Singlish: an illegitimate conception in Singapore's language policies?

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Abstract

Singapore, like many post-colonial states, longs for a common language to unite its linguistically heterogeneous population. Singlish, which comprises primarily elements of English, Malay, Hokkien, Mandarin-Chinese and Cantonese, is a language spoken by almost every Singaporean, and can be considered to be Singapore's common language. Unfortunately, this common language, Singlish, is also a language that the authorities are eager to get rid of. The Singaporean state holds the belief that Singlish is a corrupted and incorrect form of English, and is detrimental to the image and development of the nation. Singlish, has therefore, since 2000, been the subject of a large scale, state-run language campaign, the purpose of which is to delegitimise and eliminate this language. This paper traces the development of Singlish and argues that the birth of Singlish would not have been possible without the socio-political and historical factors that have created it. Applying, for the first time, Mufwene's (2001) theory of language ecology and evolution to the field of language planning and policy, I will show that Singlish is in fact an inevitable but unwelcomed conception of state language policies.

Keywords: Singapore; language ecology; Singlish; Speak Good English Movement; language policy

Conceiving (of) a common tongue

Like numerous other post-colonial states, Singapore sees language as a high-priority instrument for nation building. Singapore's quest for a common language to unite its linguistically heterogeneous population is not unlike that of India, Malaysia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, just to a name a few of Singapore's neighbours in Asia. Some of these countries, in a bid to have this common language, take language planning to a different level by looking into their inventory of existing languages and combining them to form new

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ones. The Philippines, for instance, aimed to construct the national language, Filipino, out of Tagalog and its regional languages such as Ilocano, and created a political fiction that Filipino as an amalgamation of every major language within the country can serve as a common language (Hau and Tinio 2003), whereas, in reality, Filipino is based almost entirely on Tagalog. India's dream of having a common language, Hindustani, conceived of as a combination of Hindi and Urdu, remains a dream (Mishra 2012). Singapore, in contrast, has had it easy. Singapore's common language, Singlish, evolved almost organically, seemingly, with relatively little state effort and planning. Yet the authorities have been sparing no expense and effort in getting rid of this common language. The Singaporean state holds the belief that Singlish is a form of "poor English", and that this "corrupted" form of English will make Singaporeans "seem less intelligent or competent" (Goh 2000), and thus may affect the country's economic opportunities with other countries negatively. The state has therefore been concerned about the emergence of Singlish, and does not want Singlish to be the common tongue of Singaporeans. This paper traces the development of Singlish and argues that the birth of Singlish would not have been possible without the socio-political and historical factors that have created it. Applying, for the first time, Mufwene's (2001) theory of language ecology and evolution to the field of language planning and policy, I will show that Singlish is an inevitable but unwelcomed conception of the state policies themselves.

What is Singlish?

In a bid to delegitimise and eliminate Singlish, the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), a government-run language campaign, was launched in 2000, and has since continued to be an annual event. Even though the name of the campaign focuses on the idea of speaking "good English", it often features Singlish as an example of "bad English". For instance, in the 2010 SGEM, post-it stickers with Singlish, such as those seen in Figure 1, were found in high-density areas such as food centres, bus stops and subway stations.

Figure 1. Poster of the 2010 SGEM with "Get It Right Sticky Notes" (also in Wee 2014)

These stickers were part of "an activist toolkit" (Wee 2014: 87) handed out by the SGEM people. The idea was to rally Singaporeans to think of Singlish expressions such as those seen in Figure 1 as "bad" or "incorrect" English. The SGEM runs for a full month annually. The ways the campaigns are run are no different to commercial advertisement campaigns, except that the state campaigns are far more pervasive, with methods much like the example shown in Figure 1. Sparing no expense in making sure that the campaigns reach every single person in Singapore, colorful, creative and even fun campaign posters take up print advertisement slots all over the island, and they can be seen everywhere – on billboards, bus stops, train stations, buses and malls. These posters also appear prominently in national newspapers and magazines. Infomercials are also produced, and they are played during prime-time TV advertisement slots. Even celebrity spokespersons are engaged to endorse the campaigns. New themes and taglines are used every year to maintain campaign momentum and enthusiasm. What exactly is this language, Singlish, that the Singaporean state is so eager to hate?

