily the language used. This may be because the Indian community in Malaysia is not homogenous

linguistically, some of the minority ethnic groups appear to be shifting away from their mother tongue and are not very proficient in it. Whether they use dominant English or dominant Malay in intragroup interaction depends on their age, socio-economic standing and medium of instruction. For instance, older urban Indians i.e. in their fifties tend to use standard Malaysian English (see Extract 3). If a buyer is not proficient in his ethnic language then token use of such an ethnic language can be viewed as token convergence to the ethnicity of the seller. Such token convergence can be manifested in verbal markers like the use of ethnic language particles or isolated and minimal lexical items i.e. words from the ethnic language in their mixed or codeswitched discourse. Such linguistic tokens can act as markers of ethnic identity.

*Extract 3 : Non-ethnic language used in intragroup interaction*

**MIB (Male Indian buyer) and MIS (male Indian seller)**

MIB : Excuse me, do you have loose change for RM 2.00

MIS : Yes I do

MIB : May I exchange my RM2 note for your coins? You see I am in need to make an urgent call

MIS : Here you are, the coins that you want

Similarly, Mandarin may not necessarily be the in-group language for the Chinese community. This is because Mandarin is the medium of instruction only for those who have attended Chinese medium schools. Even the Chinese who use dialects like Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew etc at home do not always shift to these dialects in intragroup interactions. This is because there are variations even within a dialect.

In short, the choice of code used by the minority ethnicities in intragroup interactions is not necessarily the ethnic language. In a situation of language shift especially for minority communities, ethnic boundaries cannot be maintained by the use of one's ethnic language.

Codeswitching between members of the same ethnic group thus performs a number of functions. It helps those with limited proficiency in their respective ethnic languages to signal(s) group or ethnic membership by the limited or token use of the ethnic

language in the codemixed discourse. Deference to an older/less educated interlocutor is indicated by a shift and convergence from a standard variety to a pidgin or bazaar variety. Metaphorical codeswitching i.e. with a hidden agenda for instance, to obtain a better price is also noted in the data as in the example of the shift from standard to a dialect of Malay. A shift away from one's ethnic language even when one is proficient in it can be seen as a distancing function of codeswitching where speakers moving away from the language they most often use feel "safe" as they discuss taboo or "non-safe" topics in the other language. The use of a high language in a codeswitch may be intentional to signal status. Using more of one language in a mixed discourse also may indicate degree of "comfortability" (Omar 1997, personal communication) with the majority or matrix language. This in turn reflects the success of the government's language planning policy where with independence in 1957 the medium of instruction in the English medium was shifted to Malay over a period of time (see David, 1999c).

Moving on to the language choice between minority ethnic groups like the Chinese and the Indians the languages for intergroup discourse are Malay and English. This is because both Malay and English are the lingua franca of these two ethnic groups. Whether English or Malay is used as a lingua franca depends on whether the speakers are proficient in English or Malay. Younger speakers who have had Malay as their medium of instruction and who have studied solely in the country tend to use Malay whilst older interlocutors who have had English as a medium of instruction in Malaysia will use English.

In intergroup interaction, Malay/English codeswitching is again revealed. In the following extract a male Chinese undergraduate purchasing some goods from a male Indian vendor (MIS) uses Malay/English in the discourse. He address the older male Indian seller as "Uncle" which is the term of respect for older interlocutors but then enquires about the cost in Malay.

*Extract 4 : Malay/English Codemix in intergroup interaction*

**MCB (male Chinese buyer) and MIS (male Indian seller)**

1. MCB : **Uncle chewing gum** *ini berapa?* (how much?)
2. MIS : **Sixty** sen
3. MCB : Ini **sixty** sen (here)

The data reveal that buyers constantly move from one code to another, especially between English and Malay. However, the accommodation is only token in nature. For instance, in Extract 5a the Chinese female buyer accommodates to the ethnicity and preferred language choice of the Malay seller. However, it is clear that the accommodation is merely token. She only uses one word i. e. *mana* (where) and then switches to English in her second turn. This could be because there is no equivalent word in Malay to fitting room the nearest being *bilik tukar* i. e. changing room. However, the Malay sales staff responds in a non-reciprocal language i. e. Malay and maintains her ethnic boundaries. When observed with other clients it was clear that Malay was her preferred language - the language she was most competent in. The Chinese client also retains her linguistic preferences and thanks the sales staff in English. The language choices of the parties in this interaction are non-reciprocal.

