The Spread of Mandarin in Malaysia: Evidence in language choices in public settings[1]

Wang Xiaomei

Faculty of Languages and Linguistics
University of Malaya

Abstract

Adopting Cooper's (1982) framework of language spread, this paper focuses on the spread of Mandarin in the Chinese community in the state of Johore, Malaysia. Survey results published by the present author already show some evidence of the spread of Mandarin among Chinese Malaysians. Specifically, those previous studies have focused on language choices in the family domain (Wang, 2007) and the role of mass media played in the process of Mandarin spread (Wang, 2005, 2006a). The present study complements the previous ones by focusing on the language choice behaviors in public settings. Observations on language use were made in public places such as shopping centers, night markets, food stalls, and coffee shops. Unintrusive observation techniques complement the instrument of questionnaire used in previous surveys. 201 interactions between 102 sales persons and customers were recorded in the observation form by the researcher. Four towns in the state were chosen for the study, namely *Johor Baru, Kluang, Batu Pahat* and *Muar* The results show the spread of Mandarin among the Chinese Malaysians in the towns studied. Age and gender are proven to be two significant factors influencing the language choice of the salespersons and the customers. The younger the speakers are, the more Mandarin is used during the interactions. Meanwhile, the female speakers tend to use more Mandarin than the male speakers. Slightly significant difference is found across 6 public settings in terms of

language choice. However, who speaks first is not a significant factor influencing the language choice in the interaction. Present findings complement previous ones: Mandarin is gaining ground not only in private settings, but also in public settings, where Chinese dialects used to dominate.

Introduction

Mandarin as one of the transnational languages (Foley 2006:60) in the world has been extensively used in the Greater China, namely, mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. It has become one of the core symbols of Chinese identity, not only in the above areas, but also in Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese communities. As Ting and Sussex (2002) claim, Mandarin Chinese has become the language of wider communication within the Chinese community in *Miri*, a city in Sarawak, East Malaysia. It is also true for the Chinese in the state of Johore, West Malaysia. To be specific, Mandarin is reported to be used not only in public settings (Wang 2006a), but also in private settings, such as the family domain (Wang 2007). In previous studies done by the present researcher, the factors contributing to the spread of Mandarin in the state of Johore, the southernmost state in West Malaysia, have also been explored (Wang 2005). Mass media in Mandarin from the neighboring country Singapore has been found to play an important role in the spread of Mandarin. In addition to this, Chinese education, language attitude, economic and cultural values of Mandarin are contributing factors leading to the spread of Mandarin.

The above findings are based on questionnaire surveys or structured interviews, which mainly rely on the subjects' self report. To improve the reliability of the results, this study is carried out through an unintrusive observation technique. By doing so, it could complement the previous studies. Public settings, such as shopping centers, markets (morning market and night market), street stalls, and coffee shops were chosen to be the observation locales in four towns in the state of Johore, namely *Johor Baru*, *Kluang*, *Batu Pahat* and *Muar* A total of 201 interactions between 102 sales assistants and customers were recorded in the observation form. The collection of language choice data was then compared to the results of the previous studies obtained via questionnaire surveys.

Fishman (1976/1989) points out that the issue of *whether* a language is used is the first and basic topic for the study of language maintenance and language shift, without exploring which, neither the *where* nor the *why* of the language use can be studied. Hence, to document the spread of

Mandarin is the first and important task for this research. While analyzing the process of language spread, Fishman (1976/1989) differentiates the LWC (language of wider communication) setting and the immigrant setting[2] Where the spread of Mandarin is concerned, it is the former, namely the spread of a language of wider communication in the Chinese community Fishman (1989:

island, where the acquisition of the national or bridging language may follow the LWC model He hypothesizes that there are different

in the two settings. The diffusion of LWC may commonly stabilize at the stage of domain separateness. It is true for the use of Malay, the national language, and the spread of Mandarin in other states, like Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, but not for the diffusion of Mandarin in the state of Johore. It undergoes the similar process as the immigrant language setting which goes through the cycle of domain overlap, domain separateness, and domain overlap (Fishman, 1989 244).

