

Chinese vendors' code-switching in service encounters in Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract

The study examined the language of service encounters in a bakery operated by Chinese vendors in a Foochow-dominant town in Malaysia. Naturally occurring data of one hundred service encounters were digitally recorded (83 with Chinese customers and 17 with non-Chinese customers). In intraethnic interactions, Foochow is the default language choice but Mandarin is emerging as a viable option. In interethnic interactions, the Chinese vendors accommodated by speaking either Bahasa Malaysia or Bazaar Malay. A majority of the service encounters took place in one language as code-switching was identified in only 19 encounters. In interethnic interactions, the vendors switched to thank customers in English but in intraethnic interactions, the functions vary with the staging of service encounters. The main functions are emphasis on attributes of goods in Sale Enquiry, attributes and quantity of goods to buy in Sale Request, and attributes, quantity and price of goods to sell in Sale Compliance. Code-switching in the Purchase Closure stage brings in expression of thanks which is not an integral feature of service encounters in Eastern settings. Using stages of service encounters to explain code-switching functions provides a less context-dependent framework which shows how code-switching brings about efficiency in service encounters.

KEYWORDS: LANGUAGE CHOICE, CODE-SWITCHING, SERVICE ENCOUNTERS, RETAIL ENCOUNTERS

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