Singlish, which comprises primarily elements of English, Malay, Hokkien,[1] Mandarin-Chinese and Cantonese, is a contact language spoken by almost every Singaporean. Some linguists refer to Singlish as the "colloquial form of Singapore English" (e.g. Rubdy 2001; Chng 2003; Bokhorst-Heng 2005; Wee 2010; Bruthiaux 2010). The grammar, phonology and lexis of Singlish are however drawn from Sinitic languages such as Hokkien, Mandarin-Chinese and Cantonese, as well as languages such as English, Malay and Tamil. Singlish has attracted much academic attention, and many scholars have provided grammatical analyses of the language (e.g. Lim 2007; Ansaldo 2009; Platt and Weber 1980; Bao and Wee 1998, 1999; Bao 1995, 2001, 2005; Leimgruber 2009), clearly illustrating how Singlish is different from English.

To provide an example of Singlish used in everyday conversations, the following is a short excerpt of an exchange between two male undergraduates, Alan and Ben,[2] recorded in 2012. The interlocutors had just spent a couple of weeks in a military camp and they were complaining about someone they met in camp. I follow, for most parts, linguistic conventions for marking non-English utterances. For instance, superscript numbers on the discourse particles (labelled as PART) mark tones. The line directly below each utterance

1. Hokkien is a Southern Min language, also known as Fujianese in China, or Minnan in Taiwan. I use the term 'Hokkien' as it is used in Singapore and Malaysia.
2. Not their real names.

shows letters for each word indicating language origin.[3] Even though each word can be traced to a language origin, semantic shift has occurred in most cases. I will not however dwell on each case, and will only provide a footnote if the correlation between the Singlish word and the word of origin is not immediately apparent. The next line provides the gloss for each non-English word. Word class, indicated in caps, will be provided only if the word class of the gloss is not clear. The final line in square brackets is a broad translation of the utterance.

```
L1   Alan  : Wahlau! Really buay   tahan   dat   cao    ah beng! Sibei   atas!
             M/H    E       H      M      E     H      H H      H       M
             EXPL          NEG   tolerate  that smelly  ah-beng  EXPL   ADJ (up)
             [Damn! I really can't stand that nasty Ah Beng! He's extremely arrogant!]

L2   Ben   : Really meh55? I   tot     he better liao53 after he kena   by the officer.
             E      C      E  E     E   E     H     E    E  M      E  E   E
                   PART    thought          already        PASSIVE (hit)
             [Really (indicating disbelief)? I thought he's not as arrogant now, after he was
             chastised by the officer.]

L3   Alan  : No lah11!  Still same-same! Got look a bit cui only lor55!
             E C      E     E            E   E   E E Man  E    C
                PART                   AUX            tired     PART
             [No (affirmative)! He's still the same! He did look a bit tired though (with particle
             indicating a sense of resignation).]

L4   Ben   : But   shiok    right? See people tekan him also song      wat11!
             E     P/M      E     E     E     M    E   E    H        U
                   EXPL                         hit            feels good
             [But it feels darn good, doesn't it? It makes me feel good to see other people give
             him a hard time (with particle carrying the force of a contradiction to something that
             has previously been asserted).]
```

Figure 2. Transcript of conversation between two Singaporean youths.

The most obvious thing that strikes one is that Singlish is made up of quite a number of languages. Some notes about the transcript[4] are provided in the footnotes. Looking solely at the composition of the lexicon, the languages represented in this excerpt are English, Hokkien, Malay, Cantonese and

3. Legend for language origin: (E)nglish, (H)okkien, (M)alay, (Man)darin, (P)unjabi, (C)antonese, (U)nknown

4. *Walau* in Malay literally means "however", but the word is used in Singlish as an expletive, with meaning similar to a Hokkien expletive *walan*, which refers to the male genitals. I am inclined to say that *walau* is Hokkien in origin. *Ah Beng* is a derogatory term referring to a male, usually Chinese, and somewhat unsophisticated. Stereotypically, he is a bit of a punk (think spiky, moussed, colored hair), but who is not edgy or cool. He is usually with gadgets and accessories, all of which are conspicuously displayed. *Shiok* is an expletive for exclaiming extreme pleasure. It has been claimed that it is Punjabi (*shaak*) in origin, but some sources claim it to be Malay.

Mandarin-Chinese. One can also see that English, Malay and Hokkien are the three major players in contributing lexical items to Singlish. Doing a full grammatical analysis of the above excerpt would be an entire paper in itself, and I will not attempt this feat here.

Some scholars have argued that Singlish is Sinitic in nature (Ansaldo 2009), as the tones in the discourse particles their roots in Cantonese and Hokkien (Lim 2007). The lack of copula, e.g. in line 2 (*he ø better*) and in line 4 (*ø shiok right*), common in Sinitic languages, is similarly a common feature in Singlish. Besides the influence from Sinitic languages, there are also some distinctly Malay features. The use of *kena*, which in Malay is a verb meaning "hit", becomes a passive construction in Singlish (see Bao and Wee 1999 for a more detailed discussion). Another distinct Malay feature, reduplication, can be found in line 3, with the use of "same-same". Reduplication is a device in Malay used to either mark plurality for nouns, or to intensify an adjective.

