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THE LANGUAGE ECOLOGY OF SINGAPORE

The language ecology of Singapore has been shaped by educational policy, which in turn has been a response to a particularly complex language ecology. Concepts of indigeneity are meaningless in this city state, which has been a multicultural trading port since at least the fourteenth century (Gupta, 1994; Miksic, 2004), and whose present language make-up is the result of British colonialism and associated immigration in the nineteenth century (Platt and Weber, 1980; Gupta, 1994). The colonial government manipulated the delivery of education as a tool of ethnic management and social engineering, and this policy has been continued by the government of independent Singapore (Murray, 1971; Benjamin, 1976; Bloom, 1986; Gupta, 1994; Pennycook, 1994; Tremewan, 1994; Chua, 1995; Gopinathan et al (eds), 1998; Tan et al (eds), 1997; PuruShotam 1998).

The extreme societal and individual multilingualism of the early twentieth century (Murray, 1971; Kuo. 1976; Platt and Weber, 1980) has given way to a linguistically more homogeneous society, in which the norm is for everyone to be able to use English and the official language associated with their officially defined race (either Malay, Mandarin Chinese or Tamil). Considerable language shift to English and Mandarin, mostly from non-official languages, has taken place. The entire population is now much more linguistically united than it was, through English, and the Chinese population is also more united than in the past, through English and Mandarin. Those born after independence are likely to know fewer languages, and are less likely to have some knowledge of a language associated with another ethnic group than are those born in the 50 years before independence.

Some aspects of the linguistic ecology of Singapore are shared with the whole Malay world (potentially extending as far modern Thailand and modern Australia), and even more is shared with (modern) Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, to which Singapore has close historical and geographical links. But Singapore has always been, to varying degrees, politically distinct from the wider region, and in this paper I will link it to the wider region only when that is unavoidable.

Developments

Modern Singapore is a city state, about 640 square kilometres in area, built across over 30 islands, many of them very small. It is located in calm waters at the southern tip of mainland Asia, where the monsoons of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean meet, at a crucial point on the trade routes that link China, India, and Arabia. In this small corner of the Malay region, there are cities and the ruins of cities that are or were international trading posts, such as Sri Vijaya, Malacca, Banten, Banda Aceh, and Singapore (the classic history is Wheatley, 1961). Some of these cities (especially Sri Vijaya and Malacca) at their height controlled a wide region. Groups of foreign traders settled in the cities in districts that were set aside for them, and the cities were open to influence by the cultures and languages of India, Arabia, China and Europe. Miksic (2004) argues that although Singapore fits into this 'port of trade' category, it is possible that the foreigners in Singapore may have had more freedom to mix with the local population than was usually the case. In Singapore, we see what seems like rapid change in the twentieth century, but this should be placed in the context of two millenia (at least) of cosmopolitan trading ports in the immediate region, and 600 years in Singapore itself.

There are a number of early Chinese (quoted by Wheatley, 1961; Miksic, 2004) and European accounts of pre-colonial Singapore in the context of the wider region of the Malay peninsula and archipelago. The language which gave rise to most attention was Malay. De Houtman van Gouda (1603) supplied the first European treatment, and Marsden's became the classic account (1812a, 1812b). Malay was the lingua franca of the entire region, and its adaptations as a lingua franca were a considerable source of fascination (especially Bowrey 1701). The negotiation of multilingualism in the region was to be a central topic of much of the writing on the area.

In 1819, Stamford Raffles and William Farquhar made an agreement with Singapore's Malay rulers and began a formal connection with Britain that was responsible both for its later ethno-linguistic composition and for the prominence that English came to have. As a result of the trade established under British control, many immigrants were attracted to Singapore, most of them from groups that had been associated with the region for centuries, and many coming to Singapore from other cosmopolitan cities in the region, especially Malacca. As a result, he population is still dominated by three groups, all of them internally diverse, which in Singapore are officially labelled[1] as follows:

- Chinese: people of Chinese ancestry, mostly from Southern regions of China now part of the People's Republic of China. Brought with them a range of varieties of Chinese, the largest of which are the closely related Hokkien (Amoy) and Teochew. Also large numbers of Cantonese speakers.
- Malay: people whose ancestors formed the majority population in the Malay Region. Most spoke dialects of Malay, which was also the lingua franca of the whole region, but there were substantial groups who spoke other related languages, especially Javanese and Boyanese.
- Indian: people of South Asia ancestry (modern Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). Most were from Southern India, a small majority being Tamil speakers. Other groups included Malayalees and Punjabis.