Against the above theoretical background, the spread of Mandarin in the state of Johore could be specifically discussed using Cooper's (1982) framework, i.e. *Who adopts what, when, where, why,* and *how?*(Wang 2005). However, the multilingual background and the special geographical location of the state of Johore makes the situation of the spread of Mandarin rather unique compared to other cases in the world, such as the spread of English.

In the following sections, the Chinese community in the state of Johore will be introduced, followed by the general description of Mandarin spread, section four reports the results of the current study, followed by discussion and conclusion.

[2] LWC setting is defined as a setting in which a powerful language enters into the social space of an established population; and the immigrant setting is a setting in which a normally powerless population enters into the social space of an established language (Fishman 1989: 244).

The Chinese community in the state of Johore

The sub-composition of the Chinese community

The state of Johore is the southernmost state in Malaysia, adjacent to Singapore in the south. It is also the second most populous state in the country, with 55% Malays, 36% Chinese, and 7% Indians according to the Census 2000 The proportion of Chinese (36%) in this state outnumbers the average in the country, which is 26%. Obviously, the demographic advantage will be a positive factor for the maintenance and spread of Chinese languages and culture. It would also result in the minimal influence from Malay culture (Tan 2000· 55). With a large population, the composition of the Chinese community is not homogeneous, but heterogeneous. According to the Census 1990, the Chinese community in Malaysia is composed of 34.7% Southern Min Group, 23.5% Hakka, 18.3% Cantonese, and 23 5% others (Tan 2000). For the state of Johore, the composition of the Chinese community is shown in Table 1 below

Table 1   The sub-ethnic composition of the Chinese community
(census 1990)

| *Dialect group*	Percentage
Southern Min group	46.3%
Hakka	19.8%
Cantonese	10.2%
Chaozhou group	14 1%
Hainan group	4.9%
others	4.7%
Total	100%

Table 1 shows that the Southern Min group is the largest dialect group in the Chinese community in the state of Johore, Hakka the second, and Chaozhou group the third. Accounting for half of the population in the Chinese community, Southern Min dialect was the *lingua franca* in most towns in this state in the past. According to a survey conducted by the author in the state of Johore in 2002[3], 60.5% of the respondents reported

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[3] The survey aimed to investigate the language use and language attitude of the Chinese in the State of Johore, which is based on questionnaires. Altogether 1636 students from 6 Chinese independent schools in six towns were investigated in the survey.

that Southern Min dialect is the most often used dialect in their living areas. In contrast, Mandarin was reported to be the most popular language in local area by 79.5% respondents in a 2005 survey[4]; Southern Min dialect is the second most popular language claimed by 44.8% respondents. This indicates that Southern Min dialect is the prestige dialect in the Chinese community in the state of Johore, which is also reported by other scholars (Tan 2000).

Four towns were chosen for this study, namely *Johor Baru, Kluang, Batu Pahat* and *Muar* The geographic location of the four towns is shown in Figure 1 below

Figure 1   Map of the state of Johore[5]

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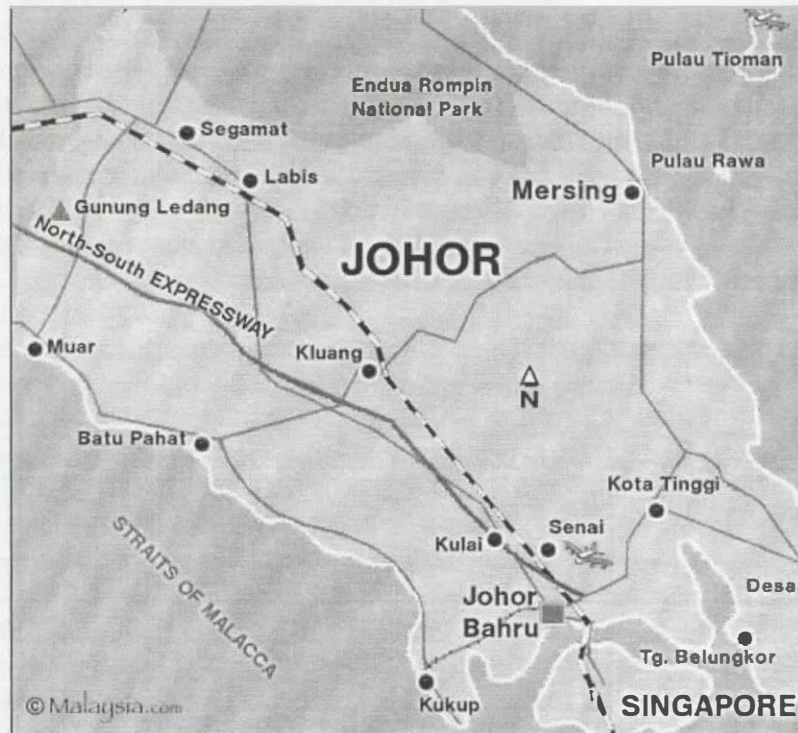
[4] The survey focuses on the language use and mass media in the State of Johore. 418 respondents from four towns, namely *Johor Baru. Kluang, Batu Pahat and Muar* were investigated by questionnaires. Please refer to Wang (2005) for details.
[5] This map is downloaded from the following website: http://www.malaysia-maps.com/johor-map.htm

