Language in Singapore: From Multilingualism to English Plus
FRANCESCO CAVALLARO and NG BEE CHIN

Introduction
With active language planning policies in force since before its independence as a nation in 1965, Singapore’s linguistic situation has undergone dramatic change in the last 60 years. As a result of these policies, we have seen the waxing and waning of many languages and an unprecedented transformation of linguistic repertoires for individual Singaporeans. In particular, the last five decades have seen a significant shift to English plus one of the designated official languages, and the attrition of many other languages, including a diverse array of Chinese vernaculars. This chapter explores language policies and planning in Singapore and their impact, drawing on a number of studies, as well as on census and survey data. The chapter opens with a brief sociolinguistic description of the island state, and discusses the socio-historical basis for the adoption of the country’s language policies, the language planning and their implementation and impact. It then evaluates the direct implications of such language policies on the linguistic practices of the different ethnic groups, and briefly turns to the attitudes of Singaporeans towards their varieties of English. Finally, the chapter briefly considers the current and future consequences of language policy and change in Singapore. While Singapore’s language policy approach can be associated with positive outcomes, e.g. such as Singapore’s economic success, there are also negative consequences, including an increasingly reduced multilingualism, official rejection of local creativity in English and communicative dislocation within families and across generations.

Singapore’s multicultural make-up
Singapore is a multiethnic and multilingual society of just over five million people. Of these, 74% are residents and 26% non-residents of Singapore (Department of Statistics, 2011). Since its independence from the British in 1965, Singapore has maintained the same relative ratio
among the main ethnic groups (Kuo, 1980a; 1980b; Department of Statistics, 2001a). Recent figures (Department of Statistics, 2006; 2009; 2011) show that Singapore’s society currently has an ethnic mix of 74.1% Chinese, 13.4% Malays, 9.2% Indians and 3.3% so-called ‘Others’, most of whom are of Eurasian, European or Arab decent (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Chinese %</th>
<th>Malay %</th>
<th>Indian %</th>
<th>Others %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Statistics, 2001b; 2006; 2011; Kuo, 1980a; 1980b.

Singapore’s multilingual composition

In the context of Singapore’s colonial history and the politico-pragmatic circumstances before and after independence in 1965, the island nation’s language policy has been described as the result of the need to ensure the cohesion of its multi-ethnic fabric (e.g. Bokhorst-Heng, 1998; Gupta, 1998; Wee, 2003). Kuo’s (1980b) account of the languages spoken within and across ethnic lines before independence shows Singapore to have been (and to be) linguistically very diverse, with no fewer than 33 mother tongue groups present in the 1950s. Singapore could rightly be taken as an early example of linguistic superdiversity à la Vertovec (2007) – involving a complex and rapidly evolving ethnolinguistic, socio-political and economic situation that, for the political leadership of a new nation state/city of only 137 square kilometres, required clear management (and rationalization) through official policy and direction.

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% of the population spoke English and only 0.1% spoke Mandarin as mother tongues. In fact, other languages were much better known: 32.5% of the Chinese community, 88.3% of the Indian community and 48% of the total population spoke Malay, and 80% of the Chinese community
spoke or understood Hokkien (Kuo, 1980b). Post-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. This is just a simplification of an even more diverse linguistic setting if we were to include, amongst 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 amongst these – see below). If we take the average adult age of the Singaporean to be 40 at that time, this group of Singaporeans is now in its 70s.

