

## **Code Switching in *Sepet*: Unveiling Malaysians' communicative styles**

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### **Abstract**

Code-switching phenomenon can be said to be successful in bringing out the unique Malaysian communicative strategy in “Sepet”, a locally produced motion picture written and directed by the late Yasmin Ahmad. The strategy used throughout the entire film is to put meaning across in a natural way and at the same time to maintain the cultural setting in the movie. It can be considered to have unreservedly mimics the authentic communicating style among multilingual in this country. “Sepet” tells a cross cultural love story between a Chinese young man and a Malay girl who just finished Secondary 5 (Form 5). Instead of using solely English as the lingua franca in the movie, Yasmin had chosen to include other languages and Chinese dialects that are widely spoken among Malaysian communities into the characters’ verbal interactions. Yasmin had always made full use of the assorted cultural qualities in Malaysia’s pluralistic society in her works. The objective of this study was to find out how code-switching in the movie depicts Malaysians’ communicative strategy, by providing examples from the movie to explain reasons for code-switching.

**Keywords:** Code-switching, Malaysian English, Communicative Strategies

## **1.0 Introduction**

Let us begin with the movie “Sepet”. In 2004, the late local film director, Yasmin Ahmad produced her award-winning film entitled “Sepet”. The film successfully portrays Malaysia as a harmonious multiracial nation, centering on the theme of racial relations. The casts consist not only Malay but also Chinese and Peranakan. Peranakan which is also known as Baba-Nyonya refers to a Chinese community migrated to British Straits Settlements in Penang, Malacca and Singapore dated back to 1800’s, who took Malay wives without converting into Muslims. They then assimilated themselves into the Malay cultures and at the same time retaining some Chinese traditions. The ability of conversing in more than one language among the multiracial characters reflects the authentic phenomenon of the current Malaysian youngsters. While conversing, these young characters code-switch primarily for social reasons such as membership and solidarity.

Is code switching an emerging trend in movie production? Generally, Hollywood produces movies in English language while the Asian Hollywood (China and Hong Kong) makes movies in Mandarin and Cantonese respectively. However, code switching occurs more frequently in recent productions due to the unleashing effects of globalisation where many countries are becoming a more heterogeneous society. In Malaysia, where the language landscape evolves due to language change and contact, it has been politicised for various reasons. Hence, for movies produced in Malaysia where the characters interact in code switching, it can provide insight into the psyche of the young Malaysians.

### **1.1 Statement of problem**

Yasmin had been an active and creative director, writer and scriptwriter throughout her involvement in Malaysia’s film-making industry. Her works often caused controversies for the reasons of depicting issues which are categorized as sensitive yet conservative. The quality of her works however, was acknowledged by awards and nominations locally and internationally. The hybridity of different cultures, races, social practices, and not to forget languages, are repeated habitually in her productions.

The originality of story line and script in Yasmin’s films is the most explicit representation of the Malaysian community that it facilitates the possibilities to conduct scholastic study on them. Nonetheless, researching motion pictures created by regional directors do not seem like a trend among local scholars. In order to discover the relationship between code-switching in local movies and depiction of Malaysians’ communicative styles, this research will study Yasmin’s second film – “Sepet”.

### **1.2 Objective of the study**

This paper aims to examine code-switching phenomenon, among the Malaysian youngsters as portrayed in the movie “Sepet”. Literal translation of “Sepet” could mean “Slit Eyes” which is a stereotype of the Chinese who usually has small eyes. Malaysia is a multilingual country where many languages are spoken. The country has Bahasa Malaysia as its national language, English as its second language, Mandarin, Tamil, Punjabi and many more as its vernacular languages. Not to overlook other dialects of these afore mentioned languages as other important varieties in Malaysians’ daily conversations. Coming from such a vibrant multilingual country, it is unavoidable that these languages and dialects contact. A palpable evidence of this situation is the habit of switching from one language to another while conversing with others, be it in discourse level or sentence level. This code-switching phenomenon can be defined as changing from language to language in the midst of an utterance (Spolsky, 1998, p. 121).

