‘Touch’ Your Heritage: An Interactive Installation on Multilingual Identity

Ng Bee Chin¹, Tan Xue Er Cheryl¹, Francesco Cavallaro¹ and Halina Gottlieb²

¹Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

²Interactive Institute
Stockholm

Abstract – Using an online and touch screen interface, this paper explores language and cultural identity as a form of intangible heritage. The relationship between language and cultural identity has spawned several studies in various disciplines in the past few decades. This study represents a first attempt at visualising some of the issues relevant to cultural identity discussed by linguists, psychologists and cultural studies experts in an interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists and digital design heritage researchers and computer programmers. For the purpose of this study, an interactive program that centres on the issue of cultural identity, heritage and language was developed to engage participants. Via a touch screen, several prompts and triggers related to culture, identity and heritage were embedded for participants to choose. The engagement includes allowing the participants to emphasize one identity trait over another as well as minimising the less relevant traits. Participants explore their perception of others and themselves via touching and manipulating the onscreen text. These participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire that was designed to elicit their thoughts about the program and on the relationship between cultural identity and language. The findings indicate that the participants considered language to be a crucial element of their identity and heritage though the different ethnic groups attributed different reasons for this response. It affirmed the “Touch my heritage” multilingual identity programme as a successful way to engage participants to think about complex and abstract issues such as culture and identity.

Keywords – Intangible Heritage, Cultural Identity, Language, Youth, Diaspora

1 INTRODUCTION

Without taking an essentialist view about the relationship between language, culture, and identity, there is no doubt that researchers have long reported a strong connection between language and culture and between language and identity. A in depth discussion of this triadic relationship is beyond the scope of this paper but the authors here take the neo-Whorfian view that language is inseparable from culture and hence, it is impossible to speak of a language that is detached from cultural reference points. Though this may seem like a straightforward enough perspective to take, it is a philosophical debate that has shaped much of modern linguistics. In essence, to talk about Spanish (the language) is to talk about the cultural worldviews embraced by the larger community of Spanish speakers. Related to this is the idea of language playing an integral role in shaping cultural identity. While this is some times contested, our research adopts the view that language (though not essential) is a critical aspect of cultural identity and acknowledges that what constitute our identity can encompass many other variables apart from language. Pavlenko (2014) reiterates the importance of recognising the influences of language diversity on our perception and cautions against the loss of knowledge to the scientific community if we were to rely on one small set of speech communities for our studies.

2 AIMS / OBJECTIVES

One of the aims of this study is to evaluate Singaporeans’ awareness of the concept and importance of culture and language as intangible heritage. Specifically, this project aims to explore the relationship between language (a part of intangible heritage) and cultural identity. A program, which was presented on an interactive platform, was developed and utilised to collect data from Singaporeans. This project also aims to find out if there are any differences in the way the various ethnicities view the relationship between language and cultural identity.

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3 Culture, Identity, Language and Intangible Heritage

‘Intangible Heritage’ includes languages, performing arts such as dance and music, social practices, ceremonies, festivals, concepts or ideas that relate to the world and the technical know-how to create traditional handicrafts (UNESCO, 2003). ‘Intangible Heritage’ is argued to be integral to one’s cultural identity and recognising intangible heritage encourages respect for diversity of cultures, along with promoting human creativity (UNESCO, 2003). The development of this concept stemmed from the history of heritage preservation. In the past, there was a large focus on preserving tangible heritage such as architecture, especially after wars as these events are the main reasons as to why there was a loss of such precious monuments. However, in the last decade, it was acknowledged that if left unchecked, there would be an extensive loss of traditional cultures, oral traditions and performances. This phenomenon was largely attributed to urbanization and adoption of global mass culture (Ruggles & Silverman, 2009). More importantly, with the UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage, ‘Language’ was also officially recognised as a critical component of intangible heritage. In Article 2, the convention identified “oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage”.