In Extract 5b the Indian buyer in Turn 1, when he requests help also initially appears to converge to the ethnicity and linguistic preferences of the Malay seller but in Turn 2 (line 3) thanks the sales staff in English. The Malay sales staff also uses a single lexical item of English i.e. the address marker "Miss" in her dominant Malay response (line 2). Such token linguistic accommodations by the minority ethnic groups, to the majority (Malay) group are revealed in the data. When minority groups, in a buyer role, use the national language, Malay, in intergroup interactions with the majority community, such linguistic convergence is only partial (Giles, 1984 who discusses degrees and levels of convergence) as the discourse consists not of one language (in this case Malay), but of two codes (the other language generally being English). The use of English in the code switch is a neutralising strategy as it is not the traditional language of any ethnic community in Malaysia except for the Eurasians. The codeswitch plays a twofold function, it indicates some degree of accommodation and simultaneously the use of English maintains distances and symbolises power.



*Extract 5a : Token Accommodation by Chinese Buyer*

**CFB (Chinese female buyer) and MMS ( Malay, male seller)**

1. CFB : *Mana fitting room?* (Where is the fitting room?)
2. MMS : *Belakang sana* (At the back)
3. CFB : **Thank you**

*Extract 5b : Token Accommodation by Indian Buyer*

**IFB (Indian female buyer ) and MMS ( Malay, male seller)**

1. IFB : Hello, *tolong ambulkan skirt saiz L* (Please give me a skirt size L)  
MMS: *Tunggu sekejap ya, Miss* (Please wait a while okay Miss)  
*Ini dia* (this is it)
2. IFB : **Thank you**

In discourse across generations, regardless of ethnicity, the variety of Malay used varies. Younger educated interlocutors, irrespective of ethnicity, who have Malay as their medium of instruction tend to use the formal standard variety of Malay and are often responded to by older interlocutors, who have not studied Malay formally, in the bazaar variety of the language. In the following extract a female Malay undergraduate talking to an Indian male shopkeeper, who is in his forties, greets him in English then switches to Malay. The variety of Malay used by the younger interlocutor is an educated variety while the variety used by the older Indian male vendor is a Bazaar variety.

Apart from Malay, English is often also used. English is at times used by the buyer for prestige purposes or to accommodate to the fact that the seller may not be of the same ethnic group. For instance, the greeting by the female Malay buyer (Extract 5c) with the Indian seller is in English. She is partially accommodating to the ethnicity (Indian) of the seller by not using Malay. Incidentally, as mentioned earlier the address marker "uncle" is used in Malaysian discourse when the addressee is male and older than the addressor.

*Extract 5c : Accommodation by Malay buyer*

**Female Malay buyer and Male Indian seller**

FMB: **Good afternoon uncle.** *Tolong bagi saya satu buku latihan 80 muka ya uncle?* (Please give me an exercise book)

MIS: *Aiseyman adik, itu 80 mukasurat punya buku sudah habislah. 120 muka surat punya bolehkah?* (We don't have the 80 page exercise book. Is the 120 page book all right?)

*Choice of Language of Sellers*

Each seller, as mentioned earlier, was observed for an hour to determine whether they shifted from one language to another depending on the ethnicity and language preferences of the buyers. It is apparent that vendors are sensitive to the ethnicities of their customers. They tend to alternate between languages in response to the language preferences and ethnicities of clients. This results in codeshifts. For instance, an Indian shopkeeper used Malay/English (Extract 6a, line 2) with a Malay client (MMB) who had initiated the turn in a Malay /English codeswitch with Malay being the dominant language (Extract 6a, Line 1). The shopkeeper then shifted to English (Extract 6b, line 2) with a young Indian client-IB (Extract 6b) who used English with him ( Extract 6b, line 1) . Incidentally, the variety of English spoken by the shopkeeper is a basilect variety.