Even English-like features, in Singlish, take on un-English grammatical properties. The *got* in line 3 is not, like English, the past tense of *get*. In this case, *got* is used as an auxiliary verb, following a null subject (see Bao and Wee 1998, 1999; Bao 1995, 2001, 2005, for more detailed analyses). What I have done here, albeit too briefly to do justice to the structural complexity of Singlish, is to suggest that thinking about Singlish as a kind of English (good or bad) is perhaps not a meaningful endeavour.

Singlish: evolution and coexistence in a language ecology

Of all the linguistic theories that seek to explain language evolution,[5] I find Mufwene's (2001, 2005, 2008) evolutionary perspective emphasising linguistic ecologies most convincing. In Mufwene's theory of language evolution (drawn from the Darwinian evolutionary theory), the emergence of contact languages can be explained by a competition-and-selection process between the features available to speakers in a "feature pool" of possible linguistic choices. This "feature pool" consists of all the individual forms and variants that each

5. The other dominant position is Bickerton's (1984, 1990) Language Bioprogram Hypothesis. Bickerton claims that the development of pidgins and creoles as an innate biological programming provides insights about language evolution. In his view, creoles are developed by children, transforming pidgins of simple grammars to creoles with more complex structures. This universalist position does not give room for the input of substrate or superstrate languages in language evolution. As the argument in this paper relies entirely on the role of substrate and superstrate languages in the evolution of Singlish, Bickerton's theory is inappropriate and irrelevant in this case, and thus will not be discussed at length.

speaker in any given community brings with them; and these speakers who come from different language backgrounds and varying linguistic experiences bring them to the contact situation. The reason why speakers bring with them these languages to form this feature pool is because fundamentally, communication needs to take place. Communication with other individuals demands that each participant can understand and is also being understood by others. Accommodation of linguistic codes has to happen, and the feature pool consists of all possible variants of linguistic features that the participants can choose from. Ultimately, which variants from this pool are chosen as stable elements of the new language depends on the ecology of the contact situation. Figure 3, a simplified adaptation from Mufwene's (2001) model, is a pictorial representation of the "feature pool", the input languages, and the linguistic outcomes of the competition and selection process.

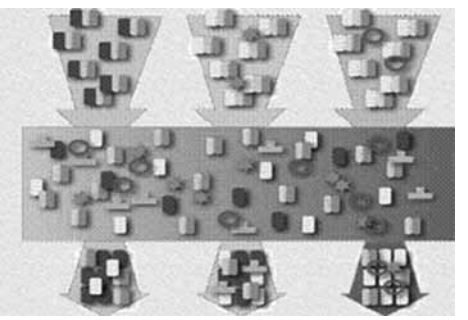

Figure 3. A simplified adaptation from Mufwene's (2001) language ecology model (adapted from http://mufwene.uchicago.edu/feature_pool.html)

The top tier represents input linguistic systems. Each input system brings with it a set of linguistic features, represented by the different shapes and shades in Figure 3. All these features enter the "feature pool", which is the middle tier. The lowest, third tier shows the output systems, of which different linguistic features have already been mixed and combined. The linguistic technicalities of how the linguistic features get diffused and grammaticalised are too complex to be spelt out here in detail, and are not directly relevant to my argument. Suffice to say, the precise nature of language contact and which features enter the "feature pool" is decided by the events that decide which languages participate in this ecology. These communicative events are in turn created by socio-political and historical factors. In the case of Singlish's evolution and development, I argue that state language policies have an important part to play, as these policies alter the language ecology.

Mufwene's (2001) model has been very influential in informing the fields of creolistics, historical linguistics and evolutionary linguistics. The model has

also been shown to be very robust in explaining the grammatical structures of contact languages (see Ansaldo 2009). Schneider's Dynamic Model (2007), which explicates the life cycle of post-colonial Englishes, for instance, is fundamentally inspired by Mufwene's ecological approach. Despite the fact that Mufwene's model highlights the importance of communicative events and speakers' agency in language contact situations, it is a model that has been very much located within the discourse of contact linguistics and evolutionary linguistics. My attempt to apply the model here to the field of language planning and policy is the first I know of. To take an evolutionary linguistics model out of its ecology, so to speak, and apply it to language planning and policy, the core set of assumptions that I take from the model, and on which my argument will be based, bears repetition, and they are:

1. Agency lies in the individual communicative activities.
2. These communicative activities are determined by language ecologies.
3. Language ecologies are determined by socio-political and historical factors.