So what is cultural identity and how does language relate to it? First, it is crucial to understand what this paper refers to as ‘identity’. As Joseph (2004:1) succinctly puts it, ‘your identity is who you are’. He argues that one’s identity consists of two parts. The first is your name and the second is the deeper and more imperceptible part of yourself. The more difficult question to answer is “What is this “deeper and imperceptible part”? Woodward (2000) argued that identity is not inborn. It is developed from our daily interactions, through a series of identifications which merge to form an individual who is made up of several identities at once. Here, identification is defined as ‘the psychological process of association between oneself and something else (originally someone else)’ (Woodward, 2000:16). From this, one can deduce that our identity is formed through the process of socialisation. The tool that is used to socialise with others is thus an important point to consider.

Recall that language is an instrument that is used daily for the purpose of communication (Butler, 2003). Language, as defined by Chimisso (2003), is a system of signs that is used to represent our surroundings, allows us to talk about our experiences and converse with others who share the same language. It allows us to differentiate between different objects in our environments as they have dissimilar names. Hence, language permits us to place ourselves in a physical world that we can relate to (identify with) (Chimisso, 2003). Chimisso further defines language as the product of the collective attitudes and values of a particular group and the fact that some ideas are easily conceptualised in one language but not another is cited as evidence of the cultural production of language. This perspective is by no means novel. This idea was put forward by Sapir (1923), and later by Whorf (1956). More often referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in its simplest form, it states that the language we speak will influence our perception of the world. The evidence to support this line of thinking in linguistics is robust.

This strongly correlates to the idea of cultural identity which refers to culture that is shared collectively among people whose ancestry and histories are of common origin (Braziel & Mannur, 2003). This can also be seen from another angle. People who share a common culture (common ancestry/origin) are likely to be able to communicate with each other and hence, share a common language (Kitayama & Cohen, 2007). Others, like Lee (2003), take it one step further and argue that language is the most important factor in culture acquisition, transmission and expression. According to her, the reverse is also true. When there is no culture, there is no language. And indeed, one of the clearest sign of language death is the cessation of cultural transmission – the intergenerational passing down of language.

Hence, if language is a part of culture, the reverse may also be true. Like Joseph (2004) has argued, because we use it daily, language inevitably becomes a part of who we are. From the above claims, it seems clear that no matter which perspective one chooses to look at the issue, language and culture are inseparable. While there are various studies that have looked at this issue, none have actively engaged participants to construct their identity and address the various concerns as they are involved in the study. Most studies try to uncover the participants’ cultural alignment or identity adherence through a covert or indirect approach. Using an open approach, the participants in this study are not naïve of the aim of the “game”. In fact, they were told that they will play a game on discovering their own identity and through the game, they will be asked to reflect on what makes them who they are. Hence, the study allows for reflection along the way and the participants also have the satisfaction of viewing the finished product - “the construction of their identity”.

4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study are from Singapore. The inhabitants of Singapore are from three major ethnic groups – the Malay Singaporeans, the Chinese Singaporeans and the Indian Singaporeans. The Malays are the indigenous population and the Indians and Chinese are members of a large diaspora with ancestors from India and China stretching all the way
back to the 15th century though most are fourth or fifth generation Singaporeans. A diaspora, as defined by Vertovec (1997), is the term that is used to represent any population of individuals that is residing in an area different from where they originated. The locus of this project is in Singapore, a multi-racial country that is located in South-east Asia (Pinxten & Preckler, 2006). Due to this island’s feature as a ‘polyglot migrant world’ (Ma & Cartier, 2003:194), it is interesting to see how the cultural identities of the Chinese, Malay and Indian diasporas have developed and how these groups’ identities are intertwined with their languages in a different setting. Singapore, as quoted from Harper (1997:261) is ‘a child of diaspora’. In the nineteenth and earlier parts of the twentieth centuries, Singapore became the home of immigrants from China, Malaysia and India. Currently, Singapore’s ethnic composition is as follows: 76.8% Chinese, 13.9% Malay, 7.9% Indians and 1.4% Others (Department of Statistics, 2010; and see Cavallaro and Ng 2014). As discussed, one’s identity is formed from one’s interaction with their environment. Hence, a displacement from one home country can imply a reformation of one’s identity. As Gilroy (2000:129) has argued, diasporic identities are often ‘creolized, syncretised and hybridized’. Hence, it would not be unusual for the identities of individuals living in diasporas to be different from the identities of those individuals who had remained in their home countries. Other questions follow from this assumption. How are the identities of Chinese Singaporeans different from that of a Chinese in China? Are the identities of Malay Singaporeans any different from Malays who live in Malaysia?