There are also a number of groups that are identified as resulting from genetic and cultural mixture before the nineteenth century, some of which (especially those descended from Arab or Indian Muslim men) were partly absorbed into the Malay population, adopting Malay, and some of which developed contact varieties of Malay (Malacca Chitty, Straits Chinese) or Portuguese (Malacca Portuguese). Some nineteenth century migrants came from smaller groups, often via India, and some of these people (Arabs, Armenians, Europeans, Eurasians, Jews) were important in the development of English in Singapore (Gupta, 1994).

Singapore was briefly (1963-65) a part of Malaysia, and became a fully independent country in 1965, since when the *People's Action Party* has been returned as the governing party at every election. The government of Singapore is active in social engineering, and has used language, especially as expressed in educational policy, as a major tool in shaping Singapore society (Bloom, 1986; Gupta. 1994; Tremewan, 1994; Chua, 1995; Tan et al (eds) 1997; Gopinathan et al (eds), 1998; PuruShotam, 1998).

The British colonial power was concerned to classify and manage the population of Singapore, which it did through its decennial censuses (from 1871) and annual reports on education (from 1856). Gazetteers of the region (such as Hamilton, 1815; Crawfurd, 1856) outlined the salient features of people and languages. Many of those working on the sociolinguistic situation of Singapore (such as Bloom, 1986; Gupta, 1994; Chua, 1995; PuruShotam, 1998) are indebted to Benjamin (1976) for an insight on how multiculturalism is a powerful cultural and social institution in Singapore. Singapore's multiracialism is one in which the state is seen as being composed of the three main constituent 'races' (Malays, Chinese, Indians), with a 'stereotypical list of defining characteristics ascribed to it' (Benjamin 1976:124): an

individual's full Singaporean identity depends on membership of a 'race'. A citizen's official racial classification is allocated at birth, based on paternal ancestry: it is expressed as membership of a 'race' (such as 'Chinese') and a 'dialect group' (such as 'Hokkien'). Official race has consequences in allocation of housing, school, and, probably most crucially, in allocating languages studied at school (see below). The sharp official classifications mask the amount of blurring of boundaries that has happened, though most Singaporeans do have a sense of belonging to (at least) one of these subgroups, and will attribute cultural traits to this ancestry (such as appearance, how festivals are celebrated, the style of domestic cuisine, taste in clothes). The younger a person is the less likely they are to speak the language associated with their official dialect group, especially if it is one of the smaller varieties.

The categories used by the British have been persistent into the censuses and the thinking of Modern Singapore (Kuo, 1976; Saw, 1981; Tay, 1983; Lau, 1993; Gupta, 1994; Leow 2001). There are accurate records of officially classifiable race and ethnicity, but the data on language use and knowledge is patchy. It is important to remember that as a result of language shift and intermarriage, it cannot be assumed that a person can speak their official 'dialect group', let alone that it is their native or best language. Censuses do have information on literacy in the official languages, and, since 1980, they have had limited information on language of the home. The way these questions are asked ("what is the main language you speak to....?") underestimates the amount of domestic bilingualism. The Ministry of Education collects some information on home languages of children coming into Primary School, which are released annually. The censal and Ministry figures taken together represent the most accurate data on current language ecology that there is, but they are based on self-report, and limited in scope. There has never been reliable information on native language patterns in Singapore: rather researchers use intelligent guesses triangulated with what is available.

