

# Singapore: A Multilingual, Multiethnic Country

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## Introduction

An English-speaking tourist visiting the country of Singapore would feel at ease from the moment he/she stepped off the plane. All of the airport directional signs are in English, street signs are in English and, most people would be able to understand his English. For the most part Singapore functions in English (Hoe, 1989). What would be difficult for the visitor is to understand the extremely hurried speech of most Singaporeans, which sounds a bit like English, but is meaningless to an outsider. This laid-back language commonly spoken is known as Singlish. Singlish is

a distinctive variant (some would say perversion) of colonial English. In essence it is an English whose syntax and vocabulary have not only been invaded, but in some cases subjugated by Hokkien and Malay. It is not simply a difference in accent, pronunciation or vocabulary. Nor is it just poor, contracted English. It is all of these in different measures, spoken differently by different people in different contexts and, in many cases, quite unintelligible to a non-Singlish-speaking person (Hoe, 1989, p.154).

In Singlish, 'Where got?' sounds like a question, but is used as an expression of disbelief or denial. 'Can' means able, but also means 'yes' when spoken with finality. A shopkeeper will say 'Kairh ai hep choo?' (Can I help you?) if you seem interested in the merchandise. If a house or section of road is 'dirty,' it is actually haunted. The phrase 'Is it?' is commonly used to express sarcasm, horror, wonderment, uncertainty, or polite disbelief. 'Is it?' usually stands alone or is placed at the end of a sentence. 'You can drop here' translates as 'You can get out here.' (Hoe, 1989). The Singaporean government does not approve of Singlish and promotes the use of Standard English. In a recent interview printed in *The Straits Times*, Senior Minister Lee Kaun Yew said, "It [Singlish] perpetuates a debased form of the language which does not do us any good. It is interesting for linguistic scholars but of no value to the community" (The Straits Times Interactive, June 12, 2000).

It is not surprising that Singlish has developed into a widely spoken language in Singapore. The Republic of Singapore is a small multilingual, multiethnic country comprising of one main island and fifty nearby islands just south of the Malay Peninsula. Over the past 20 years Singapore has become a very modern, economically successful country. The considerable use of English has brought Singapore much of its success and wealth. English is the working language of Singapore and considered to be the country's lingua franca. Due to heavy immigration during its early years, Singapore today has a very diverse population. This diverse population is experiencing a tremendous language shift towards English and it is occurring rapidly within a few generations. Although Singapore has four official national languages, English is one of the privileged languages and will continue to gain more and more speakers within public and family domains.

## Historical Background and Early Immigrants

Although Singapore's history dates earlier, what is most significant is when Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles landed at Singapore in January of 1819. Upon arriving on the island, Raffles found a small settlement of 150 people. He purchased the island as a trading settlement for the (English) East India Company from the sea lord, Abdul Rahman. Almost instantly Singapore became a thriving seaport. In 1826 Singapore became part of the Straits Settlement along with Penang and Malacca as an outlying residency of the British East India Company. In 1867, Singapore along with the rest of the Straits Settlement became a British Crown Colony. (Encyclopedia Britannica Online)

Immigrants from China, India, the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian islands were among the first to arrive in Singapore as its seaport became established. The British rule and new trade opportunities in Singapore caused many to emigrate from China. The Chinese often arrived in debt and were exploited as laborers. Indian immigrants came initially as soldiers with Raffles. Opportunity for employment as government clerks, technicians, teachers, and traders encouraged Indian immigration into Singapore from nearby Penang, India, and Sri Lanka. In 1823, Singapore became a penal station and Indian convicts were used as laborers to construct buildings, roads, and bridges. (Singapore Infomap)

Prior to 1860, Singapore's population was calculated by a head count usually conducted by the police. In 1860 the first official census was completed and the population was recorded as 80,792. Initially, Singapore was comprised primarily of Malays, but the Chinese soon became the dominant group.

In 1824, the population [of Singapore] numbered 10,683 – of which 60 percent were Malays, 31 percent Chinese, and 7 percent Indians. By 1830, however, the Chinese had become the largest single ethnic component of the population, a demographic pattern which has continued to this day. By 1867, the Chinese community had swelled to 65 percent of the population, numbering 55,000. The number of Chinese migrant arrivals varied from year to year – for example, 50,000 in 1880 and 250,000 in 1912. The Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese, and Hakkas were the four major dialect groups. From the beginning, Hokkiens dominated Singapore's commercial life, followed closely by Teochews. The Cantonese were generally engaged in agriculture, but some were artisans, carpenters, tailors, and goldsmiths. (Singapore Infomap)

## British Colonialism

Singapore's prosperity grew with development of the steamship and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Tin and rubber became chief exports of Southeast Asia making Singapore one of the world's major ports. In 1921 the British constructed a large naval base, which was captured by the Japanese during World War II. The Japanese had control of the island from February of 1942 to September of 1945. (Encyclopedia Britannica Online)

Singapore became a separate British Crown Colony in 1946 when the Straits Settlements was dissolved. In 1959 Singapore became self-governing although Great Britain continued to control Singapore's

defense and foreign policy. In 1963, it joined the Federation of Malaya, Sabah, and Sarawak to form Malaysia. Singapore became an independent republic when it separated from Malaysia in August of 1965. Although Singapore's Independence Day is August 9, 1965, the British continued to have a military presence in the country until the end of 1971. (Encyclopedia Britannica Online)