The four towns are the most populous towns in the state. In addition, they also have the largest Chinese population. Table 2 indicates the ethnic composition in the four towns (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2001).

Table 2 Ethnic composition of four towns in Johore

Ethnic group	Johor Baru	Kluang	Batu Pahat	Muar
Bumiputra	47 6%	46.9%	51.2%	53 7%
Chinese	41.5%	42.4%	46.4%	42.8%
Indians	10.2%	10.3%	2.2%	3.2%
Others	0 7%	0.4%	0.2%	0.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Chinese account for a large proportion (over 40%) of the total population in all four towns. According to census 2000[6], there are a total of 831,055 Chinese in the state of Johore, out of which 47 1% are in *Johor Baru*, 13 8% in *Muar*, 12.7% in *Batu Pahat*, and 10.2% in *Kluang* This means 83.8% Chinese of the state live in these four towns. As for the composition of the Chinese community in the four towns, it parallels that of the state. Table 3 shows the details.

Table 3 Sub-ethnic composition of the Chinese community
in four towns in Johore (Census 2000)

Dialect group	Johor Baru	Kluang	Batu Pahat	Muar
Southern Min group	39 0%	45.2%	69.9%	67.9%
Hakka	22.2%	25.4%	5.2%	5 1%
Cantonese	15.2%	16.1%	5 6%	5.3%
Chaozhou group	11.4%	3 6%	10 5%	15 7%
others	12.2%	9 7%	8 8%	7 0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

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[6] The unpublished data have been obtained from Department of Statistics Malaysia.

The sub-ethnic composition in *Batu Pahat* and *Muar* is similar, where more than 65% of the Chinese population comprises the Southern Min group, while the Chaozhou group is the second largest dialect group. The situations in *Johor Baru* and *Kluang* are slightly different, where Hakka is the second largest dialect group and Cantonese the third.

Language use in the Chinese community

As a multi-ethnic country, Malaysia is also a multi-lingual society Malay is the *lingua franca* across ethnic groups. Mandarin and prestige dialects, such as Cantonese, Southern Min dialect and Hakka are widely used in the Chinese community Tamil is the community language in the Indian community Besides, English is the second most important language in Malaysia (Asmah 1992) with wide use in business, legal and education.

As mentioned above, the heterogeneous Chinese community is composed of various dialect groups. Therefore, multiple languages and dialects can be found within the community, among which Mandarin is used as the *lingua franca* by the community members. However, the extent of utilization of Mandarin varies across different states in Malaysia. As proven by previous studies, Mandarin is more extensively used by the Chinese in the state of Johore than those in Kuala Lumpur, *Pinang*, *Klang*, and *Perak* (Wang 2005, 2006b) in West Malaysia, Ting and Sussex (2002) also claim a generational shift from Fuzhou dialect (Eastern Min dialect) towards Mandarin and English in the home domain in Sarawak, East Malaysia, Tan (2000) reports the extensive use of Mandarin in *Malacca* and *Sabah* To be specific, in the state of Johore, Mandarin is found to be used in different

centers, and banks. In addition to the wide use, Mandarin is also seen positively by the local Chinese in the state.