**Language policy and its impact**

Even before formal independence, language was a sensitive and key issue in Singapore’s nation building. As observed by other language policy watchers (e.g. Kuo & Jernudd, 1993, Ricento, 2000; 2006), any emergent nation cannot ignore language management as a key factor in its effort to focus and align the resources and potential of its citizens. The more heterogeneous the linguistic context, the more important and controversial such discussions are likely to be. Singapore is no exception. With a highly centralised governance in a small island state, it has been able to implement much of the vision other countries can only debate about. In general, the different language policies through the years have been implemented aggressively through policy statements and through the education system. There have been four main language thrusts that have shaped the Singapore of today:

a) **Official Languages & National Language (1950s)**  
b) **Bilingualism Policy (1966)**  
c) **The Speak Mandarin Campaign (1979 to present)**  
d) **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, and English has since dominated the country’s education system (Pakir, 2004; 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 (Gupta, 1998), or in a simplified form of Hokkien. 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 until the mid 1970s. This policy has since remained dormant but Malay is still symbolically a national language in Singapore: the national anthem is sung in Malay despite the fact that generations of Singaporeans have sung the anthem every day of their school life with few knowing the meaning of what they are singing.

Although some within a particular ethnic group may not master the group’s language, proficiency in it is considered very important socially. The ‘mother tongues’ are deemed to function as ‘an anchor in their [students’] ethnic and cultural traditions’ in opposition to the Western values and world view supposedly imparted through the English language (Gopinathan, 1998: 21). Regardless of how one judges Singapore’s efforts at language planning, there is no doubt in the general truth of Pakir’s (1991) prediction that post-independence-born Singaporeans today have become ‘English-knowing bilinguals’, confident in their use of the varieties of Singapore English plus their ethnic language. Yet, as Wee (2003) illustrates, the functional separation between English and the ‘mother tongues’ in Singapore has been shaken within the wake of economic globalisation, so that the utilitarian value traditionally assigned exclusively to English has now also been extended to Mandarin Chinese. This shift in emphasis has been promoted by government policies and educational reforms. Public initiatives have also been implemented to strengthen the position of Malay and Tamil, so as to preserve the equality between the ‘mother tongues’. Wee (2003), however, regards these efforts as futile, due to lack of practicality and bottom-up support.

While Mandarin, Malay and Tamil may well be bona fide mother tongues for many, they were and still are second languages for many others. The only language that can be considered a true mother tongue, given Singapore’s location in the Malay Peninsula, is Malay, even though for a
long time many of those classified as ethnic Malays in Singapore were in fact mother tongue speakers of other languages such as Boyanese or Javanese, more distantly related to Malay. In effect, however, English is increasingly becoming the mother tongue for more and more Singaporeans, and their ethnic languages are technically more like second languages. Table 2 highlights the increase in English as the language most frequently used at home (from 1.8% in 1957 to 32.3% in 2010) as well as Mandarin as the language most frequently used at home (from 0.1% to 35.6), and a concomitant dramatic decline in the number of speakers of Chinese vernaculars (from 74.4% to 14.3%).

Table 2: Speakers of the main languages in Singapore (%)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Mandarin</th>
<th>Chinese Vernaculars</th>
<th>Tamil</th>
<th>Malay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The census figures are based on ‘the language most frequently spoken at home’. Figures in this table do not add up to 100 percent. The remaining speakers speak a variety of smaller languages.


When we look at the linguistic make-up of the main ethnic groups (see Table 3) we can see a dramatic shift in language use within the short space of only 30 years. The Chinese community has shifted to English and Mandarin, at the significant expense of Chinese vernaculars. While the use of Mandarin appears to dominate, its expansion appears to have largely peaked – as a result of the rise of English as home language in this community that continues to gather pace, especially amongst the youngest Chinese (see also below). In the Indian community, English has now overtaken Tamil as the most widely used language at home, while the Malay community is better at maintaining its language compared to other ethnic groups. However, the increase over ten years from 7.5% to 17% of Malay Singaporeans claiming to speak English as a first language appears to be the start of a significant trend – lagging behind but still tracking trends in the Chinese and Indian communities. In fact, across the board, we see the increasing use of English and Mandarin Chinese but a reduction in Malay and Tamil. However, some care is needed in
interpreting these trend data in Tables 2 and 3: the rise of English is evident across all ethnic communities, while that of Mandarin Chinese is restricted to the ethnic Chinese. Both of these outcomes are the result of official government policy (see below).