In a place as complex as Singapore, the choice of code is highly rule-governed. The home is a place of freedom and knowledge. Members of a family know the repertoires of the individuals and choose a code that is appropriate to either include or exclude other family members. Mixing of codes is routine and expected in the family setting, as is the use of colloquial varieties of the languages. In interactions with strangers, codes are selected on the basis of an assessment of the ethnic and social characteristics of the speaker, the interlocutor and the setting. The rules are complex and subtle. Many Singaporeans habitually use two or three or even four or

more languages on a daily basis. This is an area of Singapore behaviour that has been little studied.

Mediums Of Education And Language Shift

The story of languages in Singapore is one of language shift motivated by pragmatism and linked to educational policy, which in turn is linked to the politics of race. Until the middle of the twentieth century, most people spoke the language their ancestors had brought to Singapore, and often several other languages as well. Bazaar Malay had been established for centuries as a lingua franca over a wide region, and most of those who lived in Singapore had to learn it. The largest single Chinese dialect, Hokkien, was known by most of the Chinese population, and even by many non-Chinese, and also functioned as a lingua franca, especially within the Chinese population.

The colonial education policy provided education in the medium of Malay for Malays, and gave some support to education in English for the rest of the population. Most education in the mediums of English and Chinese was fee-paying, with a great deal of charitable and church involvement. Much of the Chinese-medium education was provided by community associations of various types and was in the medium of the dialect associated with the association. By 1900 about half of all boys had had some education, but the literacy rate in females was less than 20% (there are details of this history in Bloom, 1986 and Gupta, 1994). Between 1900 and 1920 participation in education rose dramatically, and was extended to more social groups, and both genders. Recruitment in English-medium schools increased faster than in any other medium. The effects of the change can still be seen in census reports: the younger you are, the more likely you are to be literate, and the more likely it is that one of the languages in which you are literate is English.

Education is a major tool of social engineering and is also the principal route of social and economic advancement: the bulk of the population is enthusiastic about education and keen for their children to achieve. Tertiary education in the medium of English became available in Singapore from 1929 and was available in Chinese from 1958. By the 1950s girls were as likely to go to school as boys, more children were enrolled in English-medium schools than in any other medium, and someone who was literate in Chinese was likely to know Mandarin. There are two cornerstones of the racially based policy that has shaped modern Singapore:

- There are four official languages, but English is the language of government;
- There are three main 'racial' groups, each of which is recognised as distinct and whose culture is validated. Each group is associated with one of the official languages other than English (Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil).

Education is highly controlled in Singapore, and it is usually not possible for Singaporean children to be privately educated in Singapore. In March 2004 the Ministry of Education announced that it would allow privately funded schools to be established that Singaporeans could attend, but these schools have not yet been developed: it is still best to think of private schools as being principally schools for foreigners. In 2003, education became compulsory for children over 6 years and below 15 years, but it was near universal half a century before it became compulsory.

Until the 1950s education in the medium of English competed with education in the mediums of (Mandarin) Chinese, Tamil, and Malay. But over the twentieth century, English-medium education became the most popular, and, from the 1950s onwards, all children were required to learn English, even if they were educated in some other medium. By the 1980s almost no children were educated in any other medium, and from 1987, all education under government control (which means all education for Singaporeans) was required to be principally or solely in the medium of English. Tertiary education in Chinese-medium had ended by 1978.

Since the 1950s it has been required that all children study a language in addition to English. Until 1981, children could choose any of the official languages, the main consequence of which was that, while most children studied the language congruent with their ancestry, some children of Chinese and Indian ancestry studied Malay. Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil are articulated by policy as being associated with the maintenance of culture and cohesiveness in the three racial groups, as providing 'cultural ballast'. Confusingly, the ethnically representative language is often referred to as the 'mother tongue': this does not imply anything about the child having grown up speaking the language and Mandarin was rarely a native language until the 1970s. In 1979 the government began to strenuously promote Mandarin, encouraging its use by Chinese people in domains where formerly southern dialects were used. In line with this philosophy, the educational policy has been tightened up, so that (with rare exceptions) children are required to study the language associated with their official race. Virtually all Chinese children now study Chinese, and Malay is studied by few non-Malays.