Besides that, it will also explore how code-switching in a locally produced movie serves as an insightful tool in examining the psyche and language cognition among the young Malaysians by exploring the factors that lead such language use. This film is chosen as it is believed to represent the contemporary Malaysian society, especially the style of communication among the characters. Therefore, the specific purpose of this paper is as follows:

1. To analyse the occurrence of code-switching among young Malaysians
2. To examine the functions of code-switching among young Malaysians in different domains

### **1.3 Research Questions**

With the above mentioned research objectives, we formulate the research questions as

1. To what extent does “Sepet” demonstrate the code-switching culture among young Malaysians?
2. What are the factors and reasons that contribute to code switching among young Malaysians?

### **1.4 Scope of Study**

This research only limit its scope to one Malaysian production, hence it raises the difficulty in generalising the whole population of Malaysian youngsters. However, its gamut of centrality is to reveal the real linguistic landscape in the mind of Malaysian youngsters.

### **1.5 Significance of the study**

Sociolinguistic research in Malaysia usually focuses on language use, pragmatics and interaction of a particular ethnic group (regardless of their age) due to our very own historical and cultural terrain. This research, however, takes the Malaysian youngsters to its research foci by examining their linguistic evolution as a richly woven matrix of Malaysia.

## **2.0 Background to the Setting**

In Malaysia, the Malays form the majority of the population because they are indigenous in the country. The non-Malays such as the Chinese and the Indians however, are considered immigrant communities since their ancestors of earlier generations were encouraged to migrate and work in the back-then-called “Tanah Melayu” during the reign of British (David, 2006, p. 4). Each ethnic group that settled in Malaysia also brought along their own language, and within each language there are many other dialects which contributed to the forming of pluralistic ethnicity and language in Malaysia, which leads to a multilingual society.

For instance, the Chinese community itself brought along at least five dialects, namely Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, and a smaller proportion of Hakka and Hainanese. Cantonese and Hokkien are the two biggest dialect groups which migrated to this country. According Platt (1977), the Cantonese are the majority in the tin mining areas which were generally ranging from Seremban in the state of Negeri Sembilan (Peninsula Malaysia) to Kuala Lumpur the capital, and Ipoh in the state of Perak, which is the setting of “Sepet”. This locus makes the movie more authentic rather than an imaginary homeland.

## 2.1 Definitions of code-switching

For quite a few decades, code-switching has spurred many insightful research findings. Studies on this phenomenon were initiated by works on bilingualism. Alvarez-Caccamo (1998, p. 32) states that the first implicit mention of “code-switching” was found in Vogt (1954) where he defined the term as “perhaps not a phenomenon, but rather a psychological one, and its causes are obviously extra-linguistic”. Alvarez-Caccamo (1998, p. 32) also quoted Haugen’s (1956) definition as “the code-switching which occurs when a bilingual introduces a completely unassimilated word from one language into his speech.”

In a more recent research, Javier (2007, p. 29) cites Lambert (1972) who defines code-switching as a process by which the bilingual speaker is able to set aside the linguistic system for a moment while functioning with a second one and later, switches back to the previous one if the situation calls for it. According to Javier (2007, p. 29), in order to do so, one needs to acquire a certain level of “functional proficiency” in each of the languages involved. He also states that the process of swapping between languages is highly automatic.

Nomura (2003) explains that code-switching is the tendency among bilinguals to switch from one language to another while conversing with other bilinguals, in order to find more appropriate words or phrases. Nomura (2003) and Li (1998, p. 156) discuss the two most common types of switching among bilinguals and multilinguals – situational and metaphorical switching. According to Blom and Gumperz (1972, as cited by Li, 1998, p. 152), situational switching to change of languages according to situations where conversants wish to fit themselves into a situation. This type of switching does not involve change of topic but solely on change of codes. On the other hand, metaphorical switching requires change of topic. Certain topics are discussed using a certain languages while other topics using another code. Nomura states that the function is to add a distinct flavour to a certain topic, at the same time “encodes certain social values”.

Franceschini (1998, pp. 51) perceives code-switching as “a language universal in the behaviour of multilingual speakers”. She states that using more than one language of a few varieties of a language in conversation is an easily recognisable phenomenon around the world. The linguist also asserts that even if one code-switches between two very diverse languages, the functions is still widely comparable. Known as the alternating use of two or more languages, which is a common phenomenon often occurring in a bilingual or multilingual society (Chuchu, 2007).

