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## **Singaporean Chinese Children's Special Chinese Vocabulary and Their Identity**

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### **Abstract**

As a variation of the Chinese language, Singapore Mandarin has its characteristics which represent themselves in phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar. Factors contributing to these characteristics are many: 1. Ancestors of Chinese Singaporeans mainly came from southern China and Singapore Chinese has been influenced by Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka; 2. Since the British rule, English had been the official language and keeps to be at a dominant position since independence of Singapore. Similarly, Singapore Chinese bears certain characteristics of the English language; 3. The population of Singapore is composed of Chinese, Malay, and Indian. In the course of interaction between nations, Singapore Chinese was also influenced by languages of the other two races, Malay in particular; 4. Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, great social changes led to great changes in the Chinese language. However, for quite some time, communication between China and Singapore was stopped, so was the

interaction between Mandarin and Singapore Chinese. Due to all these factors, Singapore Chinese has many unique characteristics comparing with standard modern Chinese.

Data for current study come from Singapore Children Spoken Mandarin Corpus and this study tries to probe into usage and origin of some uniquely Singapore vocabulary in the Chinese language, which reflects Chinese Singaporeans' unique identity formed in this unique historical, cultural, geographical, and racial environment.

**Key words:** Singapore Mandarin, Standard Mandarin, lexis, grammatical features,

## **1. Introduction**

Much research has been done about Singapore Mandarin (SM) in terms of its lexical and grammatical features (Li & Chew, 2002; Chen, 1993; Chew & Chew, 1998). Li & Chew (2002) made a systematic comparison between SM and Standard Mandarin (SDM), or what is generally termed Putonghua in China, with main focus on the differences between their vocabularies. They found that the two are different from each other either in their conceptual meanings, sememe meanings and emotive colouring of certain words. That is to say, they looked at the issue from a linguistic perspective and compared the two of their linguistic features. Chen (1993), on the other hand, analyzed the characteristics of lexis of SM from a sociolinguistic perspective and traced the possible origins of some word/expressions in SM. He found that SM has been influenced by English, Malay, and Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka. Other than vocabulary, Chen also summarized some grammatical features of SM which are also quite different from those of SDM.

The data of Li and Chew's study were all taken from local newspapers and novels by Singapore authors, that is, they were written language rather than oral.

## 2. Current study

To study Singapore children's vocabulary in their oral Mandarin so as to provide baseline data for the compilation textbooks for Singapore primary schools, a large-scale survey was conducted in 2005 involving over 600 preschool children aged between 5 and 6 years old. Data-collecting methods included interview, picture-elicited talk and video-taped classroom activities. All data were transcribed using *Transcriber Version 1.4* with reference to CRPP's (Center for Research in Pedagogy and Practice) *Transcription Standard and Convention* and then segmented and annotated according to *973 Segmentation and Annotation Guidelines for Contemporary Chinese*. On the basis of the annotation of the data, *Singapore Children Spoken Mandarin Corpus* was set up, which is the first of its kind in Singapore.

### 2.1. Data analysis

According to Xu & Wang (2004), the notion of Special Words of Singapore Mandarin (SWSM) can either be general or special. SWSM in its special sense refers to the words/phrases used in SM only and they are different from any Chinese words/phrases used outside of Singapore, for example, words such as 组屋 (cheap housing flats built by the government), 拥车证 (certificate for motor vehicle purchase) etc. and Lexicon of Singapore Mandarin in the general sense differs only from the SDM (Putonghua). These words/phrases are commonly used not only in Singapore but also in places likes Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau and

because of the frequent and long-lasting interaction between the Chinese languages in the five places, more often than not, it is not easy to tell which word/phrase originates from which place. The lexicon of Singapore Mandarin dealt with in the current study is of this general notion.

## 2.2. Findings

The use of certain special words or certain grammatical structures is often discouraged in schools. However, the percentage of SWSM in the Corpus is not high, only accounting for about 1% of the total number of tokens or about 5% of the total number of words in the Corpus (Table 1), which means that despite the concern over these words/phrases, their occurrence in actual daily communication is not very frequent. In other words, maybe there is not the need to ‘correct’ the use of them, as is the concern of many language educators.

