

## The dynamics of multilingualism in contemporary Singapore

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**ABSTRACT:** Historically, Singapore was home to a heterogeneous and highly multilingual population from across the Asian region and elsewhere in the world. In contrast with its historical past, or even the early days of the post-colonial period, Singapore's earlier diverse and linguistically heterogeneous society has evolved into a multi-ethnic nation state, with four official languages, of which three are recognised 'mother tongues'. This paper reviews the historical and contemporary dynamics of multilingualism in the Singapore community, and also serves as an introduction to the five other papers in this symposium on 'English in multilingual Singapore'.

### INTRODUCTION

Since the independence of Singapore as a nation in 1965, the sociolinguistic situation in the community has undergone a series of shifts, as government language policies have motivated a move away from marked language diversity towards a formula where four official languages, English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, and three 'mother tongues', Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, have official recognition. As a result of such policies, there has been a shift away from such Chinese vernaculars as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew towards Mandarin, while at the same time the use of English as a home language has been steadily growing throughout the community. Singapore today is a multiethnic and multilingual society of some 5.4 million people, of whom 61.4 per cent are full Singapore citizens, 9.8 per cent are 'permanent residents', and 28.8 per cent (around 1.6 million people) are foreign workers, of various kinds, ranging from international 'expats' in the banking and financial sectors to Bangladeshi and Indian construction workers on building sites, and Filipinos working in hotels and other service sectors. Of those officially listed as 'residents' (i.e. citizens and permanent residents), the recent census records that 74 per cent are Chinese, 13 per cent are Malay, 9 per cent are Indian, with 3.3 per cent 'others', most of whom are of Eurasian, European or Arab descent (Department of Statistics 2011). This paper reviews the historical and contemporary dynamics of multilingualism in the Singapore community, and also serves as an introduction to the five other papers in this symposium on 'English in multilingual Singapore'.

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### SINGAPORE'S MULTILINGUAL PAST

The linguistic archaeology of Singapore's past has only been partly charted by previous sociolinguistic accounts (Gupta 1994; Chew 2013). The pre-colonial history of *Singapura* ('Lion City' in Malay) indicates its emergence as a port dates back as far as the second century CE, and that a prosperous trading city was in existence on the island in the fourteenth century. Its role as a trading hub was superseded by Malacca from the fifteenth century onwards, and by the time the British arrived in the region the island was under the control of the Johore Sultanate. The historical accounts of the pre-colonial period indicate that for centuries the island had served as a meeting place for Arabs, Chinese, Malays, traders from the Indonesian islands and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and that Singapore had a history of multicultural, multilingual and multiracial contact for many centuries before the British arrived (Chew 2013).

The picture that emerges from colonial censuses and historical surveys is one of striking ethnic and linguistic diversity. The first recorded census, some 5 years after Raffles' annexation of Singapore listed the following ethnic/racial groups: Europeans, native Christians, Armenians, Arabs, Malays, Chinese, natives of Coromandel and Malacca Coasts, natives of Hindoostan and Bengal, Bugis, Balinese, etc., and by 1836 such other groups as Indo-Britons, Jews, Caffres, Parsees, and Siamese had been added to the list. Numerically, of the 10,683 population, Malays were in the majority with some 4,580 residents, followed by Chinese with 3,317 and 1,851 'Bugis, Balinese, &c'. Europeans numbered a total of 74. The numerical superiority of 'Malays' in Singapore lasted for around sixty years, and the 1891 census results indicate that, by that time, Chinese residents had achieved a majority, accounting for 44 per cent of the population, followed by 42 per cent for Malays, 11 per cent for Indians, and around 1 per cent for such groups as 'Europeans' and 'Eurasians'. By 1931, the percentage of Chinese rose to around 60 per cent, and that for Malays dropped to some 26 per cent (Gupta 1994: 34). Such percentages provide only a broad idea of the multicultural cosmopolitanism of Singapore as a colonial society. By the early twentieth century Singapore had established itself as a key maritime hub for commercial trade with Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and many other trading ports throughout Southeast and East Asia, and was a destination for both immigrants and sojourners from the region and further afield.