Table 3: A comparison of English and Mother Tongue use in Singapore, as preferred home language, 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese vernaculars</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malays</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>82.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Indian languages</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not all of these figures add up to 100 percent. The remaining speakers speak a variety of smaller languages.


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 (Cavallaro, 2010; Clyne, 1982; 1991; 2003) or in the U.S. (Carnevale, 2009; Correa-Zoli, 1981; Veltman, 1984). That is, the community is made up of an older, 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 speaks a vernacular and for whom English is clearly more dominant than Mandarin.

**Language shift in Singapore**

Singapore has always been a multilingual society. Its population is made up of large numbers of immigrants arriving mainly from India, South East Asia, China and Indonesia. They have all brought their languages with them (see Table 4 for most widely spoken languages).

**Table 4: Most spoken (local) languages in Singapore**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indian</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Hakka</td>
<td>Javanese</td>
<td>Malaccan Creole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarati</td>
<td>Hainanese</td>
<td>Baba Malay (Peranakan)</td>
<td>Singapore Sign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>Min Nan (Hokkien)</td>
<td>Bazaar Malay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malayalam</td>
<td>Teochew</td>
<td>Orang Seletar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panjabi, Eastern</td>
<td>Yue (Cantonese)</td>
<td>Boyanese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinhala</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010

Chinese Singaporeans descend mainly from immigrants from South China. Indian Singaporeans descend mainly from Tamilnadu, but there are also representatives from all over 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 are from elsewhere.
Language shift in the Chinese community

As previously noted, the Chinese community makes up 74.1% of the population in Singapore. Mandarin is the official mother tongue attached to this community. However, as also mentioned above, the true cultural and heritage language for the overwhelming majority of Chinese Singaporeans is one of the Chinese vernaculars such as Hokkien, and not Mandarin. With the implementation of language and education policies, however, the use of Chinese vernaculars among the Chinese community has declined dramatically (Table 3). In 1979, the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew launched ‘The Speak Mandarin Campaign’ (SMC) to encourage the use of Mandarin Chinese as a replacement for all Chinese vernaculars. This campaign has been very successful. As evident in Table 3, 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% in 1980 to only 19.2% 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 SMC has made Mandarin the 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, Chew & Cheng, 1998). Given the spread of Mandarin at the expense of other Chinese vernaculars in the home, it is not surprising if it is anecdotally reported to be a key component of Singaporean Chinese identity. This is confirmed by Li, Saravanan and Hoon (1997) who found that young Teochew speakers no longer identify themselves as Teochew but as Singaporean Chinese or simply as Singaporeans.

There have not been many studies carried out on the various Chinese vernaculars in Singapore, but those that do exist confirm the clear shift away from these language varieties to English and Mandarin. See Kuo (1980a) and Kuo and Jernudd (1993) for an overview of the various censuses; Kwan-Terry (1989; 2000) and Xu et al. (1998) for the overall Chinese community; Li et al. (1997) for Teochew; and Gupta and Siew (1995) for Cantonese.

Given that both Mandarin, promoted through the SMC 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 program 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, Cavallaro & Coluzzi, 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 and were therefore unable to forge a meaningful bond with them. 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; even simple tasks such as catching a train or using the ATM were insurmountable obstacles for them. These issues are often compounded by loneliness, ill-health and poverty.

**Language shift in the Indian community**

The Indian community makes up 9.2% of the population, and is the smallest of the three main ethnic groups. The official mother tongue for the Indian community is Tamil. However, as is the case of the Chinese community, there are several traditional mother tongues within the Indian community.

With a more 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% over the past five years to about 4,800 students today. 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 (Gujaratī), 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 population of North Indians migrating to Singapore has grown steadily. The make-up of these 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 skilled
professionals. A large number were – and are – attracted to Singaporean schools for the quality of education they offer. Many have chosen Hindi as the second language/mother tongue at school. Interestingly, many Indian students whose mother tongues may be none of the NTILs mentioned above - nor Hindi or even English - have opted to study Hindi, the main national language of India, instead of Tamil as their second language.

