Language Use and Identity
Across Generations in Singapore

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1. Language policy in Singapore

Singaporean schools were using any one of Singapore's official languages, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil or English, as medium of instruction until the 1956 *All Party Report on Chinese Education* pushed for greater emphasis on English in addition to pupils' mother tongues. This led to a gradual decrease in enrollment in schools with Chinese, Malay and Tamil as languages of instruction and increased enrollment in English-medium schools. In 1987, English was made the medium of instruction in all schools, along with mandatory study of a second 'ethnic' language: Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. In addition, the Speak Mandarin campaign was launched in 1979 to discourage the use of non-Mandarin Chinese languages (or 'dialects' as they are known in Singapore) and promote the use of Mandarin among Chinese Singaporeans. The government contended that dialect use fragmented the Chinese community, whereas Mandarin would play a unifying role. Gopinathan (1994) suggests that the Speak Mandarin policy was also the result of the government's fear that if dialects were allowed to persist, English would eventually become the lingua franca among Chinese Singaporeans.

Kuo and Jernudd (1994) call Singapore's language policy one of 'pragmatic multilingualism' as it prescribes the use of four official languages, each of which enjoys equal de jure status with the others. Though it is spoken by a minority of Singaporeans, Malay has the sole designation as national language owing to Singapore's political history and geographical location. Mandarin Chinese, although not the
mother tongue of the majority of Chinese in Singapore, represents Singapore’s largest ethnic group because of its association with Chinese culture and traditions and its value as a language of commerce. Tamil is the language which represents the Indian community, although only about 64 percent of those classified as Indian are of Tamil origin and only 54 percent use Tamil as a principal family language (p. 26). English, the only official language without an Asian origin, is referred to as a ‘working language,’ as opposed to the other three languages which are known as ‘mother tongues.’ This results in an official policy which promotes a Singapore ‘kept open and progressive through the use of English in education, entertainment, industry and commerce, at the same time as it is kept ‘culturally’ on a course of communicating cherished Asian values, mainly through the use of ethnic languages.’ (p. 30).

Chew (1980) reviewed Hassan’s 1977 survey of oral-aural multilingualism and national identity, concluding that ‘bilingualism is conducive to the fostering of a Singaporean national identity as group distinctiveness becomes increasingly eroded by various processes of structural and communicative integration.’ (p. 252) His prediction at that time was that as a result of compulsory bilingualism, English would become the nation’s lingua franca, giving rise to a Singaporean culture made up of both Asian and Western values and norms.

Beardsmore (1994) discusses some of the effects of the recent shift to English as the main language of inter-group communication in Singapore and the shift from Chinese ‘dialects’ to Mandarin among the Chinese population. He observes that intergenerational differences in language use and in cultural values have become apparent and concludes that ‘the linguistic heterogeneity of intergenerational family units may bring in its wake a cultural mosaic . . . cultural perceptions as well as linguistic profiles may vary across generations.’ (p. 49)
2. A study of language use and identity across generations in Singapore

In an effort to gather data on intergenerational differences in language use and identity among Singaporeans, 75 students at Nanyang Technological University were asked to complete questionnaires on language use and identity across generations within their families. (The survey questionnaire is provided in the Appendix.) Students were asked to list the languages they use in the order of their importance, indicating where and to whom they are used. In addition, the students were asked to choose three terms (such as 'Chinese', 'Hokkien', 'Singaporean', or 'Asian') that they would use to describe themselves, again in order of importance. The students then interviewed their parents and any living grandparents in order to complete the questionnaire for these generations.

The data was entered using a spreadsheet program and imported into SPSS/RC+ for statistical analysis. Frequencies were computed for the respondents' main languages, reading languages and preferred identities. Main languages were then correlated with preferred identities. Cross-tabulation tables were generated for main language by preferred identity for all respondents.

3. Findings

Analysis of the data reveals that compulsory bilingual education and the accompanying shifts from 'ethnic' languages to English and from Chinese 'dialects' to Mandarin correlate with shifts in language use and identity across generations within Singaporean families.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show generational shifts in what respondents consider to be their main languages:
Table 1: Main Language of Grandparents

Note: 72 grandparents responded to this question. Actual numbers were:

- Mandarin: 3
- Chinese dialect: 54
- Malay: 12
- Tamil: 3