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SINGLISH CAN?
The role of speech accommodation in Singapore English

Introduction

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)
The changing of one’s communicative behaviour to indicate social distance towards or away from the other party (Sachdev & Giles, 2006).

Convergence towards people you
Divergence from people you

English - Singlish Conversations
Prevalent code-switching between Singapore Colloquial English (SCE), i.e. Singlish, and Singapore Standard English (SSE) in the local scene.

Bilingual speakers have been found to be evaluated more favourably by listeners when greater effort is perceived to be put into language accommodation (Giles et al., 1973).

Key findings

Participants awarded higher ratings to the customer in personality traits such as intelligence and confidence, when he/she converged to the salesperson’s language. Contrary to findings (Giles et al., 1973), the salesperson received more positive evaluations when he diverged from the language of the customer.

The Customer is NOT Always Right!
Unlike others from different countries (e.g. Canada), it appears that Singaporeans find it more important for customers to comply to language standards set by the salesperson rather than the other way round. Hence, the salesperson has the responsibility to lead and set standards for interactions. This has implications for the hiring of salespersons in business settings.

You are What You Speak
Language Choice ↔ Social Image

Future Work

Future studies can be extended to include participants in the older age group. Conversations of other language combinations : Chinese-Singlish, Malay-Singlish, Tamil-Singlish would also be interesting areas for study.

Acknowledgements:
The invaluable assistance provided by Cynthia Siew Shu Qin has been greatly appreciated.

Research Aims

(i) To determine Singaporeans’ responsiveness to language accommodation in SSE-SCE conversations.
(ii) To find out how convergence and divergence of language in an SSE-SCE conversation would affect the perceived social image of a speaker.

Methodology

1. Speaker Rating Questionnaire
4 variations of a SSE-SCE dialogue featuring a sales encounter between a salesperson and customer were recorded. They differed in terms of the language spoken (i.e. SSE or SCE) on various speech turns, simulating instances of language convergence and divergence in the conversation.

Singaporean participants (aged 18 to 35 years old) first listened to the recordings and then rated the personality traits of the salesperson and customer after each speech turn.

Participants awarded higher ratings to the customer in personality traits such as intelligence and confidence, when he/she converged to the salesperson’s language. Contrary to findings (Giles et al., 1973), the salesperson received more positive evaluations when he diverged from the language of the customer.

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