Questionnaire surveys reveal several factors leading to the spread of Mandarin in the state of Johore (Wang 2006a). Mass media in Mandarin from Singapore is found to play an important role in the process of Mandarin spread. By adopting Cooper's (1982) framework of language spread, the following conclusions are drawn. (1) Hakka and Chaozhou respondents aged below 30 years old with secondary education and above from Chinese medium of education tend to use more Mandarin than others; (2) the speed of Mandarin spread has accelerated since 1980s, (3) the more southern the city is located, the more Mandarin is found in use (Wang 2006a).

Structured interviews of three-generation Chinese families in the four towns also reveal the shift of language choice from Chinese dialects to

Mandarin (Wang 2007). Generational difference in Mandarin use could also be found in their social networks, which is shown in Figure 2 below

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G1                    Chinese dialects
 ↓                         ↓

G2        Fathers  more Chinese dialects, less Mandarin

          Mothers. more Mandarin, less Chinese dialects


 ↓                         ↓
G3                    Mandarin
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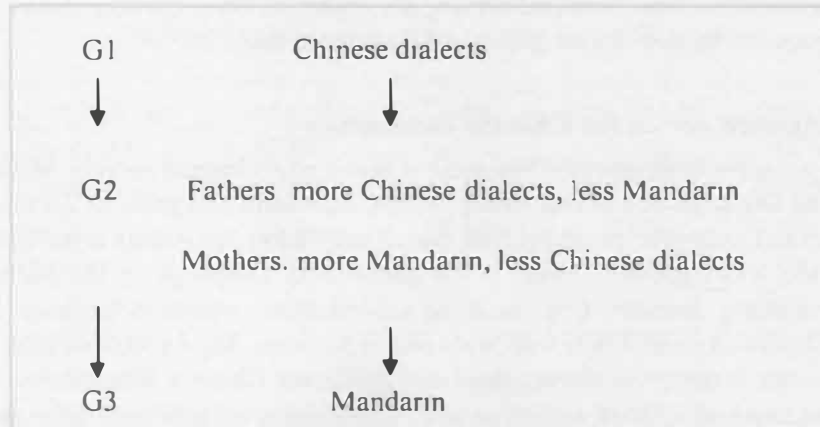
Figure 2 Social networks of three generations (N=13 families)

The children generation (G3) almost uses Mandarin exclusively in their social networks, while the grandparent generation (G1) chooses Chinese dialects to interact with their friends, and the parent generation (G2) make use of both Mandarin and the dialects.

The above studies provide evidences for the spread of Mandarin in the state of Johore. However, they are based on questionnaire surveys or structured interviews. Evidence from on-spot observations of language behaviors is needed for a complete and reliable research. The next section will introduce the current study on language choices in public settings.

Language choices in public settings

Unintrusive observation

Unintrusive observation is a valid way to collect data of language behavior in public settings. It could avoid the bias which questionnaire survey may generate. van den Berg (1985, 2005) employed an observation technique that combines direct observation with the collection of massive data (van den Berg 1985 14) when he collected data in the context of buying-and-selling in Taiwan and Shanghai In his studies, enumerators walk systematically through the various sections of the locale under study, and

note the language interactions they overhear on an observation sheet (van
den Berg 1985 15). This is a rapid way to obtain language use data in
public settings. Also unintrusive observation combining with questionnaire
survey could reveal the language situation under study more reliably

Inspired by van den Berg's study, the author conducted unintrusive
observations in public settings in *Johor Baru, Kluang, Batu Pahat* and
Muar to complement questionnaire surveys carried out before. A series of
public settings were chosen, such as the morning market, night market,
shopping centers, street stalls, food centers, and so on. The study aimed to
collect first-hand data of language use in practice, especially the use of
Mandarin and Chinese dialects by the local Chinese. By doing so, the extent
of Mandarin spread could be measured. A total of 201 interactions between
102 sales assistants and customers were observed in the four towns. The
researcher and research assistants[7] visited different locales and noted the
interactions in the observation form. At a later stage, data were processed
through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science). The results of the
study are reported in this section.

