Some Borrowed features in Singapore Chinese

In Singapore, Mandarin has through the years developed local traits, not only in its sound pattern but also in its phraseology and grammar. It thus differs from the Modern Standard Chinese (MSC) to a considerable extent. These are certain factors which give rise to the development. Firstly, the Mandarin of Singapore has been influenced by Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese and other local dialects of southern Chinese. Secondly, dialectal features on all levels of linguistic structure either are substituted for or are added to MSC features. Mandarin is taught mostly by dialect speakers. A considerable number of Chinese teachers speak a mixture of dialects and Mandarin. As a result, the Mandarin spoken by their students is out of expectation. Thirdly, the local environment serves as an aid to the process of changes. In a multi-racial and multi-cultural society like Singapore, people speaking Mandarin tends to borrow lexical items and even grammatical structures from neighbouring languages, namely, Malay, English and Chinese dialects.

The present paper investigates four aspects in Singapore Mandarin, that is, lexicon, grammar, phonology and language use. In the first section, we examine the loan words in Singapore Mandarin. Most of the loan words, no matter what their origins are, are directly from Chinese dialects. Singapore Mandarin grammar is basically similar to that of MSC. But there still are differences between the two, especially in word order and in functional words as well as in ways of expression. Discussions on the grammatical differences between Singapore Mandarin and MSC constitute the second section. The third section deals with some borrowed features in phonology. We note that Singapore
Mandarin differs from MSC in every respect of phonology, in consonants, in vowels, in tones, however minor. Here we also include the readings of individual characters which vary from the norm. "Skipanting" and "code-switching" are very common phenomena in Singapore Chinese.

Local Mandarin is interspersed with words and expressions of English, Malay, and Chinese dialects that are pronounced the same way as in the respective foreign languages and dialects. Occasionally a conversation in Mandarin will switch to a conversation in some other language or, specially, dialect.

The study shows that a new dialect of Mandarin is born. However, my purpose here is only to describe certain borrowed features in Singapore Chinese. Whether this substandard (or local standard) of Mandarin should be allowed to live is not in the scope of this paper.