Abstract

This survey aims to trace the dynamic shift in the use of certain vocabulary items in Singapore Mandarin across a spectrum of ages. The usage frequencies of vocabulary items in both Singapore Mandarin and standard Mandarin have been studied. Moreover, for certain items, frequencies of usages often encountered by the informants were also recorded, in addition to those of their own usages.

The vocabulary items chosen for this survey are largely based on the study "Certain Lexical Features of Singapore Mandarin" by Associate Professor Chen Chung Yu in 1981. A total of 108 local non-standard vocabulary items have been selected for this survey. They are presented in three different sections on the questionnaire, each using a different approach of elicitation. The first section contains 32 non-standard items; informants were asked to indicate the frequencies according to a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always), in terms of their own usages and the usages they have encountered. The second section uses the same scale, but consists of 8 groups of both standard and non-standard items. In the final section, informants were given (1) English phrases and sentences to translate into Mandarin, and (2) Mandarin sentences with missing words to fill in.

This survey was conducted on 40 informants, 10 each from four age groups: 20-25, 35-40, 50-55 and 65-70 years old, with a gap of 10 years in between. It has been observed that in the case of the non-standard items, the reported encounters were almost always more frequent than the informants' own usage. In a few cases, the expected non-standard usage did not appear in the informants' choice at all. Yet in the investigator's
own experiences, such forms have been fairly frequently encountered. This is an obvious indication that in a survey like this, non-standard usages are likely to be under-represented, as the informants tend to be self-conscious and thus be reluctant to reveal their usage of some non-standard items.

Overall, 14 items have been found to remain widespread in Singapore among various age groups; 5 items are on the rise; 54 items are on decline; the rest show no clear direction for changes. While dynamic changes are evident in certain items, in general, most of the lexical features reported for the early eighties are still very, or fairly, much in current use.