The distribution of interactions between sales assistants and customers
by areas and settings is shown in Table 4 below

Table 4 Distribution of interactions by areas and settings

		Frequency	Percentage
Areas	Johor Baru	33	16%
	Kluang	46	23%
	Batu Pahat	56	28%
	Muar	66	33%
	Total	201	100%
Settings	markets	81	40%
	street stalls	12	6%
	food center	62	31%
	separate shops	21	10%
	shopping center	25	13%
	Total	201	100%

Out of the 201 interactions between sales assistants and customers, 40% are recorded at markets, which include morning markets and night markets. Morning markets (known as *pasar* locally) are open daily where people buy vegetables, meats, etc. Night markets are organized weekly at fixed places, where various products are sold. Both settings could be regarded as informal domains. Street stalls refer to those stalls on the street selling snacks such as soya bean, desserts, and so on. They are quite popular in the state of Johore. Food centers include food courts, where a number of stalls sell different kinds of meals and drinks, and small restaurants known as coffee shops. Separate shops are those shops with their own building on the street, not in a shopping center, such as shoe shops, hair salons, groceries, and so on. Shopping centers refer to the large scale shopping malls.

In the observation form, both sales assistants' and customers' gender and age group were noted. The speaker of the first turn of the interaction was also recorded. Languages used for the first turn, the succeeding turns and the ending turn were noted during the observation. Furthermore, language use among sales assistants and customers themselves were also noted.

Language choice for different

The following table indicates the language use between sales assistants and customers for different turns during the interaction.

Table 5 Language choice by sales assistants and customers

Language variety	The first turnN=196	The succeeding turnsN=193	The ending turnN=190
Mandarin	71.5%	70.5%	72.6%
English	1 0%	0 0%	0.0%
Southern Min dialect	22.5%	22.3%	21.6%
Hakka	1 0%	1.5%	1 1%
Cantonese	2.0%	2.1%	2.1%
Chaozhou dialect	1.5%	1 6%	1 1%
others	0.5%	2.0%	1.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Based on Table 5, it can be said that Mandarin is used most often at all stages of the interaction, with the Southern Min dialect second. The other Chinese dialects, such as Hakka, Cantonese and Chaozhou are seldom used by both parties. By combining all the Chinese dialects, the trend of language choice is revealed more clearly (see Figure 3)

Figure 3 Language use between sales assistants and customers
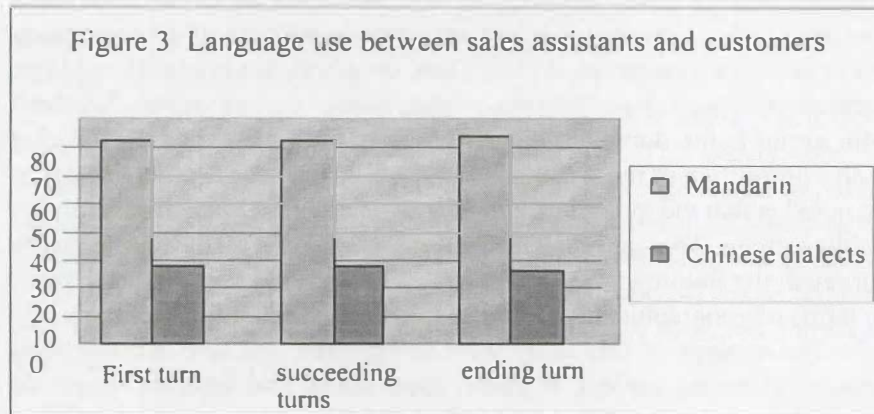

Figure 3 above reflects the general trend of language use in public settings in the Chinese community in the state of Johore. It shows that Mandarin is the dominant language in use, while Chinese dialects are much less used generally

The relationship between social variables and language choice

To figure out the social variables which may lead to significantly different use of these two language varieties, the areas, settings, gender and age groups of the two parties were investigated. Crosstabs were performed to check the relationships between these social variables and language use in public settings.

