

# Code-switching from English to Mandarin and Cantonese in Kevin Kwan’s books

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the impact of code-switching from English into Mandarin and Cantonese in Kevin Kwan’s books to reflect the cultural component of Singaporean society. Our research is based on Kwan’s books as most of the characters represent a highly educated circle, and they are all fluent in English, Mandarin, Cantonese and French. These languages are usually used for stylistic and thematic reasons, as code-switching is a tool used to express cognitive intentions or to change the topic of conversation. It is believed that speakers of two or more languages remember language systems and activate them simultaneously when they need to convey their message more clearly. Based on examples from Kwan’s books, we will try to link the theoretical context of sociolinguistic theory with its actual literary use and explore the terms that linguists use to give an accurate definition for each phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** *co-activation, code-switching, social status, prestige*

## 1. Introduction

Kevin Kwan is a Singapore-born author, who writes in English. He was born to a family belonging to the top of the "Asian aristocracy": his great-grandfather was one of the founders of the oldest Singapore bank, and his grandfather was a prominent ophthalmologist and the first Singaporean specialist who studied abroad. His parents, an engineer and a pianist, moved to the USA when Kwan was 11 years old. He received a master's degree in media studies from the University of Houston, studied at the Manhattan School of Design, worked at the Interview magazine founded by Andy Warhol, and then opened his own creative studio serving prestigious clients such as the Museum of Modern Art and the New York Times newspaper.

His trilogy, which started with the novel “Crazy Rich Asians”, has become an international phenomenon: translated into many languages with multimillion-dollar sales.

Kwan is bilingual, so his books are written in English with inclusions from Mandarin/Cantonese and French, as well as Singlish. Singlish is a Singaporean dialect of English, which is accepted and preserved by the country’s society.

In Singapore there is a number of mixed communities, which are united by one language they can all speak and understand: English. A study in 2005 concluded that a third of Chinese Singaporeans prefer to speak English at home. Some families use two or three languages on a regular basis.

The emergence of English in Singapore dates back to 1819 when the English established a trading post on the island. The country was controlled by the British for more than a century until 1963. During this period many immigrants from neighboring lands established communities in the city. In 1965 Singapore became an

independent state and the new local government decided to keep English as administrative language, while the communities maintained their native languages at home.

Nowadays, we can say that the Singaporean language and culture present a mixed code, which is why it is of huge interest to researchers.

## 2. Research Method

The method used in this research is a qualitative approach which is done by prioritizing the analysis and assessment of interaction shown in the books by Kwan.

A psycholinguistic approach to literature is used to investigate the intentions of the characters in the book when using foreign language inclusions. Social approach to literature is used to analyze why the author gives the characters the ability to switch from one language to another. Books depicting society are closely linked with sociolinguistics, as language is an integral part of a profile.

### 2.1. Data Source

The data used in this article is found in the books by Kwan: “China Rich Girlfriend” and “Rich People Problems”. The data is presented in the form of paragraphs, dialogues, sentences, phrases and commentaries by the author.

Discussion:

I.

Globalization brought the emergence of English as the global mother tongue. In Asia, the number of English speakers outnumber greatly the speakers of countries where English is considered to be the official language. This fact has a great influence on language policies in Asian countries. In Singapore, Singlish (a native variation of English) has become an integral part of life. In a book, published by NDPC “Things that make us Singaporean”, it is mentioned that speaking a “mixture of English – Mandarin and Malay is among things that are quintessentially Singaporean”. When Singaporeans were polled in a questionnaire if English was threatening their identity, only 8% admitted it, while the rest regarded English as a global tool, but not a “Western” language [11].

Recently, code-switching has become common in the books of Singaporean English-speaking writers. As a rule, such books are devoted to the life of the elite. In Kwan's books about Asian high society circles, the characters speak English fluently.

Sometimes, they switch between Mandarin, Cantonese and Singlish, as Singapore is a mixed society and the language is chosen according to the surroundings the characters are in.

In this example, the speaker consciously changes the conversation code, implying a common thing between the two speakers.

**“..all because her mother, Felicity, his dai gu cheh-or “big aunt” in Cantonese- said it was a sin to take a taxi nine blocks ..”**

Code-switching may be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsic factors make a person do things for the sake of rewards and benefits, while intrinsic motivate a person to achieve a goal.

Some words from other languages have been used for a long time, becoming familiar to speakers, and are no longer considered foreign. The change of language shows the connection between language and social relations (with each other in conversation) or attitudes towards those in question. In order to achieve this goal, all participants in communication must be aware of the social framework: switching will be effective and successful when everyone has the same background knowledge and interprets it in the same way so that there is no misunderstanding and the goal of the communicative act is achieved [10]. Quite often, authors switch to another code to describe the situation occurring in the language environment.