I propose too, at this point, a slightly modified version of the model so as to turn the focus away from the actual interaction and selection of linguistic features, but to highlight how some languages can, at different historical moments, contribute more or less significantly to the feature pool than other languages in the ecology. Figure 4 is a representation of the model that I will be using and basing my discussion on for the rest of this section.

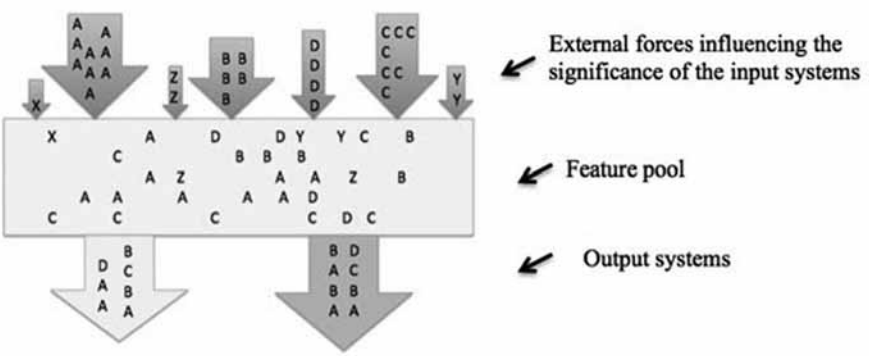

Figure 4. Modified model highlighting the external forces influencing the significance of the input systems

In this modified model, as seen in Figure 4, the input systems in the first tier are of different sizes. Their sizes represent the significance of the different languages in the ecology. Some languages contribute more features to the feature pool because they have been put in positions of higher prominence by sociological, historical or political forces. The more prominent an input language is (represented by the size of the arrow), the more linguistic features they contribute to the feature pool (the letters representing the features). Likewise, some languages participate less in the ecology because there are fewer speakers due to the relatively smaller size of the community, or they are used less frequently. As the less prominent languages contribute fewer features to the feature pool, it becomes less likely that the output system (in the bottom tier) will contain the linguistic features associated with these languages. The output systems therefore are more likely to have linguistic features of the more prominent languages. The evolution of Singlish, as I will describe it now, is therefore a tale of how the state modifies the language ecologies with language policies. Some languages, because of the policies, play a more significant role in the ecology. These language policies have the effect of shaping speakers' linguistic behaviour. At the same time, the speakers also bring with them different linguistic backgrounds and experiences, all of which come together to create a "feature pool" that ultimately, produces Singlish.

Applying the model: precursor to Singlish

It was reported that by the time the British East India Company claimed Singapore as British trading post in 1819, this tiny Southeast Asian island was already inhabited by a few families of Orang Laut ("sea people"), a small Chinese settlement of pepper and gambier cultivators, and about 100 Malay fishermen from Johore (Bloom 1986: 349). The population quickly grew with an influx of immigrants, many of them from southern China, Malaysia, Indonesia and India. By 1931, the immigrant population had grown to half a million (Lim 2010: 22). One could expect the inhabitants of the island to have had with them a diversity of languages. According to the census data of 1957, a total of 33 languages of different language families were reportedly spoken. They comprised Indic languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Sindhi; Dravidian languages such Tamil, Tegulu, Malayalam and Kannada; and Austronesian languages such as Malay, Boyanese, Bugis and Javanese. And just within the Chinese community, which made up 75.4% of the population then, more than 13 Chinese languages were spoken (Bokhorst-Heng 1998: 288), and

they included Southern Min languages such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese and Foo Chow; Gan languages such as Hakka; and Yue languages such as Cantonese. Two very important questions need to be raised at this point for us to get a clearer picture of the language ecology at that time. First, what was the role of English during this period of British colonisation? Secondly, what could possibly be the language or languages of communication? A population of migrants located in an important trading port surely needed a common language or two in which they could all communicate and trade.

Like many colonial outposts (see Schneider 2007 on post-colonial examples; and Faradas et al. 2007 on creoles), the language of the colonial masters was very much restricted only to the European settlers and the chosen few who were connected to the colonial administration. The British administration in Singapore was not particularly invested in providing English education for the locals. While there were a couple of English-medium schools by the second half of the 1800s, they were reserved for the children of the European settlers, and for the sons of a small handful of locals who could afford it (Gupta 1998). Meanwhile, the British encouraged the Malays to attend their vernacular schools (Gupta 1994: 34), and left the Chinese clans and philanthropic Chinese individuals to run Chinese schools in their respective Chinese languages (Koh 2006). English was only introduced as a subject in these Malay- and Chinese-medium schools in the 1930s. Similarly, the Indian community ran schools in their vernaculars.