Indeed, even after the Second World War, Singapore society remained linguistically very diverse, with around 33 'mother tongue' ethnolinguistic groups recorded in the 1950s (Kuo 1980). In the 1950s and 1960s, Hokkien (a Southern Min language of China) and Malay were by far the most widely spoken languages in the small island state. The 1957 census shows that only 1.8 per cent of the population spoke English and only 0.1 per cent spoke Mandarin as mother tongues. In fact, other languages were much better known: 32.5 per cent of the Chinese community, 88.3 per cent of the Indian community and 48 per cent of the total population spoke Malay, and 80 per cent of the Chinese community spoke or understood Hokkien. At the time of independence, the first language of the Singaporean Chinese community was predominantly Hokkien (39%), followed by Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese and other Chinese languages. The Malay community was more linguistically homogeneous, largely Malay-speaking (85%), with smaller numbers of speakers of languages related to Malay, such as Peranakan Malay and Javanese, while the Indian community predominantly spoke Tamil (59%), Malayalam and other languages (Kuo 1980). A focus on major language groups diverts from an even more diverse linguistic

setting if one also includes, among others, Bugis, Boyanese, Sinhala, Punjabi, Urdu and other Chinese languages such as Hakka, Hokchia, Hokchew and Shanghainese. Platt (1980) described the linguistic situation in Singapore, prior to 1980, as one of 'polyglossia', where the average Singaporean tended to be highly multilingual with a possible linguistic repertoire of six to eight language varieties (albeit not usually English). If we take the average adult age of the Singaporean to be 40 at that time, this group of Singaporeans is now in its seventies.

### LANGUAGE POLICIES IN SINGAPORE

Even in the colonial period, issues relating to language, ethnicity and race were periodically regarded as politically and socially sensitive. After Singapore broke away from Malaysia in 1965, language policies continued to play an important role in nation building, and remain a matter of official concern up to the present. Historically, in the recent past, from before independence and after, there have been four main language policy thrusts that have shaped the sociolinguistics of contemporary Singapore, (i) the Official Languages and National Language policies (1950s–1960s); (ii) the Bilingualism Policy (1966); (iii) The Speak Mandarin Campaign (1979 to present); and (iv) The Speak Good English Movement (2000 to present).

Formal education policy was instituted in the late 1950s in Singapore with an emphasis on four official languages – Mandarin Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil. In its original form, the language policy stated that the four official languages were also the media of instruction. In the time following independence in 1965, while most schools were English medium, there were also a number of Tamil, Malay and Mandarin medium schools. However, by 1987 all of these were closed because of falling student numbers (Tan 2007). This change reduced Mandarin Chinese, Tamil and Malay to being taught as second languages in primary and secondary schools, since which time English has since dominated the country's education system (Tan 2012; Tan & Goh 2011). This shift to English is in stark contrast to the linguistic situation during the British rule and in the early decades of independence. English was used by the colonial government and then the independent government primarily for administrative purposes. Singaporeans in those days communicated across ethnic lines largely in Bazaar Malay, a form of pidginised Malay, or in a simplified form of Hokkien (Gupta 1998). For a very brief period, spurred by the Federation with Malaya in 1963, before 1965, Malay was also a compulsory language for those who wanted to join the public service, and this policy was maintained until the mid-1970s. Since then, Malay still has the official status of a 'national language' in Singapore, and the national anthem continues to be sung in Malay, although today, among young people in particular, a working knowledge of Malay is generally limited only to Malay 'mother tongue' speakers.

The set of language policies that were devised in Singapore's post-colonial period were formulated and promoted by the dominant political party, the People's Action Party (PAP), who have held political power in the nation from the 1960s to the present. In particular, the formulation of policy was specifically shaped by the thinking and decisions of Singapore's post-colonial leader, Lee Kuan Yew, who took a particular interest in such policies from the very beginning. In his 2012 volume on 'Singapore's bilingual journey', Lee explains that:

We had 75 per cent of the population Chinese, speaking a range of different dialects; 14 per cent Malays; and 8 per cent Indians. But making Chinese the official language of Singapore was out of the question; the 25 per cent of the population who were not Chinese would revolt. In addition, Singapore is located in Southeast Asia, which is predominantly Malay-speaking. [...] For political and economic reasons, English had to be our working language. This would give all races in Singapore a common language to communicate and work in. At the same time, we knew we had to provide equal opportunities for people to study their respective mother tongues. Following my experiences as a student in London and Cambridge, I believed firmly that knowing one's mother tongue was a must. It gives one the sense of belonging to a culture, and increases self-confidence and self-respect. Hence, we decided that we must teach each student two languages – English and the mother tongue. (Lee 2012: 59–60)