## 2.2 Functions and factors of code-switching

It is very common to switch code while conversing. It happens naturally when there is a significant change of domain or any social situation for an example, partaking of a new participant in a conversation. It is agreed by experts that code-switching occurs at just about any part of a verbal communication, especially among bilingual speakers (Kuang, 2005, p. 84). Holmes (2008, pp. 35-46) has identified five major reasons for code-switching as follow:

### 1. *Participants, solidarity and status*

Holmes (2008) states that people may use one language for greetings (in indicating solidarity between speaker and listener) and another language when there is a change in social dimension such as the status relations between participants, or formality of the setting. Similarly, one may switch to his or her mother tongue to signal shared ethnicity with an addressee.

### 2. *Topic*

It is asserted that bilinguals or multilinguals often find it easier to discuss certain topics in a particular language rather than another. Chinese Malaysians often find certain kinds of

referential content more easily expressed in Mandarin rather than in Malay. This is meticulously common when quoting Chinese proverbs regardless for affective or referential functions.

### **3. *Switching for affective functions***

Some people code-switch to get an affective message sent. This function normally occurs when one needs to move from a formal style which distances the speaker from the addressee to a more intimate and friendly style, or vice versa.

### **4. *Metaphorical switching***

This kind of switching is done frequently in sentential level. It occurs most probably due to the incompetence of the speaker in both languages, or due to social and symbolic associations between both codes. It is asserted that by conversing using two or more languages, the speakers will convey not only the information, but also their affective meaning.

### **5. *Lexical borrowing***

The linguist also states that this kind of switching is due to the lack of vocabulary in the primary language. When speaking in a second language, some speakers tend to bring in certain terms from their first language because they cannot find the appropriate term in their second language. They borrow the vocabulary from their mother tongue instead to express a concept or describe an object.

## **2.3 Code-switching in Malaysia**

The ethnolinguistic diversity in Malaysia has given English spoken in Malaysia distinctive features. These features have contributed to the birth of “Manglish” – Malaysian style English. The term is a coinage of the words “Malaysian” and “English”, but not “mangled English” (Lee, 2005). One common feature found on Manglish is the habit of switching from English to one or more languages while speaking which is also known as code-switching.

Code-switching exists in bilingual situations such as in Malaysia. Many Malaysians are able to converse in at least two languages – Bahasa Malaysia and English. There are two types of bilingualism: Individual bilingualism which means the bilingualism of only one person, and social bilingualism which involves the whole society (Teipelke, 2008). However, knowing how to speak a language does not guarantee one’s fluency in the language. When a speaker is not fluent in one language, he or she mixes the language with another in order to avail full communicative resources of two or more languages that he or she knows. Therefore, code-switching becomes very common in a multilingual country like Malaysia. It is defined as “the abilities of societies, institutions, groups and individuals, to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives” by the European Commission (Todeva & Cenoz, 2009).

The code-switching phenomenon takes place in a range of situations. In different domain, it subsists in different way. Jacobson (2004) claims that generally, code-switching takes place only in private domains such as at home or among peers. In Malaysia however, the phenomenon can also be found in different professional settings. For examples, languages are switched between formal and informal interaction in the society, while switching becomes an important pattern of classroom communication between teacher and students in the teaching domain (Chuchu, 2007, p. 270). These phenomena occur exceptionally regular in the Malaysian society where at least two codes are being used in daily conversation. It is also extremely common to find Malaysian teachers – especially language teachers – to code-switch for the functions of facilitating students’ understanding, clarifying, emphasizing and reiterating. Known as approaches employed by speakers when they encounter a communication problem in their conversations, for instance code-switching, code-mixing, code convergence, translation and so on (David & DeAlwis, 2010).

## **2.4 Related studies**

David and DeAlwi (2009) researched on code-switching on Hindi blockbuster “Slumdog Millionaire”. It is stated that English and Hindi are the major switches in the movie because these languages are widely spoken in Mumbai, the main setting of the movie. David and DeAlwi (2009) suggest that the switching between these languages has two major functions. Firstly, it is used to communicate with the audience about what is going on in different phases – both childhood and adulthood of the characters – in the movie. Secondly, it is to assist non-Hindi speaking audience in following and understanding the plot.