The spread of English was thus very much restricted within an elite group. Even then, the *type* of English that was taught was not entirely British. By the 1920s, the teachers in the English-medium schools were primarily Eurasians. The Eurasians, a category created by the colonial bureaucracy, were "colonial subjects who were offspring of European fathers and Asian mothers" (Rappa 2000: 157). Many of the other teachers were British, Portuguese, Irish, American, German, French and Indian in origin (Gupta 1998). English would have undergone some form of dialect-levelling (Schneider 2007) during this time, and the English formed during this period was most likely the beginning of what we now know as Standard Singapore English (Bloom 1986).

The fact that English was not accessible for the majority of population also means that English could not participate in language ecology in a significant way. What was the linguistic output of the contact situation then? Without any institutional demand for a single vehicular language, how did the locals communicate with one another? The answer lies in Bazaar Malay. Bazaar Malay (*bazaar* is "market" in Malay), is, as its name suggests, a language of trade and the market. Different varieties of Bazaar Malay, depending on their

ecologies, developed along different parts of the Southeast Asian trade routes, and the existence of Bazaar Malay has been dated to the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a means of trade and interethnic communication (Ansaldo 2009). Even today, varieties of Bazaar Malay can still be heard in the Riau Islands, Borneo and Malaysia, and to some extent, Singapore (Collins 1984; Khin Khin Aye 2005; Ansaldo 2009). Throughout this entire period, i.e. from the nineteenth century until the 1970s, a form of Bazaar Malay was used as the primary interethnic lingua franca in Singapore, and the emergence of Bazaar Malay can be explained and predicted by the modified ecological model I introduced in Figure 4.

One could already see the major power players in the language ecology. Malay would be an important language contributing to the feature pool for three reasons. First, the Malays formed the bulk of the population until 1921, when the sudden influx of migrants from southern China caused the Chinese population to grow to form three-quarters of the population (Kwok 2000). The Malay community used Malay primarily as the language of communication amongst themselves, even though there were also other Austronesian languages spoken by that community. More importantly, Malay was the language of trade between Singapore and its immediate neighbours.

Meanwhile, each ethnic community communicated in their own languages amongst themselves. Within the Chinese community, while different Chinese languages were spoken by the individual Chinese groups, Hokkien was the main intra-ethnic lingua franca (Lim 2007), primarily because Hokkien speakers formed the biggest group of the Chinese population (Bokhorst-Heng 2008). As for the Indian population, not only were their population numbers comparatively smaller than the Chinese and Malay communities, they also did not have one uniform intra-ethnic lingua franca. Most of the speakers of the Indian community spoke their own Indian language, as well as Malay. None of the Indian languages can therefore be said to be contributing to the feature pool in a significant way. Out of all the possible languages participating in the language ecology, one would expect Malay and Hokkien to be the two dominant players. Applying the modified model to language ecology of pre-independent Singapore, one could see the possible input and output of the language contact situation then. Figure 5 shows a simplified version of language ecology model with a few of the possible input languages, focusing primarily on Malay and Hokkien.

Bazaar Malay was one of the possible output systems out of this ecology. I focus on it for this discussion. Another possible output system, one could imagine, would be some form of Hokkien with Malay influence, which I will

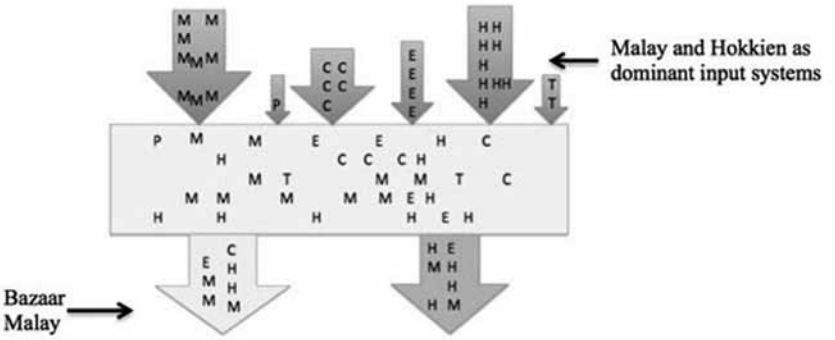

Figure 5. Malay and Hokkien as dominant input systems in the language ecology of pre-independence Singapore

call Austronesianised-Hokkien. I represent this by the bottom right-hand arrow in Figure 5. The Hokkien in Singapore has a large Malay lexicon, and these Malay words in Hokkien carry tones. One could expect too that Bazaar Malay would be predominantly Malay with Hokkien influence. Bazaar Malay would continue to participate in the language ecology when Singapore became independent. Its dominance in the feature pool however, as I will show, would be complicated by the ruling government's language policies.