Tong & Chan (2001) provided an excellent review of how Chinese Singaporeans view themselves. Most of the participants in his study believe that a crucial part about being Chinese is to ‘look’ Chinese. Religion, Chinese language and thus, culture, play a secondary role. The author reasoned that this could be because the Chinese in Singapore are becoming less proficient in Chinese languages and are also less involved in Chinese religions. Hence, to them, religion and language are not important markers of ethnic identity. It seems to imply that dissimilarities (such as language and religion) that develop among the people in a population can lead to changes in how people view what it means to be of a certain ethnicity. Although it is important to note that the Chinese population is Singapore is made up of several sub-communities such as the Hokkien, Teochew and Hakka communities, each speaking their own Chinese vernacular, recent evidence shows that they are gradually adopting a homogenous Chinese identity (Tan & Ng, 2010). In China, there seemed to be other prerequisites to be ‘Chinese’. To them, Chinese are those of the same “race, blood and culture.” (Huntington, 2003). Naturally, researchers nowadays no longer subscribe to such archaic categories but it is interesting to see that it still exists in the imagination of the public.

Malays in Singapore, on the other hand, are radically different from their Chinese counterparts (see Cavallaro and Serwe 2010 for an in-depth look at the Malays in Singapore). Malays in both Singapore and Malaysia feel that to be a Malay, one needs to speak Malay, practice Malay customs and be of the Islamic religion. To these individuals, missing one out means you are no longer Malay (Zuber, 2010). Yusof (as cited in Aljunied, 2006) provided evidence of how the Malay language has become a marker of the Malay ethnic identity where the usage of certain expressions in the Malay language is dictated by one’s position in the Malay community. These studies provide evidence of how the Malay language is important in what it means to be Malay in Singapore.

There is far less information on the how Indians in Singapore viewed the relationship between language and cultural identity. Rai (2004) argues that the Indian diaspora in Singapore could be similar to the Indians in India. The author argues that like in India, there exist a North-South divide among Indians in Singapore. However, assuming that this divide is due primarily to the present divide in India, it is unclear if this divide is maintained in the host country (Singapore). Rai (2004) also claims that identities in diaspora are constantly being refashioned by the local situation.

From the studies above, it can be seen that the new host environment in diasporas can either encourage or discourage changes in identities, depending on circumstances that are relative to each ethnic group. This is true of Singapore where, despite being placed in the same physical environment, the Chinese have a very different attitude to their language compared to the Malays. Given the length of time (50-600 years), we can definitely expect the language ecology and the language world to have moulded the inhabitants in this diaspora (Bolton 2013). These immigrants and their descendants will have different histories, different environments and ultimately, different identities.

**5 METHODOLOGY**

A web-based program was developed and used to collect data in this project. 30 Singaporeans were asked to “play” the program on a touch screen (Samsung tablet and desk top) at least once. These Singaporeans were aged between 18 and 50. There were 20 Chinese (16 females, 4 males), 6 Malays (all female) with one of them being quarter Dutch and 4 Indians (all female).

The aim of the program is to create a cultural profile collage, made up of words, of an image of a person (one of three) that is shown on the screen. First, the player is required to pick one person out of three that are available.
Once the person/character has been selected, the player is instructed to choose 15 words out of 72 available.

The 72 words were culled from 20 essays written by students about their culture and their identity. These students were told to specifically answer the question of what makes them who they are and to recount stories that define the person that they are today. From these essays, a total of 232 keywords were selected by a team of five research assistants. These words were then cross-referenced and co-indexed and ranked individually by all the research assistants. From this long list, a shorter list of 72 words were selected and it is these 72 words that were presented to the participants.

The 15 words chosen represent the player’s best guesses of what might describe their character’s cultural profile. Subsequently, the player is instructed to resize the words according to their importance. They are able to increase the size by five times or reduce the size two folds. They can also drag and pull the word into a different space (Figure 1). Once this step has been completed, the player is allowed to look at the actual cultural word profile of the character or choose another character and play another round. The purpose of the program is to trigger the participants’ thoughts about heritage, cultural identity and language before they attempt the questionnaire.

