

MULTILINGUALISM IN SINGAPORE: THE ETHNOLINGUISTIC VITALITY OF ITS MAJORITY AND MINORITY LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose for this paper is to assess the ethnolinguistic vitality of language usage in the Republic of Singapore. For our purposes here, ethnolinguistic vitality refers to language sustainability, strength and vitality. Sustainability is the language's ability to continue existing as a language. Strength refers to a language's durability in terms of economics, culture, demographics and institutions. Vitality refers to the language's ability to act as a collective entity; that is, to protect the language from external variables impacting upon it - it is a function of the shared perspective of all of those members of that particular language group (Meyerhoff, 2006, pp.107-108). In our investigation, we have used data taken from various sources: (Singapore Dept. of Statistics, 2000), Li et al. (1997, pp. 366), Liang (1999), Singaporean Census (2010), for the period (2000 to 2010). The data discussions showed that English possessed a wide range in economics and trade although it has combined with other aspects of life in Singapore. Furthermore, the Chinese has aroused to be used. English has interfered with Chinese that represents the majority community language; the Ethnolinguistic vitality has been moved from Chinese to English that has legalised the cultural, social, and symbolic capitals represented by English.*

KEYWORDS: Ethnolinguistic, Majority, Minority, English, Chinese.

INTRODUCTION

Singapore Spoken Languages: Background

Most minority group members become bilingual by learning the majority group language. That is not the case in Singapore. By design, the government established multiple official languages. Upon gaining its independence, there were four official languages established by the Singapore government: Malay (*Bahasa Melayu*), Mandarin Chinese, Tamil and English (Dixon, 2005a, p.27). With its prominent role in both regional and international trade, it was recognized that these four primary languages would serve as a bridge between many of its trading partners. This coexistence of many languages arose as a function of a desire for communication efficiency within a common language. From a linguistic standpoint, the adoption of English is a function of internationalization; that is, the adoption of a non-indigenous language of wider communication. The interdependence theory of the foreign language (L2) learning proposes that individuals with solid skills in a native language (L1) will be able to use their knowledge and skills to help them achieve high standards in an additional language; bilingual programs have to provide for an equal improvement of concepts and skills in both languages. Many scholars maintain that both basic concepts and literacy are best developed in the L1 (Cummins, 1979).

Presently, twenty languages have been identified as spoken in Singapore (David, 2008). In a planned language development process and to all level of instruction, English is regarded as

the basic medium of instruction, while Tamil, Malay, and Mandarin are learned as second languages (Pakir, 2004, p. 117). The other three official languages are taught according to ethnic background. The objective of this policy is to maintain cultural identification. To facilitate economic growth, the necessity for political and social stability should be considered in a varied multi-racial society (Gopinathan, 1998, p. 391). The loss of dialects is pronounced, since many are now banned for mass media usage and allowed for use only for the elderly.

Collected Data and their Discussions

Ethnic Chinese comprise 75% of the total population. Although Mandarin Chinese is one of Singapore's official languages, other dialects are present: "Hokkien (43.1%), Teochew (22.1%), Cantonese (16.4%), Hakka (7.4%), and Hainanese (7.1%)" (Li *et al.*, 1997, pp. 366), along with a sampling of Foochow, Henghua, Shangainese and Hokchia dialects. It can be seen that, within the family, Mandarin and English are increasingly spoken; replacing these traditional, regional dialects which are facing decline as a consequence.

Of the total population, Indians in Singapore represent 4%; within that population, Tamils have 63.9%, Malayalees have 8.6%, Punjabis comprise 6.7%, with a sampling of Bengali, Urdu and Gujarati. In 1985, 54% of Tamils reported Tamil as the principle family language; by 2000 that devolved to 3% (Singapore Dept. of Statistics, 2000). This has been attributed to a shift to English as a principle family language. Moreover, only 15% of individuals who spoke other than Tamil spoke Hindi, Malayalam, Gujarati, or Punjabi; Malayalam represents the second largest Indian ethnic group (20%). Typically while involved in family activities, Tamils use English reverted to Tamil for prayers. It had been observed that the higher the socioeconomic status and higher education achievement, the higher probability of utilizing English. Table 1 depicts the evolution of language in Singapore as a function of globalization.