**Table 1 Percentage of SWSM in the Corpus**

	Corpus	SWSM	(%)
<b>Total of tokens</b>	63488	5848	0.92
<b>Total of words</b>	2343	108	4.16

Table 2 shows the allocation of parts of speech of these words/phrases in the Corpus: the vast majority are content words (nouns, verbs, and adjectives account for 89.9% of the total) while form words are much less (adverbs and auxiliaries are only 2.7% of the total), which means that the SWSM are closely related with the children’s everyday life.

**Table 2 parts of Speech of SWSM in the Corpus**

Part of speech	Noun	Verb	Adj.	Adverb	Aux.	Idiom	Total
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<b>SWSM</b>	44	26	33	1	2	2	108
(%)	40.8	24.1	30.6	0.9	1.8	1.8	100

After analysis of the forms, meanings and uses of the 108 words/phrases of Singapore Mandarin, the authors assume that the possible origins of them are as follows (In the examples, TrnXXXX is the number of turn of utterance in the Corpus, Spk1, the interviewer and Spk2 the interviewed child.):

### 2.2.1. Vocabulary

#### Influence of dialects

The first and maybe the most predominant factor contributing to the difference between Singapore Mandarin and Standard Mandarin in terms of vocabulary is the influence of the various dialects of the Chinese language such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka spoken in Fujian, Guangdong provinces of China, where most of the Singaporean Chinese were from. The influence of dialects on SM is mainly in the form of loan words, literal translation, and conversion.

#### 阿嬷

In SM 阿嬷 is used to refer to both one's maternal and paternal grandmother, while in SDM 姥姥/外祖母 and 奶奶/祖母 are used for the two respectively.

#### Example 1

Trn0191 Spk2 我的阿嬷，去别的，别的那个，别的，别的 hotel.

## 垄沟

The SDM equivalent for 垄沟 is 水沟, meaning 'a drain'.

### Example 2

Trn0270 Spk1 为什么骂他的妹妹？

Trn0271 Spk2 鞋子掉去**垄沟**。

## 煮，煮饭

The SM word 煮 refers to 'cooking' in the general term while in SDM 煮 means 'boil'; 炒 is used to mean 'fry'; and cooking is expressed as 做饭.

### Example 3

Trn0084 Spk2 有，有时，我爸爸是在家**煮**炒饭，then 我 Mummy 是**煮**菜，有时有**煮**菜，有时候**煮**鱼，有时**煮**虾这些。

## 冷衣

The SDM term for winter-wear is 冬装 or 冬天的衣服 in the spoken language and in SM 冷衣 is used for winter-wear.

### Example 4

Trn0418 Spk2 我只会折裤子跟长裤，还是短短衣服，还是长的衣服，还是 sexy 的衣服。会会。

Spk1 哇！你有 sexy 的衣服啊？

Trn0419 Spk2 会了。可是 hor 冷衣我才不会折。

## 生气

In SDM, 生气 is an intransitive verb, which cannot have a human object, and can be split up in collocation as 生某人的气. While in SM it is used both as intransitive and transitive, and more often, as transitive.

### Example 5

Trn0229 Spk2 有时他, 有时他生气我, 有时我, 有时他不生气我.

## 坏蛋

坏蛋 is a noun in SDM while in SM it is often used as either a verb or adjective.

### Example 6

Trn0594 Spk1 你 wish for 什么东西？

Trn0595 Spk2 Wish 我不要坏蛋(v)。

Trn0596 Spk1 你不要坏蛋啊？

Trn0597 Spk2 我每次都很坏蛋(adj)的。

Li and Chew (Li & Chew, 2002) observed that in the Chinese language, two-word words are more often used than single-character words when the two expressions share the same notions. This trend is more obvious in SDM while single-character words are more often used in SM. The findings of this study seem to conform to this observation. For example, in SDM 驾驶 rather than 驾, 搭载 rather than 搭 or 载, 衣 rather than 衣服, XX 橱 rather than 橱, are used though the meanings are the same.