The sociolinguistic approach to code-switching provides an answer to the question of why interlocutors switch from one code to another during speech. There are two types of code-switching – situational and metaphorical. When the topic of conversation changes, this is a metaphorical device. This type is based on language switching functions and on the speaker's intentions to convey additional emotional connotations.

The exchange of metaphorical code enriches the communicative situation since the speaker's attitude to it is based on various social positions. This approach informs us of the presence of multifactorial social relations in the context.

Let's look through this example from the book:

Gum suey ah! - how rotten in Cantonese.

Code-switching is used by authors to form a conceptual representation of the text to the reader. Recognition of this phenomenon allows the reader to understand the intention of the author, which is to establish associative links. Some code-switched phrases are "socially motivated", which is one of the main reasons Kwan often uses them in his books. We can trace the continuous usage of Cantonese nouns, defining relatives, in English conversations "Oh... Ling Jeh!", which can be translated as "elder sister" or "Gong Gong" (86) for grandfather. Asian cultures have very closely-knit family circles, so Kwan emphasizes these ties by marking them with code-switching.

In the following example, the author turns to Cantonese to display the character's linguistic environment.

"Okay. Tor jeh, tor jeh," Alice said, hanging up.

In this episode, the author presents a phone conversation between two Singapore-born siblings. To make it more authentic and true to their culture, the author switches the code.

In Kwan's books, the use of code-switching is motivated by the author's intention to match cultural symbols or attract associations accompanied by conceptual content. This example presents situational code-switching. Situational code-switching occurs when languages change depending on the situation in which dialogues are conducted, while the topic of conversation does not change [4].

The other type of code-switching, metaphorical, is also used quite often.

"That was the plan, but Eddie managed to fly all of us down on a private jet yesterday"

"*Wah, gum ho maeng!*" Catherine remarked, as a waiter approached them bearing tray filled with tall glasses of iced logan tea.

"*Wah, gum ho maeng!*" is a Cantonese phrase for "Wow, what a god life!"

As seen here, "*Wah, gum ho maeng!*" is a Cantonese phrase for "Wow, what a good life!"

Intersentential (happening inside the sentence) situational code-switching happens when the theme of the conversation is changed within the sentence structure. For example, in the book "China Rich Girlfriend", Eleonor, one of the principle mother characters, says: "... Carlton is so handsome and so smart, of course he would have a friend! Too bad, I had so many eligible pretty girls lined up to *gaai siu*," Eleanor said mischievously. The phrase "*gaai siu*", Cantonese for "introduce" is used for emphatic reason. Eleanor is trying

to put an emphasis on the fact that she has been match-making, but all her efforts were useless. The Cantonese phrase is rather brief and expresses her manner in the most precise way.

The metaphorical type of code-switching occurs when the theme of the conversation changes. This type reflects the code-switching ability in itself. When the speaker or the author intends to present a special emotional connotation, metaphorical type is used in order to enrich the communicative state. The attitude of the interlocutor to the communicative situation is based on multifactorial social interactions and inner motivation. The main peculiarity of metaphorical code-switching is its unpredictability and spontaneity.

One more example of metaphorical code-switching can be found in the dialogue between aunt and her niece

“...- I was about to say a prayer for you.

– “Nay chyee seen ah! Don’t start on me. I’m so sick of all these people trying to pray for me.”

Cantonese for “Have you lost your mind?”

This is Cantonese for “Have you lost your mind?”

The books by Kwan are an interesting example of code-switching, as they contain not only bilingual conversations but cultural references and phrases in different Asian and European languages. The higher circles of any society have access to a variety of educational opportunities, able to hire tutors of popular languages and raise multilingual children who are able to switch from English to French or Spanish and then to Malay and Mandarin, according to the given situation. In his books, Kwan even cites different terms for the representatives of the higher circles. An interesting example of using Mandarin can be found on page 46 of the book “Rich People Problems”: “Wandi sniffed, wondering whether she should tell Luka how Colette’s video tirade had gone viral in China, logging more than thirty-six million views on WeChat alone, ...making her a poster child of *fuerdai*...”, which is “second-generation rich” in Mandarin. The concept of naming rich people circles with the figures of generational wealth is quite common in the elite society of Asia. Another interaction in Mandarin happens during the scene at Chinese New Year. Eleanor presents her pro-western niece with traditional Chinese sweet gifts, and the niece is obliged to refer to Mandarin to express her sense of “traditional” gratitude: “This is so nice of you, Xiè, xie”. Later in the dialogue, she returns to Mandarin to congratulate Eleanor, her aunt, on Chinese New Year. “Here, just a small token for you to celebrate the holiday “Xin nian kuai le”.