Table 1. Language shift in Singapore as a function of globalization¹

Date	1800	1900	2000
Chronological conditions	Malay as a Sultanate	British settlement	Independent state
Economics	Malay littoral context: piracy, trading, agriculture, fishing	British exploitation of trading as basis for operations in wider region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment and Banking • The high-technology industry • Warehouses trade
Ethnic individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Malays •Indians • Arabs • Chinese • Thai 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Sharp distinctions between natives and Europeans •Increased proportions of Chinese and Indians •Classification by race •Segregated housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Sharp distinction between citizens and permanent residents •Racial integration required by law •Integrated housing

¹ Adopted from Liang (1999).

Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Malay dominant •Arabic important •Education available only in Malay and Arabic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Malay <i>lingua franca</i> •Many languages associated with specific ethnic groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Few monolingual individuals •Main teaching languages English and Mandarin Chinese •Education made compulsory
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Statistics have shown an increased usage of English and Mandarin because of their global economic importance. While this is prevalent in Chinese and Indian communities, spoken Malay within their community is maintained, but code switching between English and Malay exists with the home area. Table 2, below, shows the proportion of languages spoken in the home.

Table 2. Resident Population Aged 5 Years and Over by Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home²

Ethnic Group/Language	2000	2010
Chinese	100.0%	100.0%
English	23.9%	32.6%
Mandarin	45.1%	47.7%
Chinese dialects	30.7%	19.2%
Others	0.4%	0.4%
Malays	100.0%	100.0%
English	7.9%	17.0%
Malay	91.6%	82.7%
Others	0.5%	0.3%
Indians	100.0%	100.0%
English	35.6%	41.6%
Malay	11.6%	7.9%
Tamil	42.9%	36.7%
Others	9.9%	13.8%

Lessons are taught in English throughout schools in Singapore as L1, as part of Singapore's policy on bilingual education. While in both primary and secondary schools, students are also taught a L2 referred to by the Ministry of Education (MOE) as the 'Mother Tongue'; these are Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. Unlike other countries, where the L1 is the typical name for the 'Mother Tongue' term, it is the L2 in Singapore. The implication of this bilingual strategy varies among the various ethnic groups. When initially implemented, for the Chinese, there was a struggle to learn both English and Mandarin, since other dialects were spoken in the home (Dixon, 2005b, p. 625). The Malay community faced similar obstacles. Malay religious schools—Madrasahs—along with mosques exclusively use Malay (Kassim, 2008, p. 47). Mother tongue is defined by MOE not by the father's ethnicity, rather than L1 or the language used at home. A child, for instance, with a Tamil speaking Indian mother and a

² Derived from Table 4 (2010) Census

Hokkien speaking Chinese father would inevitably be attached to learn Mandarin as a L2. This bilingual approach to education has been rationalized as protecting values and cultural identities of Asia against encroachment by Western impact. This policy is most evident in the use and display of language in official graphics: all four languages are represented in one graphic for the national audience (See Figure 1); while displaying an individual language in one graphic targeting a specific ethnic group (Chan, 2009).

Figure 1. Representative Singaporean Sign



A significant proportion of the Singapore population (36%) comprises of non-English speaking foreigners; 50% of which are in the service sector. The government has dealt with this issue since July 2010 by requiring all service workers to pass an English test before a work permit could be issued.

As part of its approach to language and dialect, the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) confines Chinese dialects in the media. However, dialects are not controlled in traditional arts. Subsequent to bilingual policy implementation, Mandarin subtitles were added to the various media to facilitate better understanding by the audience.