Language policies affecting the ecology

The People's Action Party (PAP), led by Lee Kuan Yew, came into power in 1959 after being given the self-government by the British, and what followed was a two-year period of unification with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965. In 1965, Singapore suddenly became an independent nation after being exiled by the Malayan Federation. Singapore never saw a change in leadership, as the PAP is, till today, the only ruling party in a one-party government. Lee Kuan Yew, who remained in power in various capacities until he formally retired in 2011, felt the need to ensure the survival of this island nation, and language planning was one of, if not his most immediate, tasks. As a consequence, the language policies of 1965, namely, the officialisation of English, the mother tongue policy and the language-in-education policy, directly altered the language ecology by affecting the significance of the languages participating in the feature pool. These policies will be explained in more detail later.

The governing body of this newly independent nation was faced with two immediate tasks. For one, the state needed to ensure the economic survival of this tiny island with few natural resources. It also needed to very quickly create cohesiveness amongst its ethnically and linguistically diverse populace, who,

as we now know, were educated in different languages and spoke Bazaar Malay as the lingua franca. English entered the spotlight as it had been chosen to be the official language.

English became the obvious choice as an official language for a few reasons. English was the vehicle that had already been built by the colonial government for the running of the government, laws and administration. The ruling elite and educated members of the nation already had access to English, and it made no sense to reinvent the wheel. Lee Kuan Yew, then prime minister, was himself an English-educated, Cambridge-trained lawyer. English was the only language he had mastery in, and in order for him to run the country, he needed his people to know the language. The institutionalisation of English as an official language was also based on the idea of pragmatism. The state believed that the only way to ensure Singapore's survival was to engage in trade and industry. This meant that Singaporeans would have to speak the language that drove the world economy, so as to increase the chances of the nation partaking in international trade and commerce. English was also chosen to ensure equality amongst the ethnically and culturally diverse population. For this purpose, English was a natural choice because it was the foreigners' language, and could thus be said to be a "neutral" language that could serve as the language of interethnic communication without privileging or discriminating any group over others. This way, English could become the common language for all Singaporeans, thereby ensuring homogeneity, which would aid in nation building.

To make sure that English was not only an official language in name, the state mandated compulsory English education. English was initially offered as a second language in the Chinese-, Malay- and Indian-medium schools of the colonial era. By the late 1970s however, English was officially made the *medium* of instruction in all schools. In fact, it is believed that it was through the education system that English spread so rapidly in Singapore (Bloom 1986; Platt and Weber 1980). Almost everyone had to use English to some extent, and every school-going child would have English as part of his or her linguistic repertoire. English had then entered the language ecology in a significant way.

English was not the only language that entered the ecology because of the state's language policies. In order to assure the Singaporean diverse population, especially the prominent and powerful Chinese intellectuals, that English was not going to be institutionalised as an official language at the expense of Asian languages, the ruling government, also instituted Mandarin-Chinese, Malay and Tamil as the official languages. These three languages, in addition to their

official language status, were also officially assigned the status of "mother tongue".

There is an inextricable link between these "mother tongue" languages and the ethnic classifications of the Singaporean population. Singapore's population is broadly classified as Chinese, Malay and Indian. Ethnic classification is based primarily on one's father's ethnic assignment.[6] Based on the rules of ethnic assignment, Chinese is the most dominant group in Singapore, with 76.8% of the population belonging to this group, followed by the Malays at 13.9% and the Indians at 7.9% (Singapore Census of Population 2010), and this distribution has remained relatively unchanged since the nation's independence. Each ethnic group is correlated to one "mother tongue". In fact, the assigned "mother tongue" can be said to be the "superordinate language" (Gupta 1998: 117) of each official ethnic group as the official languages of Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are assigned to each group correspondingly. Therefore, if one is ethnically classified as "Chinese", then one's mother tongue is deemed to be Mandarin, that of a "Malay" Malay and that of an Indian "Tamil". The "mother tongue" here, as one can see, is not based on any sound linguistic criteria, nor does it reflect linguistic realities (see Tan 2014 for a more detailed discussion). The assignment of "mother tongue" languages was and is not based the actual linguistic repertoire of any given individual. In other words, even if one does not speak or use Mandarin, as long as one has been classified as "Chinese", one's "mother tongue" would still be Mandarin. This has in fact been the case for many in the Chinese community, for even as late as 1980, only 10% of them reported to using Mandarin at home, and over 80% of them used other non-Mandarin Chinese languages (Singapore Census of Population 1980).