*Extract 6a : Codeshifting : Male Indian shopkeeper (MIS) with different ethnic clients (Malay client)*

**Malay client**

1. MMB: *Taukey tolong bagi saya **sugar** satu kilo* ( Please give me 1 kilo of sugar)

2. MIS: **Okay** *Tunggu sekejap Yah cik saya nak bungkus barang ini* ( Wait awhile I am wrapping this)

3. MMB *Bagi juga saya **egg and onions** setengah kilo* (Also give me eggs and half a kilo of onions)

*Extract 6b : Codeshifting : Male Indian shopkeeper (MIS) with different ethnic clients (Indian client)*

**Indian client****IB: Uncle please give me one pack onions****MIS: Oh sorry, crispy snack don't have anymore**

Such linguistic accommodation to the ethnicity and language preferences of the client is shown by all the vendors irregardless of their ethnicity. For example Extract 7a shows linguistic accommodation by a Chinese vendor to her various clients. With a Malay client she initiates the discourse in Malay/English codeswitch (line 1), using a pidgin variety of Malay but then shifts to English (line 3) when the client responds in English (line 2). However, her accommodation is rejected by the educated male Malay buyer who uses standard English and the Chinese sales staff again attempts to accommodate by using a English/Malay codeswitch (line 5) but this accommodation is once again rejected as the client responds still again in English (line 6). It can be seen therefore that attempting to accommodate to the preferred language depending on what appears to be the ethnic group of the client based on his/her complexion may be a hit and miss affair as the accommodation may be rejected and the client may not use his ethnic language but may have shifted to English with the intention of signifying status and power or merely because despite his ethnicity it has become his most comfortable and often used language.

The same seller, shifts to a lower variety of English with a well-dressed Chinese buyer (Extract 7b) and with an older Indian client (Extract 7c), whom she assumes is not educated in English she initiates the discourse in Malay (line 1). However, when the seller codeswitches (Malay/English) in her second turn, the buyer shifts to English (line 4) and the vendor then accommodates and also uses English (line 5).

*Extract 7 : Codeshifting : Female Chinese shopkeeper (FCS) with different ethnic clients*

**Extract 7a****With Malay Buyer**

1. FCS : Hello miss *Lu mahu apa* (What do you want?)

2. MMB : I'm looking for shampoo
  3. FCS : This brand is good lah
  4. MMB : I don't want this
  5. FCS : This brand *boleh* or not?
  6. MMS: Nolah I already got
- 

*Extract 7b*

**With Chinese seller**

1. FCS : Madam which one do you want?
  2. FCB : I want the 'pembersih muka " oil of ulan
  3. FCS : Maybe you can try this. This is good for you.
  4. FCB : Not this one. Any other type or not?
- 

*Extract 7c*

**With Indian seller**

1. FCS : *Kakak nak cari apa?*(What are you looking for elder sister?)
2. IFB : *Kakak nak cuci muka punya. Mana bagus?*(I am looking for something for the face. Which is good?)
3. FCS : *Sini Bagus.* Now promotion. Very cheap. Last time \$13.90. Now only \$10. *Belilah kak.*(This is good. ...Buy it)
4. IFB : Is it good for my oily face?
5. FCS : Good. This one good.

It is apparent that vendors tend to accommodate to their many clients' respective or what they perceive their respective linguistic preferences might be. However, attempting to accommodate to the client's ethnicity and what the vendor perceives as the client's ethnicity and preferred language choice may at times be rejected by the client. For instance, when a Bangladeshi migrant worker/seller attempted to accommodate to the ethnicity of his client, using Malay with a Malay client, the latter did not accommodate and responded in English. The seller, then in his next turn, codeswitched using Malay/English. In this way, he did to some extent, accommodate to the language choice of the buyer. Finally, in his third turn the seller completely switched to English in order to reciprocate the buyer's choice of language. The Malay client may not have used Malay for a number of reasons. He may have been educated in English and may be using more English than Malay in the many domains (see Fishman 1972 for the concept of domain) of language use. Alternatively, for him elite switching to English may be

a positive differentiation tactic. This is because English in Malaysia tends to denote high status.