David and DeAlwi (2009) also pointed out that code-switching more or less depends on the addresser, addressee, topics, settings and speech acts. In the paper, David and DeAlwi (2009) concluded that code-switching serves very successfully as a communicative strategy in portraying comprehensive messages to viewers who do not speak or understand Hindi. They agreed that the choice of code in a movie can benefit the depiction of characters, relationships between interlocutors and other aspects of a movie.

These researchers conducted another study on language awareness and learning through code-switching in the movie. Both David and DeAlwi (2010) agree that “Slumdog Millionaire” appears to be a good movie to show how code-switching is employed unconsciously by different conversant.

Chua (2007) pointed out that by employing code-switching, it would enable the protagonist to foster the bond with the mala protagonist. Besides, it is this scenario, the heteroglossia in Malaysia’s heterogeneity and inter-mingling of languages points to the fact that Malaysians, despite the differences, are not that separate and divorced from each other after all (Chua 2007:33)

## **3.0 Research Method**

### **3.1 Research Subject**

The subject or target of this research is a locally produced film entitled “Sepet” by late Yasmin Ahmad. This movie was chosen for this research because it is a highly popular local production not only in Malaysia but also in foreign countries. It was not Yasmin’s first directed film, yet it was the film which raised awareness among Malaysian and national viewers due to the film’s authenticity and fusion of Malaysian cultures. The diversity of casts in the show and its depiction of forbidden relationship have caused debate and caught attention from the public. Yasmin’s courage and compassion in discussing sensitive subject had won the movie the Most Original Story and Best Film awards in 2005’s Malaysian Film Festival. In the same year, the 18th Tokyo International Film Festival granted “Sepet” the Best Asian Film Award. Apart from that, the core reason for selecting this movie was its portrayal of code-switching norm among Malaysian citizens genuinely. The culture of being able to converse in more than one language and switching from one to another is presented thoroughly throughout the entire movie. This research was conducted solely in qualitative method.

### 3.2 Data collection

*The research material was dialogue selected from the movie. The movie was viewed five times in order to familiarise the interactions between characters. Scenes with suitable code-switching examples were selected. Dialogue of these examples was transcribed into words and highlighted to be shown vividly. The time of which scene these examples were taken from was specified. The selection was based on code-switching from English to Malay and Cantonese or vice versa, regardless of utterance made by which character and setting of the scenes. Each example was followed by justification on its function. These scenes were analysed based on the research questions mentioned earlier.*

### 3.3 Synopsis of “Sepet”

Jason (Ng Choo Seong) is a 19-year-old Chinese boy who sells pirated video CD's at a street stall. One day, a beautiful Malay girl named Oked (Sharifah Amani) stumbled at his stall seeking Takeshi Kaneshiro's films, the two fall in love at the first sight. Oked's visit at the stall led to phone calls, dates at fast food restaurants, and finally the bloom of an inter-cultural love story. The movie showcased different lives of two young people – Oked who came from a blessed family who loved her without reservation, and Jason who grew up in a domestic violent family during the earlier years in his life. Yet, Jason strived to become Romeo of the slums with his out of the ordinary hobbies such as poetry writing. Both of them went across the ethnic and religious boundaries and composed a beautiful love story. Yet, the two did not end up living together happily ever after. The relationship took a sudden turn when Jason found out that his previous girlfriend had conceived his child. At the same time, Oked was offered a scholarship to further her study in England.

### 4.0 Results and Discussion

It is very common to find Malaysian movies in more than one language. The decision to employ such communicative strategy in movies contributes much to the understanding of multi-cultural Malaysian audience, at the same time maintains the cultural setting of the story through the use of other languages. Yasmin Ahmad's “Sepet” itself is a prominent example of such. The story revolves around two ethnic groups in Malaysia – Malay and Chinese. Hence, code-switching as a communicative strategy can be seen used in the entire film.