### **搭、载、驾**

These three characters are all connected with driving of a vehicle both in SM and SDM. However, there are distinctive differences between the use of the group of words in the two languages: in SM, 驾 means 'drive'; 载 'drive somebody to a place'; and 搭 'ride' and in SDM, these three words are used more often in written rather than spoken language. That is to say, they are more formal in SDM. The equivalents of these three words in SDM are 驾驶, (开车)送, 搭乘.

### **Example 7**

Trn0188 Spk2 Saturday, 我爸爸今晚有驾 taxi, so 我们今晚去楼下 Junction Eight 跑跑一下, 玩玩啰。



### Example 8

Trn0052 Spk1 哦，今天早上你怎么来学校的啊？

Trn0053 Spk2 爸爸妈妈载我来学校。

### Example 9

Trn0530 Spk2 有时搭德士，有时搭 bus 喽。

## 衣

In SM 衣 is more often used than 衣服 to refer to ‘clothes, clothing’.

### Example 10

Trn0278 Spk1 这不是很冷喽，你还说一点点。

Trn0279 Spk2 我去我穿很，很厚的衣，没有什么感觉到。

## 弯

Similarly, 弯 is a noun in SDM, meaning ‘a turn’; and to express ‘to move in a circular direction’,

转弯 is used but not a single character 弯, as is used in SM.

### Example 11

Trn0443 Spk2 嗯，我踏脚车，他踏脚车，载我。他直直走了就弯下来就再弯。看车才走下去再去上面的 car-park。Then，then 呵，下来了就，弯就，到了。

## 顾

The single-character word 顾 is equivalent to 照顾、照看 in SDM.

### Example 12

Trn0580 Spk2 妈妈跟爸爸在顾妹妹喽。

## 橱

It is the same with 橱, though it is also used together with words like 冰, 衣 etc, to form words like 冰橱, 衣橱 etc, the SDM equivalents of which are 冰箱, 衣柜.

### Example 13

Trn0111 Spk2 我的房间有, 有玩具, 还有许多橱。

### Example 14

Trn0532 Spk1 不会坏 meh?

Trn0533 Spk2 不会。放冰橱就不会坏。

### Example 15

Trn0604 Spk2 因为我们的鞋橱已经坏了。

## 力，有力

To say 'someone is strong or powerful', the SDM expression is '有力量，有力气' or '有劲(儿)', and in SM 力 is used instead of 力量 or 力气，hence, 有力, which is more often used in written, formal SDM.

### Example 16

Trn0333 Spk1 哦，为什么你不打回他呢？

Trn0334 Spk2 他**有力**嘛，他**有力**我也是**有力**。

## 彩，彩色

In SDM, 彩 or 彩色 are both nouns but in SM they are more often used as verbs, meaning 'give a colour to'. To express this, 涂(颜)色 or 上(颜)色 are used.

### Example 17

Trn0604 Spk2 Then 我们就不可**以彩色**，我们回家来**彩色** liao。

### Example 18

Trn0210 Spk2 画画东西，画美美。**彩**东西美美。

Some researchers relate the special meanings and uses of certain words/expressions with the historical and social realities of Singapore (Xu & Wang, 2004). The promotion of Mandarin in Singapore commenced with the lack of direct influence from Mandarin and for quite a long time the textbooks adopted were in the Chinese language of the period of May Fourth Movement (1919). As a result, there is a deposit of old, even obsolete sometimes, use of words/expressions in Singapore Mandarin, which have been cast in Mandarin. This makes another characteristic of SM and difference in uses between those words/expressions in the two. The following are examples:

### **而已**

而已 often collocates with 只是, 无非 in written Mandarin as an sentence-end auxiliary and is seldom used in oral language. In contrast, in Singapore Mandarin it is often used in daily conversation and not in collocation with words like 只是, 无非.

### **Example 21**

Trn0087 Spk1 什么东西呀？都给你吃什么？

Trn0088 Spk2 饭，面而已。

### **骂架，相骂**

骂架 and 相骂(quarrel) have been replaced by 吵架 in SDM but still remain in SM to refer to quarrel or quarreling.

### Example 22

Trn0268 Spk2 然后吃完你可以去，就是，他在这边，这个人在这边，一直**骂架**，  
要吃东西。

### Example 23

Trn0378 Spk2 嗯，因为他们不懂哪一个排先，then 他们有一个要去前面，所以他们  
**相骂**。

### 游水，游船

In ancient Chinese language 游水 meant to swim, which is expressed as 游泳 in modern Chinese.