*Constant Accommodation by buyer and seller*

Code alternation i.e. a speaker shifting from one language to another in different turns is rampant in the data. Such language alternation manifests Malaysian bilingualism and accommodative linguistic modus operandi. Extract 8 shows that in the first turn when the Malay buyer (MB) uses Malay the Indian seller converges and uses Malay too. However, in the next turn when the Malay speaker shifts to English (line 3) the seller again converges and gives a response, which is in dominant English (line 4). Such sensitivities to leach other's language choices result in constant language shifts even in very short interactions and occur frequently in the corpus. This phenomena of switching and shifting from one language to another in different turns is a feature of Malaysian discourse and is rampant in the market place.

*Extract 8 : Code Shifting*

**MFB (Malay female buyer) and IFS (Indian female seller)**

1. MB : *Majallah Wanita bulan ini ada kah lagi?* ( This month's Wanita - do you have it?)
2. IS : *Ada nanti saya ambil* ( Yes wait let me get it)
3. MB : **How much?**
4. IS: **Four dollar sahaja** (only)

Accommodation is not only seen in language choice but also in pronunciation. For instance, the Indian shopkeeper accommodates to the ethnicity of his Chinese customer by pronouncing some Malay lexical items or words in the same way that some Chinese pronounce certain Malay words. He pronounces *tala* (formal Malay = *Tidak* = does not have) in the way the Chinese speaker has done. Similarly, Malay interlocutors in inter-ethnic exchanges also used a similar strategy of accommodation. In an exchange between a Malay buyer and Chinese seller it is the buyer who converges to the pronunciation of certain lexical items as used by some Chinese when speaking Malay. She says *telong* (help) instead of *tolong*, which is the official standard Malay version. The reason for such accommodation and code shifting by the buyer becomes

apparent when in her last turn she asks for the goods to be put on credit. This is again an example of a metaphorical code switch.

At times linguistic accommodation is seen in the use of certain lexical items in code switches which are not Malay/English. For instance, in an exchange between a Malay buyer and Chinese seller the Malay buyer uses some common Chinese words like *cincai* (never mind) in his dominant Malay exchange. This use of a Chinese lexical item in Malay is with the intention of getting a price reduction as he openly states "*Ala cincai la tokey, dua puluh lima sudah lah*" (Never mind boss 25 cents). The mixing of token lexical items or words from vernacular languages together with Malay results in another variety of mixed discourse in the Malaysian market place. Language contact between the different ethnic groups has led to some degree of language borrowing and at times language assimilation. For instance the word "toupou" means to pack the food i.e. takeaway and is commonly used by non-Chinese Malaysians. Even after dining in a restaurant if one has not completed the dishes, one can request for the remainder to be "*taupaed*."

It is not only Malaysians but also non-Malaysians who appear sensitive to the nuances of language choice. Non-Malaysian foreign workers e.g. Bangladeshi workers appear to be aware of the social fabric of the Malaysian populace and ethnicities. Their choice of language is indicative of such an awareness. For instance, a Bangladeshi worker used only English with a Chinese client (Extract 9) and Malay with Malay clients.

*Extract 9 : Accommodating to the client's language preferences*

1. S : *Ya Incik makan sini atau bungkus?* (Eating in or take away?)
2. B : **Having here**
3. S : *Nak spicy atau original?* (Do you want spicy or original?)
4. B : **Spicy**
5. S : **Any additional order?**
6. B : **No thank you**

Like Lawson and Sachdev's 1996 study, the data in this study also shows accommodation by the vendor. This constant accommodation to the client's or buyer's linguistic preferences is seen repeatedly in the data. If the client initiates a discourse in

Malay he normally gets a reciprocal response; if he uses English/Malay codeswitches in his opening turn (Extract 10, line 1) the response will also be a codeswitch. If in the second turn the client shifts to another dominant language (line 3) the vendor again accommodates and shifts to the language used by the client in his second turn (line 4). Such constant accommodation to the linguistic preferences of the client occurs frequently in the corpus.