Due to the fact that the storyline revolves around a cross-cultural love story between a Chinese boy and a Malay girl, more than one language is required to put messages across the audience's comprehensibility of the plot. The film is being presented using three of the most widely spoken languages in Malaysia – English, Malay and Cantonese. Code-switching can be seen to occur when the characters communicate with addressees of different domains such as the family domain and the friend domain. It is most obviously showcased on the families of both leading characters – Jason who is a mix of Chinese and Peranakan background, and Oked who represents the Malay community.

The protagonist, Jason is a multilingual Form 5 graduate from a Chinese family in Ipoh. In the movie, he converses in Cantonese at home with his family members, even to his mother with Peranakan background who speaks in Malay throughout the film. However, when he is outside the family domain, Jason switches to English and Malay while conversing with his girlfriend Oked and his best friend Keong. In addition to that, Jason is also seen reciting an unknown translated poem for his mother in Mandarin in the opening scene. Besides, Jason also uses Cantonese in his work domain where he works as a pirated video CD seller. Jason's selection of language in different domains is due to dissimilarity of addressees in different domains. His character has successfully demonstrated the multilingual capability of a typical Malaysian Chinese.

On the other hand, the female protagonist, Oked is a bilingual Malay girl who is also semi-lingual in Cantonese. Oked's dialogue throughout the film is mainly in English and Malay, but she also blends some phrases and vocabulary in Cantonese occasionally. At home, Oked uses Malay and English to communicate with her parents and their maid. The same communicative strategy is used when talking to her best friend Lin. Malay is spoken by Oked and her family because it is their native language passed down from generation to generation. English however, is seen as an important language as all the worthy goals in life – for instances entering the best university, being employed by a reknown company in the future, communicating with people from other parts of the world, and so on – require one to possess good command of English. Most families in Malaysia nowadays have chosen to prepare their children with the ability to communicate easily in English by code-switching to English in daily conversations. Oked's family is a clear example of such phenomenon in the Malaysian society.

The switch between languages (Malay, English, Cantonese, Mandarin and Hokkien) as performed by different characters in the film, can be seen as a way of portraying the cultural setting employed in the Malaysian society. Different languages are used in discrete scenes by separate groups of people because they are of distinct races. However, English can be considered as the lingua franca in the film as it is most widely used. Lingua franca refers to a language which serves the function of communication between different linguistic groups (Holmes, 2008). It is important to have a language which is a means of communication in a multilingual speech community like Malaysia because the audience consists of more than one race, and they cannot understand all the languages used in the film. Hence, English is used in order to cater audience of various linguistic groups. However, as the movie progresses to include other ethnic groups, switching of languages occurs spontaneously.

Examples of code-switching from English to other languages or vice versa can be traced through interactions among characters in the film. Each example can be exemplified and related to different functions of code-switching in the regular conversations. The first scene which has been selected for analysis is the scene where Jason and Oked met for the first time at a market. Oked, accompanied by her best friend Lin, visited Jason's pirated Video CD stall in search of her favourite Japanese actor – Takeshi Kaneshiro's videos. The scene consists of a talk between Jason, Oked, and Lin in which three languages are used in their conversation – English, Malay and Cantonese. It is timed between 00:12:30 and 00:17:00 in the movie. Below is the first part of examples extracted from the scene:

#### Excerpt 1

Jason to Orked: Want to buy some videos?

Lin to Jason : No, actually, I nak beli kasut la. Saya ni saiz enam, dia saiz lima, jual kasut tak?  
[Malay]

Orked to Jason: Jangan dengar cakap ini perempuan, she chee-sin. [Cantonese]

Lin to Oked : Apa chee-sin chee-sin [Cantonese] ni?

Oked to Lin : Takde, aku cakap you baik hati, so, suka campur dengan kawan bangsa lain.  
[Malay]

It the movie, both Jason and Oked are stupefied for five seconds when their eyes meet for the first time at the market as they are attracted to each other. Since the opening, Jason is seen to be conversing in Cantonese until he meets Oked at the morning market. Instead of phrasing "Nak beli video", Jason asks Oked if she "wants to buy some videos." It is his first line of English dialogue in the movie since the opening scene. According to David & DeAlwis (2010b), English is associated with "better education and quality of life, given the economic opportunities that come with the ability

to use the language.” Jason’s choice of English in initiating the conversation could be his intention to impress Oked, his love at first sight, in order to show that even though he does not have a proper job (selling pirated VCD), he is capable of speaking English, which indicates that his educational level is not low.