游船 meant to go sightseeing on a boat but it is a noun in modern Chinese referring to a yacht.

However, the two still hold their ancient meanings in SM.

### Example 24

Trn0266 Spk1 游泳啊，这个 uncle 呢？

Trn0267 Spk2 在**游水**。

### Example 25

Trn0436 Spk1 这个叔叔在做什么？

Trn0437 Spk2 他们在**游船**。

## 鞭

This character used to be both a noun and verb in ancient Chinese meaning a whip (N) or to beat with a whip (V). In SM it is still a verb but in SDM it is only a noun and its sense as a verb can only be seen in textbooks about ancient articles or in idioms such as 鞭尸 (to whip one's dead body).

### Example 26

Trn0546 Spk1 做功课不对妈妈就生气了，是不是？妈妈生气以后是什么样子的？

Trn0547 Spk2 鞭我。

Trn0548 Spk1 噢，什么？

Trn0549 Spk2 鞭我。

### Influence of English

The influence of English upon SM is also reflected in its vocabulary, namely, SM has borrowed some English words by transliterating, translating using the closest sounds, but most English words are translated into SDM according to its meaning. For example, taxi, lorry and bus etc are translated into SM according to their sounds as 德士，罗厘，巴士 and in SDM, 出租车，卡车 and 公共汽车 respectively.

### Example 27

Trn0090 Spk1 阿公帮 Mummy 啊。那爸爸呢？爸爸做什么？

Trn0091 Spk2 哦，爸爸驾德士。

### Example 28

Trn0650 Spk1 哦，搭 bus。Ok，Ok。还有，哦，你只有搭 bus 吗？还是可以搭别的  
东西去？

Trn0651 Spk2 也可以搭罗厘和 bus。

### Example 29

Trn0175 Spk2 嗯，巴士那边坐然后去 Jurong East。

## Influence of Malay & Tamil

Similarly, some Malay words also found their way into SM by transliterating. A typical example is 巴刹, the SDM equivalent of which is 集贸市场.

Trn0270 Spk2 哦，Mummy 去做工，就去巴刹，就 Mummy 带我去巴刹。

Some words in SM are directly borrowed from Malay even without translation, that is, in their original Malay form.

### Example 30

Trn0039 Spk1 你喜欢吃什么？

Trn0040 Spk2 Carrot 和 fish 还有 satay，哦，chicken，duck，还有 noodle，rice，  
fish cake。

### Example 31

Trn0418 Spk1 Shopping , 去那里 shopping ?

Trn0419 Spk2 去我的 , 家那边 shopping , 还有巴刹场 , 还有那些 **pasar malam**。

In Singapore, a country surrounded in a Malay world, Chinese people have long been interacting with Malay people and this borrowing of words between their languages is quite natural. The same is true with Tamil, the language spoken by Singaporean Indians. For example, roti prata (a kind of Indian pan-cake) is directly borrowed from Tamil:

### Example 32

Trn0230 Spk1 嗯 , 去 food court 吃什么啊 ?

Trn0231 Spk2 有 **roti prata**。

#### 2.2.2 Grammatical features

Some of grammatical/sentence structures and collocations in SM are also quite different from those in SDM. Similarly, the special structures/collocations reflect the influence from dialects such as Hokkien.

先



In SDM the adverb 先 is always put before the verb as an adverbial modifier of the verb but in Hokkien 先 is usually put after the verb it modifies.

### Example 33

Trn0075 Spk1 还有什么？

Spk2 吃饱先。才吃汤。

### 到

The verb+到+adjective combination is a unique collocation in SM, in which the adjective is the complement to the verb while in SDM the auxiliary word between the verb and its complement is 得, that is, the structure is verb+得+adjective. Though there is also similar collocation with 到 in SDM, the complement after 到 is always a noun denoting a place or point of time but not a adjective or a verb, i.e. verb+到+noun.