In 2010, 36.6% of the Indian Singaporean population spoke Tamil at home as their primary language - a significant decrease from the 60% reported in 1957. At the same time 13.2% spoke other Indian languages such as Malayalam, Hindi and Punjabi in 2010. Language shift to English among Indian Singaporeans is significant, as already illustrated in Table 3 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: (1) the notion that a good command of English is tied up with economic success and academic accomplishments, and (2) the Tamil variety spoken at home is significantly different from the variety traditionally taught in school, as a result of which, students could not make an association between them.

**Language shift in the Malay community**

The Malay community makes up 13.4% 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% of the Malays in Singapore indicated that they use Malay as their preferred home language, and only 17% 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 3. Firstly, that that there was an almost 10% jump in the reporting of English used at home from the 2000 census. This jump is unprecedented compared to previous decades. Secondly, 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. The study also confirms a transfer of domains away from Malay to English, especially amongst younger Malay Singaporeans.

**Language shift, attitudes and identity - future prospects**

All studies looking into language shift in Singapore point to a situation where traditional languages are losing their grip on younger generations of Singaporeans. Cavallaro and Serwe (2010), Pillai (2009), Ramiah (1991) and Li et al. (1997) all found that their participants aged 18-29 were more comfortable in English. Pillai (2009) even reports that young Singaporean Malayalams are not at all interested in learning Malayalam. For some varieties like Peranakan Malay (or Baba Malay), the shift is drastic, with the language facing imminent endangerment in Singapore.

There is little doubt that the change in Singaporean language practices is due to two main causes: government policies, and people’s desire for personal gain and social mobility (Li, et al. 1997), with both issues closely tied in with language attitudes and language identity. Singapore has experienced significant social and economic development in the past few decades. These developments have in part been brought about through the government’s emphasis on good English language skills. 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 about their choice of home language. Their responses were overwhelmingly in favour of bringing up the children bilingually in both English and Mandarin Chinese. That said however, it was striking that, despite the apparent success of official efforts to promote Mandarin for Chinese Singaporeans (as seen in Table 3), those who were fluent in Mandarin were also abandoning it in the home in favour of speaking English, their weaker second language.

While it is clear that non-official languages (especially Chinese vernaculars) will always struggle to gain a foothold in the current scenario, a different tension has emerged in the new English-speaking backdrop of Singapore. In the pre-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 a concerted push to create a larger base of English literate bilinguals, the elitism that was associated with speaking English soon lost its lustre. Practically speaking, most Singaporeans who are now 45 years old and below (in 2013) have been educated in English medium schools. This group of Singaporeans is now expected to be at least bilingual in English and one other
official language. As a result, for the last 20 to 30 years, it has become commonplace for English to be used as a lingua franca amongst all Singaporeans. This means that, in effect, English has 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) and exists alongside Standard Singapore English (SSE).

The issue of whether SCE exists as a separate English variety and whether it should be recognised as such is an issue that has polarised the community, much like the debate on standard and non-standard English in the UK or the debate on African American Vernacular English in the US. In surveying the concerns of Singapore’s ‘Speak Good English Campaign’, launched in 2000, one immediately recognises the same reasons put forward for not promoting a non-standard variety. The authorities and critics are concerned about intelligibility, academic achievement, national image and Singapore’s economic future, among other issues. On the other hand, proponents of SCE underline the importance of national identity and language rights. As elsewhere, the defenders of SCE are typically the privileged few who have good control of both SSE and SCE. The tension between these two camps is palpable and on-going. These issues are extremely complex as they involve language attitudes and identity, along with a shift in Singapore’s broader linguistic ecology and the loss of some languages. (Given the limited space here, readers are referred to the following for further detail: Bokhorst-Heng & Caleon, 2009; Cavallaro & Ng, 2009; Cavallaro, Seilhamer & Ng, forthcoming; Ng, Cavallaro & Koh, forthcoming; Tan & Tan, 2008.)

Discussion

In 50 years or so, a linguistically heterogeneous group living in Singapore has evolved into one with English as an intergroup and intra-group lingua franca. 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. 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.