Oked’s friend Lin however, does not seem amazed by Jason’s English utterance that she code-switches from English to Malay instead. She sees Jason’s question as a form of redundancy because buying video is the purpose why she and Oked had visited the stall. Lin consequentially tantalises Jason by answering his question with irrelevant subject matter in Malay, saying that they are there to look for shoes. Her act of starting off the reply in English and then altering to Malay (“No, actually, I nak beli kasut la...”) could be a form of mockery rising from her dislike towards Jason, a pirated-VCD seller who eyes on her best friend. She could also be sneering Jason as a VCD seller who is able to articulate simple question, but not capable of understanding long English sentences.

Conversely, Oked who seems to be attracted to Jason, tries to attract attention from him by calling Lin “chee sin”. The Cantonese term “chee sin” refers to “crazy” in English. According to Malik (2004) as quoted by Muthusamy (2009), Hindi or other Indian languages are used in English newspapers in India to attract attention from readers who originate from Indian languages. A similar situation prevails in this scene where Oked mixes a dialect which she does not originate from, but Jason on the other hand as a citizen of Ipoh (where Cantonese is widely spoken among Chinese) is expected to understand. By doing so, Oked is trying to appeal to Jason as a Malay girl who can use a foreign dialect which is out of her language background in her words. Besides that, another function of this switch is to exclude Lin from Oked’s utterance to prevent her from knowing that Oked has used a degrading term on her. Even though not trying to be offensive, Oked tries to minimise the risk of provoking Lin by shifting to a language she is unable to understand. This is proven in a later part of their conversation where Oked comes up with irrelevant explanation when Lin, who has no idea about the meaning of the term at all, interrogates Oked with “Apa ‘chee-sin chee-sin’ ni?”(What do you mean by “chee-sin”?).

The scene then moves on with Oked buying movies of Takeshi Kaneshiro (a Japanese actor who participates in Chinese movies) from Jason. Jason’s dialogue continues to demonstrate switch of code due to change of addressee. It is exemplified in the following example when Jason has to ask his peer to hand over a copy of VCD which Oked intends to buy.

#### Excerpt 2

Oked to Jason : CD.

Jason to Oked : Oh, sorry.

Jason to peers : Loh jeg “Yes Sir, No Sir” lei. [Cantonese]

(Pass me a “Yes Sir, No Sir”.)

Skiba (1997) states that there are patterns where code-switching occur with regard to addressee and location in order to ensure that an appropriate language is used for that particular social group. In the earlier part of the movie, Jason communicates with the group of thugs in Cantonese. It is an established norm that they communicate among themselves using Cantonese, which could be the native language for all of them. Hence, when Jason has to ask one of his peers to hand him Oked’s “Yes Sir, No Sir” VCD, he has to alternate from English to Cantonese because it is the language used among them.

Often in this scene do we see repetition of a same utterance in two different languages, first in English then in Cantonese. This phenomenon occurs particularly on Oked who is not fluent in

Cantonese but tries very hard to mix it in her sentences for affective functions. There are two examples which can be extracted from this scene, the first one is as below:

Excerpt 3

Oked to Jason : How much?  
Jason to Oked : Five (Ringgit).  
Oked to Jason : Thank you, um goy. [Cantonese]  
(Thank you.)  
Jason to Oked : Mmm sigh.[Cantonese]  
(You're welcome.)

After paying, Jason hands the VCD over to Oked whereas she takes it from Jason while thanking him. Oked's gratitude is expressed in English followed by Cantonese ("Thank you, um goy"). The repetition in Cantonese is merely to signal solidarity with Jason. As asserted by Holmes (2008, p. 39), a speaker can achieve such function even though he or she is not proficient in a second language. Holmes states that when the speaker is not fluent in that language, solidarity can still be expressed with very short phrases or words. Therefore, despite the fact that Oked cannot converse in Cantonese like a native speaker, she uses short phrases in her conversation with Jason in order to narrow the social distance between them. Jason on the other hand replies "you're welcome" in the same language to signal his comprehensibility on Oked's utterance.