Table 6 Crosstabs between areas and language use during the interactions (frequency)

Areas	Mandarin	Chinese dialects	Total
Muar	32	28	60
Batu Pahat	38	15	53
Kluang	36	7	43
Johor Baru	30	3	33
Total	136	53	189

Table 6 above shows the crosstab result between geographical location and language use in public settings. To check if it is significant, chi-square was calculated. The result (x^2=19 14, df=3, p<.001) proves the significant relationship between the two variables, which means that the language use in the four towns is significantly different. People from *Johor Baru* and *Kluang* use less Chinese dialects and more Mandarin than those from *Muar* and *Batu Pahat*. Cramer's V, which indicates the strength of the association between the two variables, is .318. Thus, the effect size is considered to be medium or typical. Recalling the composition of dialect groups, Southern Min group is the dominant dialect group in both *Muar* and *Batu Pahat* with a proportion of more than 67% of the total Chinese people. What is to be noted is that the more northern the city is, the less Mandarin is used in public settings. The same conclusion was drawn based on the questionnaire survey in the four towns (Wang 2006a). The two studies verify each other in terms of geographical variation of language use in public settings.

The settings of this study were categorized into five, namely food centers, shopping centers, markets, street stalls, and separate shops. To verify the relationship between settings and language use, crosstabs were carried out and the results are shown in Table 7 below

Table 7   Crosstab between settings and language use during the interactions (frequency)

Settings	*Mandarin*	*Chinese dialects*	**Total**
Food centers	41	17	58
Shopping centers	22	1	23
Markets	48	28	76
Street stalls	7	4	11
Separate shops	18	3	21
Total	136	53	189

The Chi-square result shows a significant relationship between the two variables (x^2=11 71, df=4, p<.05), which means language choice for Mandarin or Chinese dialects is significantly different in the five settings. Mandarin is used more often at shopping centers, and Chinese dialects are spoken more often at markets. The other three settings are in between in terms of language choice. The strength of association between settings and language choice is indicated by Cramer's V (.249), which is medium or typical. Shopping centers are the most formal setting among the five

settings observed, where 95 7% (N=22) of the interactions are in Mandarin. In contrast, markets including morning market and night market are the most informal settings, where 36.8% (N=28) of the interactions are conducted in Chinese dialects. This means the more formal the setting is, the more Mandarin is used between the sales assistants and customers. However, even in the most informal setting, i.e. markets, the proportion of Mandarin is over 60%. This confirms again the spread of Mandarin in all settings, formal and informal.

As for the gender of the sales assistants, it is not significantly associated with language use during the interactions. This means male and female sales assistants act the same in terms of language choice in public settings. However, significant relationship is found between sales assistants' age group and language choice. Four age groups were identified. (1)20-30 years old, (2) 31-40 years old; (3) 41-50 years old, and (4) above 51 years old. The crosstab between age groups and language choice is shown in Table 8.

Table 8 Crosstab between age groups of sales assistants and language choice (frequency)

Age groups	Mandarin	Chinese dialects	Total
20 to 30	41	4	45
31 to 40	24	5	29
41 to 50	30	18	48
Above 51	41	26	67
Total	136	53	189

Based on the frequencies given in Table 8, the chi-square was processed. The result (x^2=15.83, df=3, p=.001) shows that age group of sales assistants is significantly associated with language use during the interactions between the two parties. The younger the salesperson is, the more Mandarin is used. For group 20-30 and group 31-40, more Mandarin is used than expected. However, for group 40-50 and group above 50, more Chinese dialects are in use than expected. Cramer's V (.289) indicates the strength of the association between the two variables is at medium or typical level. This result again confirms the findings based on questionnaire survey which reveals the significant association between age and language preference (Wang 2006a).

Although sales assistants' gender is not a significant factor influencing the language choice during the interactions, customers' gender is. Table 9 shows the crosstab results between the two variables.

Table 9 Crosstab between customers' gender and language choice in public settings (frequency)

Gender	Mandarin	Chinese dialects	Total
Male	47	31	78
Female	89	22	111
Total	136	53	189

According to Table 9, female customers speak more Mandarin (80%) than dialects (20%), while male customers tend to use more Chinese dialects (40%). The chi-square result shows a significant association between the two variables (x^2=9 01, df=1, p<.05). The strength of the association indicated by Phi value (-.218) is medium or typical. This result conforms to that from family interviews which shows that G2 mothers play an important role in the spread of Mandarin in families (Wang 2007). Both studies prove the gender difference in the spread of Mandarin.