The prescription of the language to be studied presents problems mainly to people of mixed ancestry, and to members of minority groups that have no affiliation to any of the three languages, the situation is especially fraught for the Indian community PuruShotam, 1998; Schiffman, 2002). It also presents practical problems for Malays and Indians because Malay and Tamil cannot be offered in as many schools as Chinese is. A further negative consequence is the emergence of many schools which are attended only by Chinese children. Regulations cap the proportion of minority children allowed in a school: there are no schools that are dominated by minority ethnic groups. Like minorities everywhere, the ethnic minorities of Singapore are more familiar with the majority than the majority are with them (Gupta 1994).

The lack of opportunity for non-Chinese children in the school system to learn Mandarin, the language linked to the largest ethnic group, has often been commented on in the press, many members of minority groups feeling that they are linguistically excluded from some commercial and social activities dominated by Chinese-speakers. The policy has also resulted, in the twenty years of its operation, in a decrease in the knowledge of Malay by non-Malays, something that was commented on in the Singapore press (*Straits Times*, 18 February 2005) when Singapore sent help to victims of the Pacific tsunami of December 26 2004. Senior members of the government came to the realisation that non-Malays could not communicate with Indonesian authorities in Aceh (Sumatra is visible from Singapore), as the only younger Singaporeans to know Malay now are Malays. The decline in knowledge of cross-ethnic languages arises partly from the education policy having halted a move to Malay that had happened at the expense of Chinese and Indian languages, and partly because English is now available as a universal lingua franca in Singapore.

There has in recent years been some move to redress the ethnic separation that resulted from the prescription of the language to be studied. Within the state education it has for some years been possible for only the most able students to study a third language formally, from the age of 12 years. Initially the languages offered were Malay, French, German and (for those who already knew Chinese) Japanese. Following a suggestion from the then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong in 2002, Chinese became available to academically-able non-Chinese in this way from 2004. In response to continuing concerns expressed about the lack of cross-ethnic language knowledge, and in recognition of fact that "[t]he ability to speak a third language is useful, and will help young Singaporeans of all races operate effectively in the region and beyond", there has been an extension of this third language scheme, so that "[f]rom 2007, Sec[ondary] One students will be allowed to offer another M[other] T[ongue] L[anguage] in addition to their native M[other] T[ongue]

L[anguage], as long as they have the interest and inclination" (Ministry of Education, 2004). This means that students of all levels of ability may study Chinese or Malay, or, if there is demand, Tamil, as a third language, even if they do not have high marks in their primary school subjects. The extension of this scheme does make it possible in a limited way for children to learn cross-ethnic languages in school: it is not clear how many will take up the opportunity. Some schools also now have limited "programmes for students to pick up conversational skills in either Malay language or Chinese language" (Ministry of Education, 2006).

The selection of English as the medium of education for all Singaporean children had an inevitability about it once Singapore broke away from Malaysia in 1965. English was already the dominant medium of education and it unified the racial groups. The negotiation of a potentially difficult racial situation is central to Singapore's politics. The People's Action Party has faced the difficult balancing act of being a small country with a clear Chinese majority enclosed by two large Malay nations (Gupta 1994). The Chinese population of Singapore is the successor of a division between 'Chinese-educated' and 'English-educated' that is still to some extent linked to a class division, the 'English-educated' having been on average of higher social class, as are the English-focused of today (Kuo, 1976). The better educated you are, the better English you are likely to know, the richer you are likely to be, and the more likely you are to speak English to your parents. The move to universal English-medium education has broken this down to some extent, but there is still a perception that the Chinese of the 'HDB heartlands' or 'neighbourhoods' are Chinese-focused and perhaps chauvinistic. English is the bulwark against this, and Mandarin is the gesture towards this majority group.

