ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to look into the occurrence of Hokkien in the local pop cultural scene, and to uncover the functional roles delivered by the dialect, so as to achieve a better understanding of the significance of Hokkien in modern Singapore.

Clearly a language issue, yet not entirely so, an expected approach might have been wholly linguistic in nature. Chua (2000) however, has confronted the issue by seeing it as a symbol of the “Return of the Repressed”. According to the latter, Hokkien, which is a suppressed language here, readily voices out the inner tensions and frustrations of a neglected and marginalized lot in society. As such, the instance of Hokkien in pop culture constitutes a “Politics of the Displaced”.

Meanwhile, locals have continually reverted to Hokkien when unleashing negative sentiments and when the need to fulfill certain social objectives arises. Out of the 4 objectives identified in this paper, 2 notable ones are: using Hokkien to reduce the social distance between friends and relatives and to portray one’s individuality.

Here, several scholars’ work provides guidance to identifying the role Hokkien plays. Scotton’s (1988) notion of code switching as indexical of social negotiations, Brown and Levinson’s (1982) “Politeness Phenomena”, as well as Johnstone and Bean’s (1997) seeing linguistic variation as a means of self expression all offer key frameworks under which we can purposefully explore the different roles Hokkien undertake. Whatever the case, the use of Hokkien in society is pleasurable because the act in itself spells resistance and is a public refusal of hegemony.

This paper thus offers a slant into the power play between Mandarin and that of dialects. While the government has shown to achieve much success in the “Speak Mandarin Campaign” over the last 30 years, Mandarin, as an intentionally fabricated language has been a working language for most Singaporeans. On the other hand, while an indigenous language like Hokkien has been deliberately suppressed, it has and is still one communication vehicle locals continually look to when articulating themselves.