

Languages and cultures in action: Snippets of interactions from Singapore

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The city-state of Singapore is known for its linguistic and cultural diversity, with a community made up of people from a variety of cultural traditions and an education system that promotes plurilingualism in English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Within each of these languages, there are further variations and complications. Speakers of ‘Chinese’, for example, find themselves using, in addition to Mandarin, a mix of ‘Chinese dialects’, with Hokkien (Min) being the most popular, but there are equally large numbers speaking Toechew (or Chaozhou), Hakka (or Kejia) and Cantonese (Yue).

In this paper we move from a bird’s eye view of the community to an engagement with languages and cultures at the ground level by zooming in on talk-in-interaction in Singapore as people go about their everyday businesses. Using snippets of social interactions in the form of video recordings and an Ethnomethodological and Conversation Analytic approach, I will show how a host of interactional goals are achieved via the skilled use of a pool of interlingual and intercultural resources that have a distinctly ‘Singaporean flavour’. By approaching these interactions as ‘culture in action’ (Hester & Eglin 1997), I will unpack the localisms and distinctive forms of expression in an attempt to document and celebrate a rich and colorful kaleidoscope of creative practices that we can identify as ‘speaking, the Singapore way.’

BIO: K.K. Luke is President’s Chair Professor of Linguistics and Chair of the School of Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. K.K.’s research is on talk and social interaction using an Ethnomethodological and Conversation Analytic approach. This research explores the ways in which joint actions are achieved through talk (and ‘body language’), and is driven by the fundamental question of what makes communication possible. Among K.K.’s publications are *Utterance Particles in Cantonese Conversation*, *Telephone Calls: Unity and Diversity in the Structure of Telephone Conversations across Languages and Cultures*.

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