Another example of the same function is when Jason decides to let Oked watch another film of Takeshi Kaneshiro for free, and allows her to return it without charging her money if she happens to not like it. Feeling shocked in disbelief, the same type of repetition occurs when Oked asks Jason, "Are you sure? Chan gae? (Really?)" Again, Jason replies in Cantonese by saying "chan hai" (really). The usage of Cantonese terms in Oked's exchanges is so prominent in her dialogue that it serves as a fundamental stimulus in helping to establish rapport between her and Jason. By the end of the scene, Jason who assumes that Oked has the capability of comprehending simple Cantonese sentences chooses to ask Oked's name in Cantonese. The exchanges in the ending (still the same scene) is exemplified below:

Excerpt 4

Oked to Jason : Ok, thank you.  
Jason to Oked : Errr, miss! Miss! Lay gyu mae maeng? [Cantonese]  
(What is your name?)  
Oked to Jason : Oked!  
Jason to Oked : Byebye Oked.  
Oked to Jason : Byebye Jason.

Here, Jason's alternation from English to Cantonese is no longer to initiate further communication. Instead, he understands that other than English and Malay, Cantonese is another socio-linguistic tool which can be utilised between the both of them. According to Crystal (1987) as quoted by Skiba (1997), when two bilingual speakers are accustomed to talking in a particular language, one of the reasons they code-switch is bound to create a special effect in their conversation. It is unusual to find Malays being able to communicate in simple Cantonese. Jason sees the

phenomenon as a unique click between the two of them that he chooses to ask “Lay gyu mae maeing” instead of saying “May I know your name please” in order to create the effect.

Moving to the second part of the analysis, the examples will be focused mainly on Jason’s Chinese friend – Keong’s context. The second selected scene is a scene where Jason introduces his girlfriend Oked to his best friend Keong. Examples are extracted from the excerpt below timed from minute 00:50:00 to 00:51:00.

#### Excerpt 5

you know or	Keong to Jason : ... also, you’re gonna break your parents’ heart la. You have to change your name, then change your religion, very mah fan [Cantonese/Mandarin] one know? Some more you cannot eat Char Siew [Cantonese] anymore you not, cannot eat pork.  (mah fan – to cause someone a lot of trouble; Char Siew – roasted pork marinated in Chinese sauces)
	Jason to Keong : Yea hor.
	Keong to Jason : Some more you have to cut your xiao di di! [Mandarin]  (Plus, you’ll have to circumcise!)
	Jason to Keong : Shhhhhhhh!

In the short excerpt above, Keong is seen switching at the single lexical item level where three Cantonese and Chinese terms are used. The first lexical item is adjective “mah fan” (troublesome). The term, pronounced the same way in Cantonese and Mandarin, is regularly borrowed among Chinese while communicating using a second language to purport a situation which is or a person who is causing troubles, annoyance or difficulty to someone. Keong’s code-switch occurs naturally as it may not even be a conscious choice. This is because Chinese and Cantonese words are habitually used as code-switching items among Chinese community in Malaysia.

The second lexical borrowing from the example above is Keong replacing roasted pork with its original Cantonese name “Char Siew”. It is uncommon to find Chinese calling “Char Siew” roasted pork in Malaysia because it could mean another type of dish cooked in the same way yet tastes entirely different. When said “Char Siew”, people will immediately link it with Canton style marinated pork commonly found at Chinese chicken rice stall in Malaysia. According to Holmes (2008, p. 43), when a speaker switches frequently from a second language to his mother tongue, the reason does not necessarily be initiated by lack of vocabulary. Contrarily, it could be caused by the fact that the speaker does not know the appropriate word in the second language. Holmes refers this type of switching as lexical borrowing. By saying “Char Siew” Keong can directly put his meaning across without having to describe to Jason which kind of roasted pork is he referring to. The language barrier can then be overcome by using the lexical component from Keong’s first language.