Next, the players were invited to create their own personal identity profile using the same set of words. The entire process is repeated and the participants can print the final created profile to take away. An example of the profile can be seen in Figure 2.
Lastly, the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to elicit the participants’ demographic details, and their thoughts on language preservation, their personal cultural profiles, and on how their language relates to their cultural identity and heritage. They were also asked to evaluate the ‘game’ and to comment on how they were engaged through the interaction.

6 RESULTS

Chinese Singaporeans

The participants were asked whether their language is considered an integral component of their heritage or not. Results were very consistent where all of the Chinese participants agreed that language is indeed important to one’s heritage. Some participants (Participant No.X = PX) began their answers by reasoning that language is important as it is a form of communication.

“(Language) is more than just a form of communication…” –P3

This is important because the fact that language is a communication tool is what allows the following statements to be valid. These statements are the reasons that participants gave in response to why they think language is considered a part of their heritage. One of the commonly cited reasons was that it allows inter-generational communication.

“With language, information about our culture can also be passed down from generation to generation, which aids in the preservation of our heritage.” – P7

This reason is important to the discussion of heritage because inter-generational communication is a necessary component in the passing down of a culture’s values, beliefs and ideas.

“As language is of everyday use, it is part and parcel of the life our ancestors led. I feel that it is ... carries the characteristics of the lifestyles, traditions and beliefs of the past.” – P20

“A lot of values are also passed through languages as well as point of views and perspectives.” – P9

Another commonly cited reason was that language helps to understand the past/origin of one’s culture.

“It is important to understand language such that we can understand how it has affected our cultures as an inherent component.” – P6
“Example, Chinese characters reveal the Chinese’s way of thinking and life” – P14

Another reason that was cited was because language grants individuals membership to a community.

“We tend to be able to identify ourselves more with people who speak the same language as compared to others who do not.” – P19

“With language, we are able to communicate with people of the same ethnic groups and being able to converse in the same language creates a closeness and intimacy between people.” – P22

Others also reasoned that language is important in one’s heritage because it shows each culture’s distinctive and unique characteristics.

“There are certain aspects that cannot be found in other languages.” – P21

In conclusion, the Chinese Singaporean participants show that there have four ways in which their language is linked to heritage. Language allows intergenerational communication, the understanding of past/origin of culture, grants individuals membership to a(n) (ethnic) community and contains attributes that helps to distinguish one culture from another.

Questions on language preservation also revealed that Chinese participants can be divided neatly into two camps. One half of the Chinese participants (P3, P7, P2, P3 and more) revealed that Chinese vernaculars (referred to as “dialects”) such as Hokkien and Hakka should be preserved. A reason for this was because they claimed that these vernaculars in Singapore are dying out.

“Chinese dialects (should be preserved), mainly because of the declining population of speakers.” – P19

The other half (P10, P14, P22 and more) claimed that all languages should be preserved.

“All languages should be preserved as each one is special in its own unique way.” – P27

**Malay Singapouranes**

In general, Malay participants seemed to agree with the Chinese participants on many fronts. They agreed that language allows communication between generations (P11), understanding of past/origin of culture (P1), grants individuals membership to a(n) (ethnic) community (P24) and contains attributes that helps to distinguish one culture from another (P23).

However, there was one striking claim made by P13.

“I feel that being Malay, there is a certain standard of conversation of Malay that I need to know as part of being Malay.” – P13

P24 also claimed something similar.

“Without speaking that particular language, you cannot fully belong to that culture which speaks that language.” – P24

It seems that in a Singaporean Malay context, the level of proficiency of the Malay that one speaks is also important when it comes to being ‘Malay’. This is not reflected in the answers of the Chinese participants even though the sample size of Chinese participants is larger than that of the Malay participants.

At this point, it will be interesting to note that P5, who is a quarter Dutch chose to identify herself as a Malay. However, it should be noted that she is the only individual out of thirty to claim that language is not considered part of her heritage. Her exact words are, “No. I don’t speak/comprehend the language.” This statement seems to support the point made above that one needs to speak the language (and speak it well) for it to be part of the Singaporean Malay identity.