The language policy has supplied a universal lingua franca, English, but has unfortunately produced some mono-ethnic (Chinese-only) schools and has reduced the opportunity to learn languages associated with racial groups other than one's own. The situation is a difficult one, and is under constant political discussion. The academic studies referenced here are a mixture of critiques of policy, and studies of how policies are being implemented.

Whenever a language is used as a medium of education, it is likely to become someone's best language. As education was extended to the whole population, the languages of education attracted speakers at the expense of other languages. It is not surprising that English should recruit people who prefer to speak it to any other language, and who speak it to their spouses and friends. And as a result of Mandarin being the variety of Chinese used in education, and because of the government's attacks on other Chinese dialects from 1979 onwards, the ancestral dialects of

Chinese came to be seen as low prestige. Parents who can speak both school languages are likely to use them to their children because they think it is an advantage for their children to be able to speak the languages of education before they go to school. And most parents of school-age children now can speak both school languages, so that most children now come to kindergarten already able to speak both school languages.

Patterns of intermarriage have long promoted language shift in the cosmopolitan cities of the Malay region. There is widespread intermarriage of different 'dialect groups' within the Chinese community, facilitated by the post-1960 breaking up of the ethnic residential enclaves and by the spread of education. Intermarriage across ethnic boundaries within the Muslim population (84% of whom were officially Malay in 2000) has been commonplace for centuries and through processes of assimilation Malay has also largely displaced related languages like Javanese and Boyanese. English-focused Chinese and Indian Singaporeans of high social class are also likely to intermarry, especially if they are Christian. The fact that only paternal ancestry is recorded makes it hard to estimate just what proportion of the population is mixed in some senset. The languages that benefit from intermarriage are English, Mandarin, and Malay.

The use of Mandarin in education from the 1920s created a Chinese population which had a latent knowledge of Mandarin, but used it little. As a result of the drive to switch to Mandarin, over the 1980s oral use of Mandarin in social interaction rocketed, and it is now probably the single largest native language of children under 10 (Gupta, 1994).

Over the generations, the languages passed down to children have changed -- Mandarin and English have gained many native and non-native speakers; Malay has gained native speakers but is less commonly learnt as a non-native language; and all other languages (especially Indian languages, languages closely related to Malay, and dialects of Chinese other than Mandarin) have lost native and (especially in the case of Hokkien) non-native speakers. New lingua francas have emerged. In the nineteenth century, the main lingua franca across racial lines was (Bazaar) Malay, while among the Chinese it was Hokkien. Now, English is the main lingua franca, with Mandarin an important lingua franca in the Chinese community. English, and even more so Mandarin, are relatively new in the linguistic ecology of Singapore.

English spread to the whole population over the course of the twentieth century. It is hard to find a Singaporean under 60 who cannot speak English, but in a snapshot of the present we see the past -- the younger you are, and the higher your social

status, the more likely you are to have English as a native language and to speak it in more domains. But by the late twentieth century, English was not *restricted* to the social elite, as it had been in earlier generations. The link of English with particular ethnic groups is relatively weak, though the minority groups (Malays and, especially, Indians) are more likely to use English in more domains. The rise of Mandarin has promoted unity among the Chinese population, but it has spread in some domains at the expense of English, giving rise to some dissatisfaction in other ethnic groups.

Those born roughly 1930-1960 were the most multilingual generation, especially the Chinese, who were typically able to speak English, two or three varieties of Chinese, and Bazaar Malay (Murray, 1971; Platt and Weber 1980). Their parents and grandparents may have spoken just the ancestral language, plus one or two lingua francas (English, Hokkien, Malay), and their children probably speak just English and the official language of their ethnic group, possibly making them unable to converse with their own grandparents, which is the tragic consequence of rapid language shift.

Future directions

Singapore continues to change. One of the most apparent recent changes is that a remarkably high proportion of those who live in modern Singapore are now non-citizens. There has been a considerable rise in the number of foreigners living in Singapore, from 10% of the population in 1970 and 14% in 1990 to 26% of the population in 2000, and the revelation of this in the 2000 census returns was the subject of extensive comment in the press.