*Extract 10 : Constant Accommodation*

**Male Chinese Buyer and male Indian seller**

1. MCB : **Uncle boleh bagi saya satu plastic bag tak?**(Can you give me a plastic bag?)
2. MIS : *Ini dia plastic bag ...hello adik ini semua **junk food** semua tak elok untuk badan kita **you tahu tak?***(This is it. Sister junk food is not good for our bodies do you know?)
3. MCB : *tak apa **uncle. Once in a while I think its okay to do so*** (never mind)
4. MIS : **Not really. As you know junk food contains...**

The vendor is sensitive to the dominant language most often used by the buyer and even as the latter accommodates to the language choices of the former, the former shifts to what he perceives is the preferred or most comfortable language of the latter. In Extract 11 the buyer switches to English (line 1- speaking to a pharmacist he may have perceived English to be the preferred choice of the pharmacist) but uses Malay with her friend (line 3). Overhearing this (i.e. line 3) the vendor shifts to Malay (line 5).The buyer then reverts to dominant Malay (line 6) except when she has to use the expression "one strip"(line 6).

*Extract 11: Alert and linguistically sensitive vendors*

**Female Malay Buyer and Female Chinese seller**

1. MFB : **Do you have any painkiller?**
2. CFS : **Yes, Ponstan and Penadine, which brand do you want?**
3. MFB : to friend *Engkau hendak yang mana satu?* ( Which one do you want?)
4. MFB : **Berapa harga for each brand?** (How much...)

5. CFS : *Ponstan berharga \$2.50 dan penadine berharga \$2.30*  
(Ponstan costs...)
6. MFB : *Kalau begitu tolong berikan saya **one strip** Penadine* (if that's the case please give me one strip of Penadine)

In one exchange the accommodation by the vendor from the language he normally uses i.e. English is noted as he starts in English, ("Wait a...") and quickly shifts to Malay after an initial "**Wait a...nanti saya ambil** ( Wait... I will get it).

### Accommodation to ethnic address forms

Apart from converging to the language of the interlocutor, linguistic convergence can be seen in codemixing. Here, only a single lexical item of the other language is used together with the dominant language. For instance, address forms and pronoun markers used by Malaysian interlocutors, show great sensitivity to the ethnicity of the interlocutor. In the following example the variety of Malay spoken by the both the Indian seller and his Chinese client is the Bazaar variety (Extract 12). This is the only common language between these interlocutors coming from different ethnicities. However, the Indian seller has accommodated and uses the Chinese address form (*ah pak*). Another Chinese client codemixes between Malay and a dialect of Chinese and uses wa meaning I. In this way, she either consciously or subconsciously maintains her ethnic identity. Incidentally, the variety of Malay as used by some members of the Chinese community can be noted in the use of gua for I instead of standard Malay *saya* and lu for you instead of standard kamu. Such accommodation to ethnic preferences in the use of pronoun markers results in code mixes.

### *Extract 12a : Accomodation in use of address markers*

#### **CFB (Chinese female buyer) and IMS (Indian male seller)**

IS : HELLO *Apek lama tala jumpa* (long time I have not seen you)  
CB : *Wa pegi itu anak perempuan punya rumah* ( I went to my daughter's house)



*Extract 12b*

MMS to IFS : Tunggu sekejap ya **Miss** (wait a while okay Miss)

*Non-accommodation*

There are only 8 cases of non-accommodation in the data (Table 7a and b). Such non-accommodation is seen not only in intra-ethnic communication but also in interethnic communication. Extract 13 shows an intra-ethnic encounter, between a young female Malay (in her twenties) with an older male Malay vendor. The vendor makes no attempt to accommodate and converge to the language choice i.e. English, of the buyer. The only reason for such non-accommodation, it is hypothesized, is that there is disapproval on the part of the vendor that a member of the same speech community shifts to English. Another possible reason is the vendor's inability to speak English.