“Xin nian kuai le” is “Happy New Year” in Mandarin.

Style and management of conversation are tightly linked with social status. The use of specific code in a particular situation requires not only language knowledge, but a high level of sociability. The tone of a communicative act depends on the social status of the interlocutors and, as a matter of fact, provides for the obligation to rules and requirements of the situation.

The following example from the book illustrates the depiction of a daughter by her mother. The author uses a Cantonese word to sound not so rude.

Su Yi could not think of a worse fate than to be trapped with her eem zheem daughter throughout all of eternity.

“Eem zheem” translates as “difficult” from Cantonese.

Another example of using Cantonese in order to make a sentence milder and more pleasant-sounding is this: “It was Corinna sounding frantic. “*Suey doh sei*”, it’s going up too fast!”

If the speakers lack the needed resources in the second language - if it is hard to remember the word or its usage is too rude - the code switch happens unintentionally: “Remember, Mummy, um ngoi hoi she, ah”. Don’t say anything! Um ngoi hoi she, ah means “don’t put a curse of death,” or do not sabotage the situation”.

The choice of code demonstrates social settings and signifies a special unspoken agreement between the interlocutors. Chosen language or dialect can define the status of social relations between the speakers.

For example, in this situation the two gossipers discuss the rich families and switch to language for emphatic reasons to emphasis wealth, which cannot fully be described with English vocabulary.

“Wah, ah nee ho miah!” I told you the Baos were loaded”, Daisy said.

“Well, you were right-the Baos are loaded beyond belief”.

If the model of the situation cannot be coordinated with the representation, the concept of relativity is not significant for cognitive proceedings.

In several verbalization variants the speaker chooses in favor of the most suitable while the alternatives are eliminated.

Here is an example of a regional phrase, which is commonly used in a particular social circle:

“Ada and her tai tai friends totally froze me out for the first hour”. As the author refers to this particular phrase, tai tai was used to mean “supreme wife”, when it was still not prohibited to marry more than once. Today, this term means a lady of means in Cantonese. It is another example of referring to the elite in traditional language. That term in Asian language is more complete and overwhelming than the phrase of the same definition in English.

Modern linguists are inclined to suppose that mutual activation of two languages is a rather common state, requiring the existence of such language variations, where code-switching is permanent. Simultaneous co-activation of systems at the conceptual level is a typical state, which is manifested in the interpretation of a metaphor, irony or other means of linguistics, based on interaction of different semantic meanings [3]. A multilingual personality treats the systems of available lexicons as a conceptualization and during the grammatical coding, different formation strategies that deal with lemmas are used in the framework of the coding rules [8].

The code borders can be found inside a phrase, where a verb is English, an object is Mandarin or Cantonese and subject is French. In the books by K. Kwan, understandable conceptualization for some specific groups occurs quite often.

There is even a term for Caucasians that is mentioned in the book in Cantonese. “Over time, you might strike up friendship with other rich Mainlanders or the *gweilo* wives of men stationed here with three-year contracts at some foreign bank or some equity firm.” It is understandable, why the switch happens here. The term used above is used in a negative, pejorative context, showing the domination of the Asian elite over the visiting Europeans. Ethnic and cultural stereotypes are fixed in the mentality in the form of mental notions and fulfill special cognitive functions. The main purpose of them is to store and form group ideology. As Kwan suggests, it is considered that every Mainland Chinese girl is looking for a “tall, rich, and handsome” man for a husband. That is part of the group ideology in the society described in the following paragraph:

“Okay, from now, I’ll be sure to drape myself over you and gaze adoringly into your face at all times. You’re my one and only *gaofushuai*,” Rachel coed, fluttering her eyelashes facetiously. *Gaofushuai* is a special Mandarin term to describe every girl’s dream husband, which is, as mentioned above “tall, rich, and handsome”. The process of interpreting the code-switched term is compared to the process of minimal discrepancies

processing in the semantics of synonyms for the reader to get additional connotations [8]. The conclusions, made up in terms of activation of particular cultural models can become a source for widening the semantics of code-switching. Foreign language units, when they get into the system of accepting language, symbolize the actualization of ideas as well as attaching additional meaning to the content linked with a given foreign language and its speakers [8].