**Indian Singaporeans**

The answers of Indian participants were quite different from those of the Chinese and Malay Singaporeans. Instead of giving reasons such as intergenerational communication and granting membership to ethical communities, they claimed that language is important because it is a way of communication that reflects their heritage. This is in contrast with the Chinese and Malay participants.

“It (Language) reflects our cultural and historical background…” – P30

The participants also gave cultural terms as examples to substantiate their claims.

“My language allows me to understand certain concepts which are not found in the English language.” – P29

“Even in cultural festivals and shows, they try to speak in English but a lot of terms are spoken in Tamil.” – P30
For Singaporean Indians, the role language plays is more nebulous. While participants clearly see language as significant, it seemed more emphasis is placed on “way of speaking” as a form of identification.

Comments about the touch screen game and the online interface

The comments about the game were overwhelmingly positive. Various participants pointed out that the interface prompted them to reflect upon themselves. They particularly liked to be able to collect their own profile. However, they also pointed out that they were not able to find many words that they would have liked to use for themselves and found it frustrating to have to be locked into the list of 72. We have addressed this issue and in the current programme, we allow players to submit other words that they feel are better suited for them.

The current programme is available online and can be accessed on http://diha.ntu.edu.sg/projectvisual6.html.

7 DISCUSSION

The Relationship between Language and Heritage/Cultural Identity

There are four main ways in which the participants viewed the relationship between language and heritage/cultural identity. It should be noted that each reason seems to link language and heritage in different ways.

The first reason (provided by Chinese and Malay participants), intergenerational communication, relies on the fact that language is a communication tool. Knowledge of one’s heritage is usually held by the seniors of a community. Hence, to pass on that knowledge to the next generation, a communication tool such as language is needed. Usually, this language is also the culture’s language. Hence, this explains how language plays a role in preserving one’s heritage.

The second reason, the understanding of past/origin of culture seems to hint at the possibility that there are some things about one’s culture that cannot be learnt through intergenerational communication but is only possible through language. For example, one of the participants claimed that it is possible to learn more about their past ancestors by examining the Chinese characters. This claim seems to be making reference to how writing systems can act as crucial keys to understanding one’s culture. For example, Egyptian hieroglyphics have long been known to hold crucial information as to how Egyptians lived in the past (Sharpe, 2010). In other words, while language enables communication between two adjacent generations, it can also allow communication across generations that are not adjacent to each other. The above two points show how language is crucial in allowing cultural transmission, a point that was argued by Lee (2003).

However, is it possible to transmit culture through a language that does not belong to the same culture? The Indian participants argued that because cultural terms are hard to translate and that some concepts only exist in one language and not others. This indicates that they believe transmission of culture can only be carried out using that culture’s language.

The third reason, granting ethnical membership to an individual seems to place emphasis on the argument that while language is a communication tool, it is only useful if a group of people share the same language. Language seems to ‘grant membership’ by allowing these individuals to communicate with those of the same ethnicity. Hence, in this context, language allows the building of relationships and levels of understanding between individuals of the same ethnic community. In brief, language allows communication to occur between those that share the same heritage.

The last reason provided by all the participants is how language contains attributes that help to distinguish one culture from another. By claiming that different languages have distinctive features, these participants feel that their languages are unique in some way. Thus, this uniqueness gives value to the language and possibly, by extension, their heritage. It is also possible that these participants and others use language to distinguish themselves from others that do not speak the same language.

However, there is one argument that seems to be used exclusively by the Malay participants. For the Malay participants, level of proficiency, seems to be a crucial component of what it means to be Malay. It alludes to the possibility that perhaps, in the Malay community, language competence is more highly valued.

P5, who is quarter Dutch and three-quarters Boyanese (Malay) is an interesting participant in the sample. Due to her not being able to speak her ancestral languages, language does not seem to play a significant role in her heritage. In contrast, many participants in Tan and Ng (2010) expressed regret about not knowing or having lost the language(s) spoken by their grandparents. Clearly, some people feel the loss more than others.

On Language Preservation
In this section, only the answers from the Chinese participants will be considered as the small number of participants from the other ethnic groups does not allow a substantive analysis.

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