By the next census in 2020, we expect to see a further increase in the use of English as preferred home language across the different ethnic groups. In the Chinese community, there will be a further reduction in the number of Chinese vernaculars spoken but also in the use of all the other three official languages in the home, including, for the first time Mandarin Chinese. In effect, over time, Singaporeans will be even more English-dominant in tandem with the rise and spread of English worldwide. This is a formidable market force that is beyond the boundaries of the island state and, as prosaic as it sounds, this ‘English tide’ will continue to wash over all other languages, with the possible partial exception of Mandarin Chinese outside the home setting if its utilitarian value continues to increase 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 practiced by many older Singaporeans.

However, with regard to SSE and SCE, it is unclear how the tension between them will be resolved. While official policy still strongly proscribes the use of SCE, its prevalence is clear. While it is relatively easy to sanction against 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. It is clear that both SSE and SCE have their functions. Recently, during a field trip to a Singaporean Supreme court, the authors observed prosecutors using SCE in their interrogation of their own witnesses but SSE with the defendant. Clearly, these two varieties were being used to both facilitate interaction (in the case of the witnesses for prosecution) and intimidation (in the case of the defendant). Such discourse functions are not unusual and have been documented for other diglossic varieties. Both SSE and SCE have a role to play and these roles are duly exploited by the speakers. In the long run, the best thing may be to encourage speakers to acquire both varieties and to use them in context-appropriate situations. As it stands, Singapore has clearly moved from ‘English knowing’ to ‘English dominant’.
There are other downsides to the rise of English in Singapore that give cause for concern, in particular its social consequences. The 2010 Census shows that of the 5,076,700 people in Singapore, 3,771,721 are residents. In terms of literacy, 128,661 people out of the resident population over 15 are non-literate and 887,241 are literate in only one language: 485,511 in Chinese only, 338,221 in English only, 47,278 in Malay only, 10,939 in Tamil only, 5,292 in only one other language. Of these 887,241 residents, 338,387 people are over the age of age of 65, of which 214,778 were born in Singapore and 123,609 were born abroad. Among these senior residents, 283,185 are Chinese, 30,938 are Malay, 19,806 are Indians and ‘Others’ comprise the remaining 4,458. These elderly residents show the highest use of non-official languages and the lowest use of English. Given these statistics, coupled with a new emerging generation of children who do not speak any of the minority languages or vernaculars, we already have no common language between generations for some groups of speakers. Can the cost of the loss of non-official languages be measured? How does one quantify the sadness of some thousands of elderly people who are cut off from the English-speaking world? What provisions have been made for them to make their last few years a little better? What steps have their children and grandchildren taken to reach out and talk to them and listen to their stories? Official language policy directed at specific outcomes (i.e. language engineering), such as the emphasis on Standard English and on the learning of Mandarin Chinese (and associated shift from traditional vernaculars) by the Chinese community, does not take into consideration any of these social consequences.

The next decade will see the need for Singaporeans to meet and balance three major challenges:

- the harmonious integration of both old and new residents from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds;
- the nurturing and harnessing of the resources of post-independence Singaporeans to meet the needs of the nation’s blueprint for success, and
- the management of the ageing population and bridging the language gap between older Singaporeans and the increasingly English-dominant youth.

These challenges are not new but official policy has always focussed on the first two, with scant attention paid to the last. With increasing English plus bilingualism in neighbouring Asian states, Singapore is likely to lose the edge it has always enjoyed in this area. However, by paying careful attention to the transition across generations and across groups, it can lead the way in responding to the market forces of globalisation while nurturing the varieties that create meaningful and harmonious bonding within the community – including within families and across generations.
Endnotes

1 ‘English Plus’ is a term used by Michael Clyne in his video Growing up with English plus (Beligan, Clyne & Lotherington, 1999) about bilingualism in Australia. Though the situations in Australia and Singapore are vastly different, we will show how this term now aptly applies to Singaporeans today.

References