Thus, partly as a result of the economic challenges facing a newly independent Singapore, and partly, as indicated, because of the personal experiences of the new Prime Minister, the essential formula for language policies and planning became established. This was to be a combination of English and the 'mother tongue', although the mother tongue here was to be limited to those mother tongues considered most relevant and applicable, namely, Mandarin for the Chinese community, Malay for those of Malay ethnicity, and Tamil, as historically the majority of South Asian immigrants had come from Southern India.

Prime Minister Lee was also active in promoting Mandarin from the late 1970s onwards through the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign', a policy considered important not only for educational, but also for cultural reasons, as Lee himself again indicates in a later section of his book:

I stressed the importance of Mandarin to Chinese Singaporeans. Not only was using dialects an obstacle to learning Mandarin and English in school, it would displace Mandarin and strengthen the position of English, I said. English would not be emotionally acceptable as a common language or mother tongue. To have no emotionally acceptable language as our common language is to be emotionally crippled. We would doubt ourselves and be less self-confident. Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue (and Malay and Tamil for the other ethnic groups). (Lee 2012: 150)

In the same passage, Lee (2012: 150) goes on to assert that Mandarin not only 'unites the different dialect groups', but 'reminds the Singapore Chinese that they are part of an ancient civilisation with an unbroken history of over 5,000 years'. For Lee (2012: 150), the power of language represents 'a deep and strong psychic force, one that will give confidence to a people to face up to and overcome great chances and challenges'. For him and the government, the Speak Mandarin Campaign, was a great success, because, by the late 1980s, 'wherever you went in Singapore, you could speak Mandarin to a Chinese and everyone would understand and accept you' (Lee 2012: 158), which was a direct testimony of the effectiveness of the campaign after a single decade. The Speak Good English Movement was the third strand in government language policy, and was introduced in 2000, amid concerns about the spread of 'Singlish' in the community and perceived falling standards of English.

The effects of such post-colonial policies continue to be felt today, and, following the widespread promotion of English as the dominant language of education, a large section of the population may now be described as 'English-knowing bilinguals', with proficiency in English as well as their ethnic language (Pakir 1991). However, while Mandarin, Malay and Tamil may well be mother tongues in the traditional sense for many, they were and still are second languages for many others, particularly those coming from diverse South Asian and

Table 1. Languages most frequently spoken at home in Singapore (percentages)

	English	Mandarin	Chinese dialects	Tamil	Malay
1957	1.8%	0.1%	74.4%	5.2%	13.5%
1980	11.6%	10.2%	59.5%	3.1%	13.9%
1990	18.8%	23.7%	39.6%	2.9%	14.3%
2000	23.0%	35.0%	23.8%	3.2%	14.1%
2010	32.3%	35.6%	14.3%	3.2%	12.2%

Sources: Kuo (1980), Lau (1993), Department of Statistics (2001; 2006; 2011).

Chinese backgrounds. Perhaps the one language with the closest claim to being regarded as an authentic ‘mother tongue’, given Singapore’s location in the Malay Peninsula, is the Malay language, even though for much of its history many of those classified as ethnic Malays in Singapore were in fact speakers of other languages, such as Boyanese or Javanese, rather than a standardised version of Malay. However, despite the objectives of the ‘mother tongue’ policy of the government, the spread of English among younger people in Singapore has to some degree undermined the planned compartmentalisation of languages, according to the official ‘English and the mother tongue’ formula (see Tan, this issue).