*Table 7a : Linguistic Divergence when Shopkeeper initiates discourse*

Ethnic Group of Shopkeeper	Language of Sh.	Eth. group of Client	Lang. of Client
Malay	Malay	Malay	English
Malay	Malay	Indian	English
Indian	Malay	Indian	English
Indian	Tamil	Indian	English

*Table 7b : Linguistic Divergence when Client Initiates Discourse*

Ethnic Group of Client	Lang. of Client	Ethnic Gr. of Sh.	Lang. Of Sh.
Malay	Eng./Malay	Indian	Malay
Chinese	Malay	Punjabi	English
Chinese	Malay/English	Indian	Malay
Indian	English	Chinese	Malay

### *Extract 13*

Female Malay Buyer and Male Malay seller

1. MMS : *Ye akak nak apa?* (Yes elder sister what do you want?)
2. FMB : **Do you have "Far away Perfume?"**
3. MMS : *Nak spray ke parfum?* (Do you want spray on perfume?)
4. FMB : *Parfum*
5. MMS : *4 ml 15 ml?*
6. FMB : **15 ml please. How much?**
7. MMS : *Lapan puluh sembilan (\$89)*

### **5. Conclusion**

The results of this study on actual language choice and use in a natural setting in Kuala Lumpur shows that both buyers and sellers are constantly accommodating to each other. The result of such code accommodation is the emergence of a linguistic variety -the code mixed discourse which should be seen as a language in its own right. Just like a language has many functions (Halliday, 1973) this mixed discourse has specific functions and should be evaluated favourably (see also Lawson and Sachdev, 2000 who hold the same view). The mixed discourse satisfies the function of convergence to the speech variety of the interlocutor but at the same time helps the speaker to maintain his identity or ethnic boundary. An educated Malay using bazaar or pidgin Malay with a less educated interlocutor shows "*budi bahasa*" (good manners/upbringing by correct language norms).

The use of an international language English in the mixed discourse or standard Malay instead of pidgin Malay can also be used to denote and signal status. It must also be pointed out that the varieties of English and Malay used by the participants indicate not only the type of education they underwent and their proficiency in a language but also at times their membership in different socio-economic and ethnic groups. For instance, Malays when speaking to Malays generally use standard or a dialect of Malay except in a middleclass English educated setting while Chinese and Indians when speaking to Malay vendors tend to use a variety of Malay

depending on their proficiency. Both Indian and Chinese Malaysians are not homogenous in their language choices for instance, the Chinese English educated middle class may be more comfortable with English while the Chinese Mandarin educated tend to use Mandarin with interlocutors from the same background. As for the Indians while some still maintain their ethnic mother tongue others have shifted to English or Malay even in the home setting. Code switching at the marketplace also has a metaphorical function as both parties to the transaction intend to buy/sell the product/service at the best possible price. Language choice in the market place appears to be like a see-saw with both buyer and seller constantly accommodating to each other's linguistic preferences resulting in code switches, code mixes and code alternations. Such linguistic devices help the speaker to partially or fully converge/accommodate to their interlocutors. The pragmatically driven and socially sensitive accommodation of individuals in an interaction in multilingual Malaysia is seen in the flowering and bountiful crop of this distinct linguistic variety in the Malaysian speech repertoire. A well-known Malay proverb says "Bahasa menunjukkan bangsa" (language reflects upbringing) and the code mixed discourse of Malaysians, it is argued, is the product of a multilinguistic, multiethnic population which is sensitive to each other's language variety. In the process of accommodation this hybrid has developed and flourished in the Malaysian setting .

Since multilingualism is the natural way of life in many countries and since trade is an inevitable fact of life both within a country and with other countries, being aware of the existence of code switching as a distinct linguistic variety which performs many functions in multilingual societies is merely being pragmatic to the concept of language as having both functional and symbolic power. With such a highly attuned language awareness "significant rewards" can be attained by both vendors and buyers when using such a mixed discourse.

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