On the other hand, Keong also substitutes circumcision with “cut your ‘xiao di di’”. “Xiao di di” literally means young boy in Mandarin, is an informal way of saying a male’s sexual organ in Mandarin. By telling Jason that he has to “cut” his sexual organ if he chooses to marry a Muslim girl in the future, Keong is asserting that Jason will have to circumcise. Keong code-switches to Mandarin even though there is English word which can express the concept uninterrupted. However, Keong still borrows from Mandarin in order to put across his meaning in a less direct manner. This is because Asians are not as receptive when it comes to sexually related issues. Indirect or informal terms are often used with the intention of avoiding awkwardness or embarrassment in

conversation. The see-sawing between English and Chinese (including its dialects) in Keong's dialogue mimics the linguistic code-switching that regularly occurs in the Malaysian society.

The scene then persists with Oked entering the Chinese coffee shop, looking at Char Siew on the chop board of a chicken rice stall and utters "Huiyoh, ho ho may yea" (Wow, so delicious). She then walks towards Jason and calls him "sayang" instead of using English endearment terms such as "darling", "sweetheart" and so on. By altering the language from English (conversation between Keong and Jason) to Cantonese and Malay (when Oked comes into the scene), Yasmin the director and scriptwriter of the movie is trying to preserve the cultural setting of pluralistic the Malaysian society. Moving on to the moment when Jason finally introduces Keong to his girlfriend, Oked switches again to Cantonese.

#### Excerpt 6

Jason to Oked : Hi, this is Keong.

Keong to Oked : Hi, Oked.

Oked to Keong : Keong! Wah, Jason gong lei mmm laeng jai, ngo thai lei ho laeng jai.  
[Cantonese]

(Keong! Wow, Jason said you're not handsome, but I think you are.)

In this situation, Oked is trying to establish good rapport with her boyfriend's best friend whom she meets for the first time, by praising him that he is very good-looking in Cantonese. Albeit not coming from the same ethnicity and linguistic background, Oked attempts to achieve affective effect by amusing Keong with her rather good Cantonese. Holmes (2008, p. 35) states that many bilinguals and multilinguals are skillful enough to make use of their linguistic repertoires for solidarity intention. Oked in this case for example, is exploiting her limited fluency in Cantonese to impress Keong and make him take positive account of her presence in this social situation. Even though not a proficient speaker as a participant of a different race, relationship between Oked and Keong can be more easily generated because their social distance has been shorten.

## 5.0 Conclusion

"Sepet" has demonstrated how code-switching works as an essential strategy in social communication among multi-lingual young Malaysians. For instance, it is found that the phenomenon occurs throughout the movie be it at inter-sentential or intra-sentential level and either from English to another language or vice versa. Of significance is that there are a number of languages involved in switching in the movie, among these languages, a Chinese dialect – Cantonese is used most extensively in the script. Code-switching in the movie has in a straight line reflected the communicative style and strategy among multilinguals in Malaysia's pluralistic society. Whether it is switching from second language to first language (for example Jason and Keong) or to a foreign dialect which is not within one's linguistic background (Oked for instance), code-switching practice is inevitable in countering communication problem during conversation among Malaysians.

It can be summarised that code-switching is a vital communicative style in putting meaning across in the movie and daily practices in Malaysia. Even though the movie was produced by Malay film makers, "Sepet" has managed to portray the real life situations of a Malaysian society by selecting more than one ethnic group for leading roles in order to embrace cultural elements of other races, at the same time design interactions in more than one language among the characters. These combinations may be unfamiliar to foreign movie makers as well as foreign audience, yet, they have

successfully manifested the authentic characteristic of communicative styles among local citizens. The movie's triumph in local and international film awards is the best evidence to its success.

Another aspect which is worthy to be brought up is that the English used in the movie is the non-standard version – the Malaysian variety of English known as “Manglish”. In terms of level of formality and difficulty, Manglish is not as high a standard as Standard English. Therefore, the selection of Manglish in “Sepet” mimics exactly the English proficiency level among most Malaysians who are semilingual in the language. This has successfully demonstrated again how the movie brings forward the authentic communicative style in the Malaysian society.

Local productions – especially Yasmin Ahmad's films – reveal affluent cultural characteristics which are not easily found in other countries. If local productions in the future continue to retain Yasmin's philosophy and trait, it is not impossible for Malaysia's film industry to venture into international platform.

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