### CURRENT TRENDS IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND USE

One unforeseen and unintended consequence of official language policies has been, ironically, the spread of English as a home language, and *de facto* ‘mother tongue’ for increasing numbers of Singaporeans across ethnic groups, whose designated mother tongues, in many cases, are now becoming ‘second languages’. Table 1 demonstrates the increase in reports of English as the language most frequently used at home (from 1.8% in 1957 to 32.3% in 2010) as well as similar spread of Mandarin as a home language (from 0.1% to 35.6%), coupled with a concomitant dramatic decline in the number of speakers of Chinese dialects, other than Mandarin (from 74.4% to 14.3%). As can be seen in Table 1, the use of Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew has declined greatly over the last five decades. While the numbers of those using Mandarin and English have grown exponentially, essentially over the lifetime of a single generation.

The extent of such language shift is also illustrated in Table 2 below, which again indicates that, over the last 30 years, the Chinese community in Singapore has shifted significantly to English and Mandarin, at the expense of Chinese vernaculars. In the Indian community, English has now overtaken Tamil as the most widely used language at home, although the data for the Malay community indicates a high level of language maintenance within this ethnic group. However, even here, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of Malay Singaporeans claiming to speak English as a first language (from 7.5% to 17%, from 2000 to 2010). Across the board, we see the increasing use of English and Mandarin Chinese within families, and a reduction in the use of Malay and Tamil, although the rise in the use of English occurs across all ethnic communities, while that of Mandarin Chinese is restricted to the ethnic Chinese.

The various ethnic groups in Singapore find themselves in many ways in a similar situation to that of immigrant groups in other parts of the world, for example, the Italians in Australia (Clyne 1982, 1991, 2003; Cavallaro 2010) or in the US (Correa-Zoli 1981; Veltman 1984; Carnevale 2009). That is, the Singapore community includes an older,

Table 2. A comparison of English and mother tongue use in Singapore, as preferred home language, 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010 (percentages)

Ethnic group	Language	1980	1990	2000	2010
Chinese	English	10.2%	21.4%	23.9%	32.6%
	Mandarin	13.1%	30.0%	45.1%	47.7%
	Chinese vernaculars	76.2%	48.2%	30.7%	19.2%
Malays	English	2.3%	5.7%	7.9%	17.0%
	Malay	96.7%	94.1%	91.6%	82.6%
Indians	English	24.3%	34.3%	35.6%	41.6%
	Tamil	52.2%	43.5%	42.9%	36.6%
	Malay	8.6%	14.1%	11.6%	7.9%
	Other Indian languages	14.9%	8.1%	9.2%	13.2%

Sources: Lau (1993), Department of Statistics (2005; 2011).

largely monolingual (in their ethnic language, or if multilingual, without English) generation, another largely bilingual generation (in English and ethnic language) and a younger generation that is increasingly more competent in English than their ethnic language (see also below). The case of the Chinese community is worth noting briefly here. As pointed out by Platt (1980), elderly Chinese in Singapore are likely to be quite linguistically versatile but many are only multilingual in Chinese vernaculars and in none of the official languages. There is a middle generation of Mandarin and English bilinguals who may also speak some of the vernaculars and then there is a younger generation who barely speak a vernacular and for whom English is clearly more dominant than Mandarin.

### LANGUAGE SHIFT IN SINGAPORE

From its inception as a British colony, Singapore was a multilingual society, largely because of its origins and development as an immigrant society. Historically its population was made up of large numbers of immigrants arriving mainly from India, South East Asia, China and Indonesia, who brought various languages with them. From China such languages included Mandarin (Putonghua), Hakka, Hainanese, Min Nan (Hokkien), Teochew, and Yue (Cantonese). Varieties of Malay/Austronesian languages included Javanese, Baba Malay (Peranakan), Bazaar Malay, Orang Seletar, and Boyanese, while Europeans brought with them English as well as other languages, all of which had their historical impact (Cavallaro & Serwe 2010). The Chinese Singaporeans were descended mainly from immigrants from South China. Indian Singaporeans descend mainly from Tamil Nadu, but there are also others from across India and Sri Lanka. The Malays were the native inhabitants of Singapore but also include numbers of Boyanese, Javanese and Baba Malay (Peranakan) speakers whose origins were from elsewhere. Each of the three major language communities in Singapore has experienced language shift in recent decades, although this has varied from community to community.