The same association is found between customers' age group and language use as that between sales assistants's age group and language use. The result is shown is Table 10

Table 10· Crosstab between customers' age group and language use in public settings (frequency)

Age groups	Mandarin	Chinese dialects	Total
10 to 20	3	0	3
21 to 30	46	4	50
31 to 40	52	17	69
41 to 50	19	12	31
Above 51	16	20	36
Total	136	53	189

Table 10 shows that the older the customers are, the more Chinese dialects and the less Mandarin are used during the interaction. For customers aged below 50 years old, more Mandarin is spoken. However, for customers aged above 51, more Chinese dialects are used. The Chi-square result

indicates the significant association between customers' age groups and language choice (x^2=26.77, df=4, p<.001). The strength of association is medium or typical (Cramer's V=.376).

Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, evidence for the spread of Mandarin in the state of Johore has been found through unintrusive observation in public settings. The main findings are as follows.

Dominance
Mandarin is dominantly used in public settings in the four towns, Southern Min dialect is still the prestige Chinese dialect in *Muar* and *Batu Pahat*, but not in *Kluang*
Hainan, and Hakka are seldom used in public settings.

Geographical
Language use in public settings in the four towns is significantly associated with the proximity to Singapore. The more southern the city is, the more Mandarin is used.

Formality
The more formal the public setting is, the more Mandarin is found in use.

Age difference
Age groups of both sales assistants and customers are significantly associated with language choice. The younger they are, the more Mandarin they will use during the interactions.

Gender difference
More female customers tend to speak Mandarin in public settings than males.

The above findings could be analyzed in Cooper's (1982) framework of language spread, in which seven items are mentioned: *who adopts what, when, where, why, and how* For the language choice in public settings of this study, three of them are relevant:

Who
The study shows that young female customers speak more Mandarin in public settings. Age and gender are two important social variables in the process of Mandarin spread.

Adopts
Cooper (1982 11) differentiates four stages of adoption- *awareness, evaluation, proficiency,* and *usage. Usage* means the speaker uses the language for a given function (Cooper 1982:12). For the current study, Mandarin is used as a *lingua franca* in public settings. More than 70% of the interactions are conducted in Mandarin. Therefore, the spread of Mandarin in the state of Johore is at the level of usage, the final stage of adoption. Furthermore, the extent of spread at the level of usage is rather high.

Where
This item has a twofold meaning, the geographical location and social interactions within certain social domains. In the first sense, this study reveals the significant difference among the four towns in terms of language use. It may be related to the sub-ethnic composition of the local Chinese community For the two northern towns, *Muar* and *Batu Pahat,* Southern Min group is the absolute dominant dialect group. Consequently, Southern Min dialect is still active in public settings. However, it is not the fact in *Kluang* and *Johor Baru* where Southern Min dialect has declined together with other minor Chinese dialects. The situation could also be explained by referring to distance of the towns to Singapore. The closer they are to Singapore, the more influence they obtain from the country, which includes the language policy promoting Mandarin through the mass media (Wang 2005). Sommer (1997) also found similar geographical differences in the process of language shift from Siyeyi to Setswana in northwestern Botswana. In another sense, *where* refers to social domains where language spread occurs. In this study, various public settings were investigated. Mandarin is found to be extensively used in all these settings. However, the extent of its spread is associated with the formality of settings. The

more formal the setting is, the more Mandarin is used. This shows that the process of Mandarin spread is from formal settings to informal settings.

This study investigated the language choice in public settings in the Chinese community in the state of Johore, West Malaysia. By conquering one setting after another, Mandarin has spread itself not only in formal settings, but also in informal settings. What is more, language choice analysis enriches the study of language spread, which is defined by Cooper (1982:6) as '*an increase, over time, in the proportion of a communication network that adopts a given language or language variety for a given communicative function*' In the process of the spread of Mandarin in the state of Johore, language shift is concomitant. It has been recorded that Chaozhou dialect was widely spoken in *Johor Baru* and *Muar* in the past (Tan 2000:47). However, it is not true nowadays. People have shifted their mother tongue from Chinese dialects, especially minor ones to Mandarin. As for the domain distribution of the spreading language and vanishing languages, it is not as Fishman (1976/1989) hypothesized. They are not distributed over separate domains, but tend to overlap in domains and finally Mandarin dominates in all domains. In conclusion, Mandarin spread in the state of Johore should be studied in the setting of LWC (language of wider communication) with the process of domain overlap and finally domain dominance.

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