In the reports on the 2000 census, information on most questions is recorded only for Singapore ‘residents’, who are defined as Singapore citizens plus foreigners with a permanent right to reside in Singapore. Apart from visitors, and children at boarding schools in Singapore, there are two groups of ‘non-resident’ foreigners living in Singapore – low-paid ‘work permit holders’ and high-paid ‘employment pass holders’. The overwhelming majority of ‘non-resident’ foreigners living in Singapore are work permit holders in low-paid manual and domestic jobs, most of them from Indonesia, South Asia, and the Philippines. There is a great deal of legal and societal discrimination against them, although according to the ILO the conditions under which they work compare favourably to conditions for similar workers elsewhere (Ofori, 1998). The status of the (diverse) higher prestige group of foreigners is closer to that of the Singaporean population, and as they are allowed to

be accompanied by family members, some groups have established private schools following (for example) the British, American, Canadian, French, German, Japanese and Swiss curricula.

Foreigners who become Singapore residents still come predominantly from the three traditional sources: the Malay region, India and China. Some of the 'resident' population born outside Singapore are the children of citizens temporarily overseas, but the majority are likely to have, or to have been born with, another nationality. The world's population has become highly mobile, and especially the Chinese. 82% of Singapore 'residents' born outside Singapore are described as 'Chinese': Singapore is attracting diasporic Chinese from all over the world. The effect on language ecology is likely to be to strengthen even further the two strongest languages, English and Mandarin.

There are moral, hegemonic and ideological issues around the choice of medium of education and associated language shift, which will continue to be explored in relation to Singapore (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Language shift in Singapore appears to have taken place rapidly in relatively happy circumstances, associated with the rise in participation in education, and in a context of increasing prosperity and social equity. It has also taken place in a region with a long tradition of openness to multiple cultures and languages: Singapore is the latest in a long line of cosmopolitan trading ports in the Malay Region, and pragmatism is what it is about. At the moment the dominant languages in Singapore are English and Mandarin, but, should the need arise, Singapore could just as rapidly adjust to a Chinese, Malay, or even Arabic focus.

The identification of Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil as 'Mother Tongues' reflects past and current patterns of migration, and shapes what is seen as 'Singaporean'. There is still an ambivalence towards English, which is a vital language in Singapore, but which is still seen within Singapore as in some senses 'foreign'. At official and unofficial levels, for example, it is not accepted that a large proportion of Singaporeans are native speakers of English: when the government discusses the use of 'native speakers of English' in education, they mean people from countries such as the UK, USA and Australia.

The central role of education in a directed policy of language shift is unusually clearly articulated in Singapore. It is hard to know what constitutes free choice of language and what constitutes coercion, and this is something that scholars need to continue to explore. Perhaps the distinction is meaningless. De Swaan (2001) shows how individuals make choices, defends their rights to choice, and shows how

individuals will only respond to governmental decisions on language if they correspond with the actual communication value of a language. He celebrates 'complex language constellations' and bilingualism, and the fact that lingua francas have increased 'the coherence of the human species in its entirety' (p186). I personally endorse these views. I do not think our present is determined by our ancestral endowment: nearly all of us must have ancestors who at one point or another were engaged in language shift, and each generation changes the culture of its parents. Language shift need not damage the individual or the society that engages in it. We are actors in a real world of functional language, and of change, and that is the context in which the language ecology of Singapore has taken place, and will continue to take place.

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[1] The terms used for ethnic groups, languages and dialects are always problematic. I have used the terms currently used in official Singapore documents and glossed them by alternatives. The variety called ‘Mandarin Chinese’ can also be called ‘Modern Standard Chinese’ and is also known as *guoyu* (‘national language’), though this implies a political evaluation that would be regarded as inappropriate in modern Singapore. I use ‘Malay’ in its widest sense, to refer to all dialects, including the standard varieties of Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and Indonesia. Singapore designates English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil as its official languages. Malay is the ‘national language’, which is a ceremonial designation.