According to the 2010 census, the Chinese community now accounts for some 74 per cent of the population in Singapore, for whom Mandarin is their official mother tongue. Historically, however, the heritage language for the overwhelming majority of Chinese Singaporeans was not Mandarin, but one of the Chinese vernaculars such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Teo Chew, and other dialects. With the implementation of language



and education policies, the use of Chinese vernaculars among the Chinese community has declined dramatically, partly as a result of the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign'. As may be seen in Table 2, the latest census reveals that the number of people who report Chinese vernaculars as the language most frequently spoken at home dropped from 76.2 per cent in 1980 to only 19.2 per cent in 2010 (Department of Statistics 2005; 2011). Most of the shift has been to Mandarin, although there is a significant and rapidly increasing number of Chinese Singaporeans who report speaking English at home. The Speak Mandarin Campaign has helped establish Mandarin as a language of solidarity and inter-(Chinese) group communication, especially among younger and middle-aged Chinese adults. Studies also show an increase in positive attitudes toward Mandarin Chinese (e.g. Xu et al. 1998). In view of the spread of Mandarin at the expense of other Chinese vernaculars in the home, it is not surprising that knowledge of the language contributes to a sense of Singaporean identity that transcends their regional language loyalty (Li et al. 1997).

Given that both Mandarin, promoted through the Speak Mandarin Campaign and the bilingual education policy, and English have increasingly displaced the Chinese vernaculars within the Chinese community, there are very few domains that need the use of a vernacular. While the position of Mandarin seems very strong, the fact that it is only taught as a second language at school and not in a true bilingual programme where it would be the medium of instruction or part of the curriculum, gives rise to concerns as to whether it can be effectively maintained in the long-term (David et al. 2009). On the other hand, Mandarin is unlikely to be entirely eroded due to its increasing international economic value, the increasing population of Mandarin speakers in Singapore and the continuing influx of immigrants from China. However, the loss of the vernaculars is not without cost within the Chinese community. Tan and Ng (2010) documented feelings of loss and alienation by young adult speakers who regretted not being able to speak the vernacular of their grandparents. These findings were also confirmed in Ng's (2009) study where she interviewed 18 elderly Singapore Chinese who did not speak any of the official languages. In these interviews, they spoke poignantly about their feelings of desolation and dislocation as they were unable to connect with their grandchildren and their sadness at having to depend on their children for routine tasks such as visits to hospitals, and such mundane tasks as catching a train or using the ATM machines.

The recent census now estimates the Indian community as constituting 9.2 per cent of the population, and ranks it as the smallest of the three main ethnic groups. Despite the fact that the official mother tongue for the Indian community is Tamil, there are a number of other mother tongues in use, including Hindi as well as other Indian languages. With the recent influx of Indian migrants to Singapore, the government has allowed non-Tamil speakers to choose one of the five Non-Tamil Indian Languages (NTILs) in lieu of Tamil as the official school level examination subjects since the 1990s. The number of students studying NTILs (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Panjabi and Urdu) as their second language has grown by about 20 per cent over the past five years to about 4,800 students today. The instruction of NTILs is organised by seven South Asian community groups: D.A.V. Hindi School Ltd and Hindi Society Singapore for Hindi, Bangla Language and Literary Society and Bangladesh Language and Cultural Foundation for Bengali, Singapore Gujarati School (Gujarati), Singapore Sikh Education Foundation (Punjabi) and Urdu Development Society (Urdu). These community groups hold classes, employ their own teachers, design their curriculum and set their own assessment. However, the Ministry of Education sets the national school examinations (see Dixon 2005). Over the years, the number of North Indians migrating

to Singapore has grown steadily, and the social and educational background of recent migrants has changed as well. Compared to the past, when many Indian migrants took up unskilled jobs, these new immigrants are better educated and often take up jobs as skilled professionals, and a large number of their children now choose Hindi as the second language/mother tongue at school.

In 2010, 36.6 per cent of the Indian Singaporean population spoke Tamil at home as their primary language, a significant decrease from the 60 per cent reported in 1957. At the same time, the 2010 census also revealed that 13.2 per cent spoke other Indian languages such as Hindi, Malayalam and Punjabi. Language shift to English among Indian Singaporeans is significant, as illustrated in Table 2 and confirmed in a series of studies (Gupta & Siew 1995; Schiffman 1998; 2002; Saravanan 1995; 1999). David et al. (2009) attributed this shift to two main causes: (i) the belief that a good command of English is associated with academic and economic success; and (ii) the fact that the Tamil variety spoken at home is significantly different from the variety traditionally taught in school, which results in a disconnection between the home language and that taught at school.