The importance of the "mother tongue" language is reinforced by the state's acquisition planning, with every school-going child having to acquire his or her "mother tongue" in school, together with English. This was one of the ways in which the state could maintain a semblance of equality in the treatment of the various language communities. Believing in the idea that language transmits values, the three "mother tongue" languages were instituted as compulsory languages to be learnt in school. These "mother tongues" serve the important function of giving Singaporeans an "Asian" set of values as these languages are thought of as cultural ballast against the undesirable influences that come with the use of English. The "mother tongue" that a child has to learn in school then

6. This has however changed since January 2010. Couples of inter-ethnic marriages have the option to reflect, for their child, either or both their ethnic groups as a double-barreled group. For example, if one parent is 'Chinese' and the other is 'Indian', the child's race may be recorded as 'Chinese', 'Indian', 'Chinese-Indian', or 'Indian-Chinese'.

depends entirely on the ethnic classification of the child: Mandarin-Chinese for the Chinese child, Malay for the Malay child and Tamil for the Indian child. The average post-1965 bilingual Singaporean therefore is a product of a state-engineered bilingual education programme, which Pakir (1991: 111–20) describes as "English-knowing" bilingualism. The three "mother tongue" languages – Mandarin-Chinese, Malay and Tamil, are now participating more fully in this language ecology.

What does the language ecology look like at this point? We know by now that Bazaar Malay, as the resultant output of the pre-independence period will continue to play a significant role. I represent, in Figure 6, Bazaar Malay as an input system consisting of linguistic features of mostly Malay and Hokkien, some Cantonese, and a little bit of Tamil. Meanwhile, Mandarin-Chinese, Malay and Tamil, because of the "mother tongue" policy, have their roles increased as input systems in the ecology. Most significantly, the input of English into the feature pool increases. Figure 6 illustrates the new ecology, with Singlish as the resultant output.

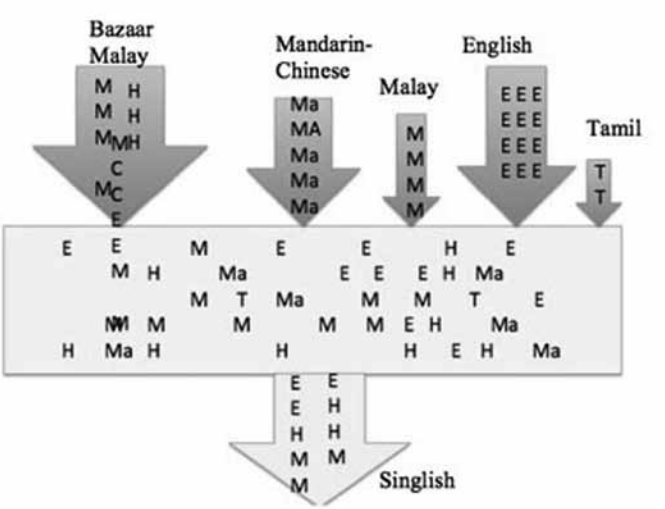

Figure 6. Language ecology influenced by language policies

The state language policies, as I have argued thus far, are responsible for altering the language ecology; and altering the ecology has the effect of creating a linguistic output like Singlish.

A case for Singlish?

Now that we know the language ecology in which Singlish is situated, it is now time to return to the SGEM, the state-run campaign that aims to eliminate Singlish, the very language that I have argued thus far was produced unexpectedly by the state language policies. The state, besides deeming that Singlish will tarnish the image of Singaporeans and ultimately lead to Singapore's economic downfall, also argues that Singlish must be gotten rid of because Singlish and English cannot coexist because there is only one way of speaking. The absolute impossibility of having both Singlish and English within the same speaker is perhaps best summed up by Goh Eck Kheng, Chairperson of the SGEM, in 2010: "We are only capable of speaking one way. And if we can only speak one way, we should ensure that the one way is what we call 'Good English'."

This is essentially the claim that a speaker is only capable of one language or one way of speaking, with no capability for diglossia or even multilingualism. This claim is inherently at odds with the state policies. The state, after all, has been the agent institutionalising multilingualism by giving Singapore four official languages. Singapore's education system is a bilingual system which makes every Singaporean a bilingual speaker. To say that there is only one way of speaking is to throw doubt on the viability of multilingualism in Singapore. Conversely, to say that Singapore thrives on multilingualism is to then acknowledge that the language ecology can accommodate multiple languages. Singapore's language ecology, as we have seen earlier, is most certainly a multilingual one. There is no good reason therefore to believe that Singlish and English cannot coexist in the same ecology.

