Abstract

The Chinese population in Singapore takes up approximately 70% of the entire population, with the Hokkiens taking up approximately 40% of the Chinese population (Census 2010). The Hokkiens form the largest dialect group in Singapore and the Hokkien dialect is widely spoken by both Hokkien and non-Hokkien Singaporeans. Due to the vibrant sociolinguistic background of our society, Hokkien members pick up more than one language to stay competitive and to communicate well with the other races and dialect groups. Codeswitching is a common phenomenon in the daily conversations among these Hokkien Singaporeans. This serves as an important tool to look at the language maintenance and language shift (hereafter LMLS) of the Hokkien dialect.

This paper serves to examine LMLS of the Hokkien dialect across three generations of Singapore Hokkiens through the codeswitching phenomenon. The collection of data is based on three parts: 1) Natural exchanges of conversations were recorded on different occasions. 2) Interviews were conducted across three generations. These data collected are used as a foundation to look at LMLS in the Singapore Hokkien community. 3) Surveys were also conducted to capture the difference in language choices and language attitudes across the three generations.

The analysis of data shows that the codeswitching phenomenon increases across the three generations. The first generation Hokkiens who might be monolingual or multilingual, have an excellent command of the Hokkien dialect. The second generation Hokkiens, who are
normally multilingual, have a fairly good grasp of the Hokkien dialect with some codeswitching in their conversations. The third generation Hokkiens are multilingual but have poor or zero command of the Hokkien dialect. Taking into consideration the relationship between codeswitching and LMLS, the Hokkien dialect in Singapore is believed to be undergoing language shift at a tremendous pace. Factors that might have contributed to LMLS would be addressed from the socio-economic and socio-political point of view.