The Malay community makes up 13.4 per cent of the population in Singapore. The official ethnic mother tongue of the Malay community is Bahasa Melayu or Malay. The census data point to a situation where the Malay community is more resilient to language shift than the Chinese and Indian communities. Indeed in the 2010 census, 82.7 per cent of the Malays in Singapore indicated that they use Malay as their preferred home language, and only 17 per cent indicated that the language most frequently used at home is English (Department of Statistics 2011). There are two things of note in these figures, also shown in Table 2. First, that there was an almost 10 per cent jump in the reporting of English used at home from the 2000 census. This jump is unprecedented compared to previous decades. Second, the census does not show the extent of the increase in domains where English has made in-roads at the expense of Malay (David et al. 2009). Very few studies have looked into maintenance or shift within the Malay community in Singapore. However, Cavallaro and Serwe's (2010) comprehensive study found that the ages of the speaker and of the interlocutor are the most significant factors determining language choice by Malays, across domains and topics of talk. They found that more English was used among young Malays, while Malays with university degrees and with higher income showed the highest use of English overall. Across all these factors, Malay was used among and with community members over 45 years of age, whereas the shift towards English was most noticeable among younger Malay Singaporeans (see Chong and Seilhamer, this issue).

### SINGAPORE'S MULTILINGUAL PRESENT

There is now a body of sociolinguistic research that indicates that the use of traditional languages in Singapore is declining among younger generations of Singaporeans. Ramiah (1991), Li et al. (1997), Pillai (2009) and Cavallaro and Serwe (2010) all found that their participants aged 18–29 were more comfortable in using English in their daily lives, compared with other languages. Pillai (2009) even reports that young Singaporean Malayalam speakers have little interest in learning Malayalam, and smaller varieties like Peranakan Malay (or Baba Malay) are now facing imminent endangerment in Singapore. The changes that have occurred in language acquisition and use in recent decades may be partly explained by reference to two major factors, first, official government policies, and, second, the



pragmatic decisions of citizens motivated by personal gain and social mobility, where instrumental attitudes relating to the perceived utility of languages loom large. Singapore has experienced significant economic and social development in the past few decades, associated with the nation's success as a trading hub and financial centre. The importance of good English, and to a large extent, a good command of Mandarin, both of which have been actively promoted by the government, has not been lost on the pragmatic Singaporeans. Ng (2008) surveyed parents of Chinese ethnic background in Singapore with young children, and their responses were overwhelmingly in favour of raising their children bilingually in both English and Mandarin Chinese.

While it is clear that non-official languages (especially Chinese vernaculars) will struggle to maintain a foothold in the current scenario, rather different tensions have emerged with reference to the status and functions of English in Singapore. Before the 1980s, English was very much associated with the elite and was not widely used as a lingua franca within ethnic groups. In the intervening years, with the propagation of English as the medium of instruction in all schools and universities, the elitism that was associated with speaking English lost its lustre. The vast majority of Singaporeans who are now 45 years old and below have been educated in English-medium schools, and are generally at least functionally bilingual in English and one other official language. As a result, over the last 20 to 30 years, it has become commonplace for English to be used as a lingua franca among all Singaporeans, which means English has now replaced all other languages as a supra-ethnic language. As in all language contact situations, the co-existence of English with other varieties has given rise to a new contact variety of English with substrate influences from other local varieties (Hokkien, Mandarin Chinese and Malay). This variety is sometimes referred to derogatorily or fondly (depending on one's perspective) as 'Singlish' or Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) in contrast to more standardised varieties, which are often referred to as 'Standard Singapore English' (SSE) (see Ng et al. this issue). The question of whether Singapore Colloquial English exists as a distinct variety and whether it should be recognised as such is an issue that has polarised the community, in similar fashion to debates on standard and non-standard English in the UK or those on African American Vernacular English in the US. Official motivations for Singapore's 'Speak Good English Campaign', launched in 2000, make reference to concerns about academic achievement, economic advancement, intelligibility, Singapore's national image, while those who advocate the recognition of Singapore Colloquial English appeal to the importance of national identity and language rights. The tension between these two camps is palpable and ongoing, and the issues involved are complex, involving questions of language attitudes and identity, the ecology of languages, and the broader sociolinguistic dynamics of the society (see Cavallaro et al., this issue).