Interestingly, Singlish even mirrors the state's vision for ethnic harmony. One of the features of Singlish is that it has not developed ethnically. One may notice that in Figure 6, the major output system is Singlish, whereas in Figure 5, Bazaar Malay was one of possibly two or more equally robust output systems. The basic difference between Figures 5 and 6 is that, in Figure 5, the output systems are ethnically based, as we can see in the production of Bazaar Malay which is a kind of Malay, and Austronesianised-Hokkien, which is still a kind of Hokkien, amongst other possible by-products. And such ethnic-based contact outcomes are completely within expectation, as most output systems develop along ethnic lines (Mufwene 2001, 2003, 2005). As I have illustrated earlier, Singlish is not a variety of Malay, Hokkien, English or any other single language in the ecology. The mixture of languages in Singlish, to a large extent, is a good and fair representation of the language communities in Singapore,

with the exception of the Indian languages. Much of it is of course due to the competition and selection of linguistic features in the feature pool. However, one cannot help but see this mixture in Singlish as a serendipitous result which meets the state's quest for unity and ethnic harmony.

Despite Singlish representing unity and ethnic harmony, there is still a sense that the use of Singlish is also associated with degradation and lack. Goh Eck Kheng, Chairperson of the SGEM, refers to Singlish as "poverty of language" in his 2010 SGEM speech: "This is a key element in making sure that people who are disadvantaged, or who come from dysfunctional environments, will not be further disadvantaged by poverty of language."

It is clear that Singlish is being correlated to low social status, poor employment and a general sense of dysfunctionality, or as Wee (2014) puts it, Singlish ghettoises its speakers. This sense of linguistic deprivation led Lee Kuan Yew, in a speech given in 1999, to assert that Singlish is a linguistic handicap: "The people who will benefit most are those who can only master one kind of English. Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans." Handicapped by their language, speakers of Singlish are believed to become socially disadvantaged. One wonders if there is adequate empirical evidence to show that Singlish speakers are indeed disadvantaged, and if not, this is certainly an area that warrants future research.

In fact, over the past few years, there were also several "counter"-campaigns such as the "Save Our Singlish Campaign" and the "Speak Good *Singlish* Movement" which gained much traction on the internet, and based on the quality of the exchanges and debates, it is reasonable to posit that many of them are fairly well educated. The initiator of the "Save Our Singlish Campaign" happens to be a film director and a newspaper columnist. Another well-known example of such a fighter is a young lady in her early twenties, named by the Singapore media as "Sticker Lady". "Sticker Lady" is a visual artist who did her undergraduate training in the US. In 2012, she surreptitiously went around Singapore and put up stickers (such as the ones in Figure 7) on traffic lights.

These instances of "resistances" are displays of a richness and resourcefulness in language play that comes with the use of Singlish. It makes one wonder therefore if there is truly a need to get rid of Singlish. As I have tried to show in this paper, Singlish is really a product of historical conditions and communicative events shaped by state language policies. Instead of fixating on the perceived ills of Singlish, it may be worthwhile to focus on the beauty of the evolutionary process of Singlish and also think about what this language can do for the country and her people.

Figure 7. Singlish stickers on traffic lights. Photos taken by the author at two different locations in the eastern part of Singapore in 2012.

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Résumé

Symptomatique de beaucoup de pays postcoloniales, Singapour, c'est-à-dire l'état singapourien, désire une langue commune afin de mettre en unité ses citoyens qui partagent entre eux des langues hétérogènes. Et cela est en dépit du fait que presque tout Singapourien parle *Singlish*, une langue qui se constitue des éléments de l'anglais, du malais, du hokkiène, du mandarin et du cantonnais. L'état vise cependant à supprimer le *Singlish* puisqu'il croit que ce dernier est une forme corrompue et défectueuse de la langue anglaise et qu'elle compromet l'image et le progrès du pays. Dès 2000, le *Singlish* a ainsi été la cible d'une campagne étatique de grande envergure cherchant à le délégitimiser et à l'éliminer. À l'encontre de la perspective de l'état et de son rejet du *Singlish*, cet article trace la généalogie du *Singlish* en s'appuyant sur la théorie du langage écologique et évolutionnaire

de Mufwene (2001), et met en avant l'argument que la naissance et l'existence continue du *Singlish,* bien que contestées, sont essentiellement indéniables, étant donné les facteurs historiques et socio-politiques qui l'ont effectivement créé.

Mots clés: Singapour; écologie linguistique; Singlish; politique linguistique; mouvement «Speak Good English»