The Chinese community has seen a rapid decline in knowledge of dialects over the last decade. This can be seen as a direct consequence of the decline in use within the home, as noted previously. Typically, persons 40 years old and younger have an employed knowledge of both Mandarin and English, but no knowledge of other dialects. Conversely, older people can only speak other Chinese dialects with little or no knowledge of Mandarin. Consequently, a language barrier exists between grandparents and grandchildren. Chinese clan associations are instrumental in maintaining dialects by supporting Chinese immigrants. However, the decline in dialect usage has steadily been declining.

Conversely, however, Indians are treated differently from Chinese and Malays. Although Tamil is the official language, there have been no attempts on the part of the government to discourage other Indian languages. For example, in the primary school leaving examination, students may declare Bengali, Bujarati, Hindi, Urdu or Punjabi as their mother tongue. An obvious question is why the Indian community is being treated differently than Chinese or Malay communities. Subtle racial cleansing seems to be at work here, with the majority population ethnic Chinese, along with a lesser number of Malays; however, the ethnic Indian population has remained constant. Although publicly denied by the government, racial preference within Singapore is given to the majority ethnic Chinese population.

A study was conducted in (1998) comparing relative skills of the three distinct groups of students writing Chinese characters, Japanese students, native students from Beijing who were monolingual with no L2 exposure, and university students from Singapore who were bilingual (Okita & Guo, 2001, p. 63-64). Findings included a significantly lower skill level for Singaporean students writing *Kanji* by correct stroke order than that of either the Beijing or Japanese students. Acquisition of correct stroke order is a fundamental basis to successfully learning Chinese characters. The Singaporean students attributed poorer performance to less daily exposure to, or usage of, Chinese characters.

Dixon (2005a: 41) examined another study that was carried out by Cheng (1997); its main aim was to conduct the degree of Chinese and English biliteracy in Secondary 3 (~15-year-old) students. Measured students who were taught Chinese and English simultaneously, scored in the primary school leaving examination top 10%. Survey of these students indicated the following usage preferences (Table 3).

Table 3. Language usage preferences³

	Used Mandarin Chinese	Used English	Used other Chinese dialects
In home	60.8%	20.8%	19%
With friends	86%	30%	-----
Preferred TV shows	57%	15%	-----
Preferred reading	6.7%	69.2%	-----

The significance of the Table 3 data is higher Mandarin oral use, while English scored a higher value for reading.

Going back to the interdependence hypothesis mentioned earlier, most Chinese and Indian students spoke in dialects at home rather than Mandarin; therefore, they could not rely upon home language exposure to enhance their skills. Subsequently, however, these students learned Mandarin to the extent that code-switching within the home resulted, i-e, learners

³ Developed from Dixon's data (2005a: 41-42).

learned the requisite language skills very well so that they would be able to switch between speaking one or the other at home (Dixon, 2005a, p. 43). It is believed that these students develop their knowledge of language skills in the language used at home alongside the development of English literacy; however, since the mother tongue is taught solely in a school environment, these students cannot benefit from L2 development in the home.

CONCLUSION

In developing a bilingual policy, the government's aim had been to use English solely as a means of standardized communication for the purpose of economics and trade, while maintaining a rich diversity of Singaporean languages and dialects. However, English has increasingly integrated across all aspects of life in Singapore. At the same time, the use of the Chinese language has evolved. Singapore is approaching a point where language usage can be seen as an indicator for social position (Tan, 2003, p. 48). This social distinction expresses symbolic power through use of language.

Singapore has made great strides in standardizing their official languages within their populace. This has come at the cost of the various dialects that historically were predominant within the country. Since the codification of their bilingual policy in 1965, English language encroachment has clashed with Chinese representing the majority community language. Despite the Singaporean government's approach to make English language acquisition an economically pragmatic issue, English has gained capital values. Characterised as a "dictatorship of the middle class", the prevalence of English language usage, both formally and informally, has subtly changed the political and social characters, as well as the planned economic character that it targeted for implementation. The shift from Chinese to English has legitimized the cultural, social and symbolic capitals represented by English. The significant downside of Singapore's official language structure is the gradual erosion and eventual elimination of dialect usage within its society.

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