## CONCLUSION

In contrast with its historical past, or even the early days of the post-colonial period, Singapore's earlier diverse and linguistically heterogeneous society has been socially re-engineered to become the nation state of the present, where language acquisition and use has been subject to control and cultivation, and the diversity of multiple Asian languages has been pruned to a total of four official languages, of which three are recognised 'mother tongues'. From the perspective of a new government concerned with the harmonisation of

ethnic relations as well as the development of a post-industrial financial and commercial hub, such language policies have been promoted as both rational and desirable.

The high levels of English proficiency of Singaporeans have made them an attractive workforce for multinational companies and allow Singaporeans to integrate into the various higher education settings in the English speaking world with relative ease, as well as giving them a passport to international employment. Locally, the accessibility of education has meant that every Singaporean has a chance to be educated up to at least Year 10. In all international measures of literacy and numeracy skills, Singaporean children are among the most competent in the world. Though an increasing number of Singaporeans are English dominant, they are able to converse in at least two languages (see Siemund et al., this issue). In terms of nurturing a nation of bilingual speakers, therefore, the policy has been a resounding success, although the extent to which this officially sanctioned bilingualism can be maintained, or the extent to which it can be balanced, remains to be seen, given the English-medium education system, and the teaching of Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil as second language subjects only.

When the next census of Singapore is carried out in 2020, one expects to see a further increase in the use of English as the preferred home language across the different ethnic groups. In the Chinese community, it is likely that there will be a further reduction in the number of Chinese vernaculars spoken but also in the use of Mandarin Chinese in the home domain. More widely, the prospect is that of the continued spread of English in all domains, with the possible partial exception of Mandarin Chinese which is likely to enjoy continuing utility with the economic rise of China. Overall, all this adds up to a situation of increasing linguistic homogeneity at the expense of the more traditional multilingualism practised by many older Singaporeans. In the case of English, it is unclear how the tension 'standardised' forms of English and Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) will be resolved. While official policy still strongly proscribes the use of SCE, its prevalence across the community is clear to citizens and visitors alike. While it is relatively easy to sanction an entire variety (e.g. Hokkien), it is much harder to prohibit a variety that is part of a stylistic continuum, and is an important part of local linguistic creativity and identity, especially at a time when English is rapidly becoming the *de facto* first language (or mother tongue) of the vast majority of younger Singaporeans. Simultaneously, many of the older generation, as speakers of Chinese vernaculars or minority South Asian languages, have become, in effect, disconnected from the languages of their grandchildren, whose compartmentalised bilingualism has been produced by official language planning. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the next decade will see the need for Singaporeans to meet and balance at least three major challenges: (i) the harmonious balance of the language needs of Singapore's major ethnic groups; (ii) the demands and needs related to the nation's continuing role as a major commercial and financial centre; and (iii) the challenge of recognising and valorising the diverse heritage languages of Singapore's elderly citizens, who now often contend with a 'language gap' between their worlds and those of their children and grandchildren. In addition, Singapore, as a rapidly-evolving immigrant society, will also need to consider the linguistic issues related to the reception and integration of new generations of residents and citizens. From a consideration of the diversity of Singapore's multilingual past, the discussion of the somewhat constrained multilingual present in turn raises a number of key questions about its future.

The five papers included in this symposium present original empirical research on various aspects of Singapore English considered from the perspective of multilingualism in

Singapore. The paper by Tan, considers the problematics of the term ‘mother tongue’ in the Singapore community; the contribution from Siemund et al. investigates the multilingualism of college and university students; that from Chong and Seilhamer presents research findings related to the maintenance of the Malay language among young people; the paper by Cavallaro et al. presents the results of a verbal guise study of language attitudes; while the paper by Ng et al. presents findings relating to the switching between Singapore Colloquial English and standardised varieties of the language. Read together or individually, the papers in this symposium offer detailed insights into the dynamics of both English and multilingualism in the Singapore context.

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