### Example 34

Trn0352 Spk2 之后我怕到要死，我就躲进橱里面。

### Example 35

Trn0351 Spk1 她为什么生气呢？

Trn0352 Spk2 因为他们弄到肮肮脏脏。

### Example 36

Trn0026 Spk2 我是华人，但是我每天一直我每天吵我的妈妈去游泳。所以我晒到黑黑。

## 有

The collocation of 有+verb is a very common structure in SM, where 有 does not have the meaning of ‘to possess’ or ‘to own’. Rather, it is more like an auxiliary denoting a state of being as in **Example 37**, or the English auxiliary verb ‘have’ to form a perfect tense as in **Example 38**. Because of this, 有没有 can also be used in interrogative sentences and 有 can be used to give a brief answer to such yes-no questions (**Example 39**). In contrast, 有 in SDM means ‘to possess/own’ only, in other words, it is never used together with a verb but with a noun as its object.

### Example 37

Trn0426 Spk1 你帮她做啊？

Trn0427 Spk2 我们两个都，我们三个都有做。

### Example 38

Trn0488 Spk2 有去过，去，去马来西亚，如果有开学，就没有。

### Example 39

Trn0088 Spk1 Hui Qi，妈妈有没有做工啊？

Trn0089 Spk2 有，有时没有去 office，有时有去 office。

### **多+Mumerical+Noun**

多+M+N in SM means M more N (for example one more egg) but the same idea in SDM is

expressed as 另外 M 个 N or 还有 M 个 N

### **Example 40**

Trn0376 Spk2 我只，我只会画，多一个杯。还有碗。

Trn0747 Spk2 Then 多一个人在吃鸡蛋。

### **Replicated words**

Replicated words in SDM are, in most cases, the characteristics of baby language but in Singapore Mandarin adults as well as children often use replicated words in their daily conversation, which makes another special feature of SM. Examples are as follows:

### **Example 41**

Trn0675 Spk1 红包，OK，还有呢？还有新年要做什么事情？

Trn0676 Spk2 拜拜。

Trn0677 Spk1 Ok，拜拜什么？

Trn0678 Spk2 神。

### Example 42

Trn0282 Spk2 跟洋娃娃，还有跟洋娃娃一起假假去上班。

Trn0371 Spk2 他只会乱乱，乱乱丢玩具。玩玩具以后，丢玩具。Then 画完，then 就乱乱丢纸。

### Example 43

Trn0610 Spk2 我的 daddy 跟我去，去街街，then 我的妹妹一直哭。

The influence of English can also be seen in the grammatical features of SM, in the following examples, 我喜欢两个 is just like a literal translation from the English sentence *I like both* and 我没有看到全部 *I didn't see all (of them)*. In SDM 两个 or 全部 usually are not used as objects of verbs but as adverbial modifiers to the verb and are placed before the verb, as 两个我都喜欢 and 我全没有看到.

### Example 44

Trn0497 Spk1 我最喜欢哪一个故事啊？我喜欢那个，我喜欢两个。

### Example 45

Trn0172 Spk2 我没有看到全部。

### **3. Discussion**

To sum up, the data and examples listed show that though the absolute amount of lexicon of Singapore Mandarin is not significant, their use do reflect the culture and life of the Singaporean Chinese, their love of their dialects and Mandarin of the early times, and their embrace of languages of other nationalities. The examples also reveal that in the trend of convergence between Singapore Mandarin and Standard Mandarin, there is also power to diverge and this divergence makes Singapore Mandarin a variation of the Chinese language with its own unique historical and social colours and in the meantime, reflects the national identity of the Singaporean Chinese in their historical, cultural, geographical and humanistic environment. From the above description and analysis of special lexicon in Singapore children's oral Mandarin, we think that the special lexicon is a kind of historical heritage of their Chinese ancestors for the fact that many of the words in Singapore Mandarin bear the characteristics of their dialects. Singapore Mandarin is a product of the struggle between retainment of its own culture and adaptation to its environment and has its value of existence. In other words, Singapore Mandarin, like Singapore English, plays an important role the building a harmonious society in this multiracial society. Though there is gradual decline in the use of Mandarin and Chinese dialects, the above listed special words in Singapore Mandarin will remain. Educators of Mandarin should not just resist, mock and criticize these linguistic phenomena. If they do, they are to bring puzzlement to Mandarin learners and make them lose their interest in learning the language.

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