Using code-switching helps to understand the policy of the language. Ethnic relations depend on differential dissipation of access and control over the resources, or, as F. Barth calls them [2], “ecological niches”. Distribution of them can be bi-dimensional, in the form of additional, when groups occupy different niches and competing when groups compete for control over the niches. The distribution may be equal or unequal and the ways of controlling it may vary the effectiveness and estimation of the phrase.

These notions are closely linked with the language data access to the situation, in which symbolic and material resources, based on prevailing forms of social life organization are dominating. Language resources have a stable functional base for denoting value, as well as status, prestige, honour, solidarity and power. These processes happen due to the dissipation of resources and also due to the ability to find common features and difficulties, present among the representatives of one group and different language groups.

There are also socio-psychological reasons and factors of borrowings: the perception of the whole society and part of the foreign language as prestigious, scientific and sounding good, as well as communicative relevance of the defined notion [5].

Y. Matras refutes the theory that foreign inclusions are “prestigious”, “socially-motivated” and “susceptible to socially motivated pressure” without a definite link to social conditions, the influence of spoken language and communicative intentions, as well as the special functional role of given structure or category [9].

Prestige is a sociolinguistic notion, which is effectively used for estimating the sentence. Code-switching is usually considered prestigious. Let’s look at the example from the book: «Kitty was steered toward a moon-faced woman in her early thirties. She couldn’t believe that this person dressed in a secretary-like navy pantsuit was the noodle heiress she had heard so much about. “Justina—hiyah, gum noi moh gin!\* Meet my friend Katherine Tai.”

“Hello. Are you related to Stephen Tai?” Justina asked, immediately trying to place Kitty on her social map.

“Um, no.»

This dialogue is a power-play between two acquaintances. Cantonese is used for showing belonging to a particular circle. The Cantonese “gum noi moh gin” means “long time no see”.

With the help of “prestige”, the relations between two social groups or two neighboring language societies can be expressed using code-switching.

However, even the motivation of “prestige” is not enough to describe the motivation of multilingual personalities to generate new lexical units, limited by a different functional status of B language instead of using the words from A language.

We are researching the language of particular circles, especially middle classes and elites, as they are the main characters in the books by Kwan. The language of elite societies has a structure, where both prestige and values are important. Values define the behavior of a personality and take the center stage in the theory of elite values, outlining the most important cultural characteristics and personal conduct, while penetrating into all spheres of social life and directing the development of ethnic groups. Societal values present life aims and meanings. They form notions, which define all spheres of life [10].

In Asian societies, government officials are ranked as royalty. In Mandarin, there is a special term to show high respect for a high-ranking boss – “lingdao”. In the scene where the characters meet the Prime Minister, we can observe two Mandarin words used as a form of address “Buzhang” and “lingdao”.

“No interruption at all. It is an honour to have you here with us, Bao, *Buzhang*...This calls for a celebration. We need some very special Tiger Bone wine”. The words “honour” and “special” are used to emphasize the further inserted high-ranking term for “minister”.

“Yes, tiger power for everyone! ... That was a very insightful speech you gave last week about the dangers of monetary inflation, *Lingdao*”.

Not only linguistic but also social factors impact the symbolism of language code. So, we can trace the given language code stereotype and fragment of world picture.

The identification of the word has a domineering position in the definition of the phrase. The concept is formed in the mentality of a native speaker and based on a certain semantic field.

This concept is used in linguistics for defining a unified mental unit, which reflects the reality and the definition of words in the mentality of native speakers. Main concepts of culture play a great role in the collective mentality of the language society.

Kwan refers to additional information for every foreign inclusion or phrase, in case the reader doesn't understand what the author had intended in the first place.

In many cases, the communicative goal is to attract the largest number of readers and to index ethnolinguistic identity, which leads to the activation of the template and emblematic code-switching from the dominant, majority language to a less common one [1].

### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, we would like to claim that the usage of code-switching from English to Mandarin and Cantonese gives an author the opportunity to express their intentions and depict an ultra-exclusive society with its own rules. The “secret language” code which is used in particular groups and conversations is considered prestigious and valuable, which is why characters from the book usually refer to it. Code-switching in the examples from the book is socially-motivated, prestigious, socially pressured and linked to social conditions, and the influence of spoken language and communicative intentions, as well as the special functional role of the given structure or category.

The author's characters use code-switching not only for convenience but also for emphasizing their special social status or role. Obviously, one language has a domineering position, despite the presence of multiple languages in one communicative system. Different language systems in the book denote cultural differences, cultural backgrounds, differences in interests and economic gaps.

### **4. Acknowledgements**

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