## Language Planning During Colonial Transition

The British colonial authorities had very little interest in language planning and education beyond providing free primary education in the Malay language for ethnic Malays (Tan, 1997). It wasn't until Singapore was in the midst of colonial transition did changes in its educational policy occur. In 1946, the government provided free primary education in the four main languages – Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English. In 1955 the government recommended that each of the four main languages be treated equally. In 1956 Singapore developed its official bilingual policy recommending English and a mother tongue for all primary schools and trilingualism (adding Malay) for all secondary schools (Parkir, 1993). "The English language was to be retained as an important economic language and lingua franca. At the same time, the study of Chinese, Malay or Tamil, now termed mother tongues, was deemed crucial to the preservation of 'traditional values'." (Tan, 1997, p. 306)

Today, the government English-medium school system provides education for most students. The private schools in Singapore are typically for non-citizens or for those who have failed within the government schools (Gutpa, 1997). Within the English-medium schools, students must study the language assigned to their ethnic group as a subject. Therefore, Chinese study Mandarin, the Malays study Malay, and the Indians study Tamil (Gupta, 1997) even if the language is not the student's mother-tongue. Very few have the opportunity to learn a third language (German, French, or Japanese) or learn one of the other ethnic languages. Gupta (1997) argues that a policy of mother-tongue education in Singapore "would definitely be seen as denial of access to the languages of privilege" (p. 505). Most parents agree to this form of education, because their primary concern is their children's success in school. Just as the government desired, the privileged languages are seen as avenues towards personal success and upward social mobility.

## Current Sociolinguistic Situation

According to the Singapore Department of Statistics (1999), Singapore's population in 1990 was 3,016,400 and the mid-year estimates for 1998 were 3,865,600. The ethnic distribution in 1998 was 77.0% Chinese, 14.0 % Malays, 7.6% Indians, and 1.4% others. None of the three major ethnic communities is homogeneous. Within the Chinese community there are ten dialect groups, the largest being Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, and Hakka (Cheah, 1997). The Malay population is more homogenous, but the Javanese and Boyanese dialects can be found within its communities. The Indian dialects include Tamil, Malayam, Punjabi, Hindustani, Bengali and Gujerati. A total of twenty-six languages are spoken within Singapore (Grimes, 1996).

At the time of its independence, the Singaporean government designated four official national languages; English, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil and Malay each of equal status. "The three ethnic languages were

chosen to represent the ethnic diversity in Singapore while English was selected because it is an international language and is the language of trade, science and technology" (Cheah, 1997, p.3). Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay are considered official "mother tongues" while English is regarded as a "first language." However, both of these terms are used differently than what is expected from their linguistic definitions. Mandarin and Tamil were selected to represent the Chinese and Indian communities respectively, but neither are the first languages acquired by children. Within these two communities, the true mother tongue is one of the other various Chinese or Indian dialects. Only Malay can be considered a true mother tongue as most do acquire the language first. English is better described as the "first school language" rather than a "first language." Cheah (1997) states that in Singapore, English has the status, prestige, and usage of a first language and is used in a variety of domains: the official language, the working language, the lingua franca, the expression of national identity, the international language, and the language of the Christianity religion.

During the past twenty years, Singapore has seen a rise in its literacy rates. In 1980, the literacy level was 84% and increased to 90% in 1990. The estimated literacy rate for 1998 was 93.1%. More Singapore residents have become multilingual. The 1990 Census revealed that 47% are literate in two or more languages, which is an increase from 34% in 1980. (Cheah, 1997).

## **English-knowing Bilingualism**

It was the British who first brought English to Singapore, but it was the Singaporean government who transformed the colonial language into a widely accepted national language.

Between the early 1970s and late 1980s, English became identified as a link between ethnic groups and more importantly, "as a source of economically valuable knowledge and technology" (Wei, Saravanan, & Hoon, 1997, p. 369). The use of dialects in public became discouraged. The government persuaded its people that English would provide access to world markets and provide people with better living standards. The economic growth that Singapore experienced since the 1980s proved that knowledge of the English language could provide opportunities for the country as well as the individual (Wei, Saravanan, & Hoon).

This wide acceptance of English is causing many Singaporeans to be better known as 'English-knowing' bilinguals. Parkir (1993) describes this type of bilingualism as having knowledge of an international language and that in Singapore; English is the "cornerstone...towards bilingual achievement" (p.74). To be bilingual in Singapore today is having proficiency in English and another national language. In a survey of undergraduate students, Parkir (1993) found that the verbal repertoire of Singaporean Chinese student usually includes English, Mandarin, and a native Chinese dialect. It may also include another Chinese dialect, a foreign language (French, German, Japanese) or Malay. (Parkir, 1993)

## **Speak Mandarin Campaign**

Along with English, Mandarin is also viewed as a privileged language. This is due mostly in part to The Speak Mandarin Campaign that was founded by former Prime Minister Mr. Lee Kaun Yew. The

Campaign, which began in 1979, was initiated for two reasons, educational and social. Educationally, it complemented Singapore's bilingual policy by stating that English is important as a global language while Mandarin "facilitates the role of transmitting the cultural values and traditions of ethnic Chinese" (Speak Mandarin Campaign, p.1). Socially, Mandarin can allow for effective communication between Chinese Singaporeans of different dialect groups since it is more widely used and has a written script. The Speak Mandarin Campaign is an annual event encouraging Chinese to speak more Mandarin through the use of mass media, telephone Mandarin lessons, courses, and film festivals.

The Campaign has proven to be successful. The 1990 Census showed an increase from 13% in 1980 to 30% of Chinese homes using Mandarin as the dominant language. The use of dialects in the home fell from 76% to 48%. Mandarin is also being used more frequently in the workplace. At the same time however, the use of English as the predominant language in Chinese homes also increased from 10% to 21% in 1990. (Speak Mandarin Campaign) This increase in the use of English is a concern to Senior Minister Lee Kaun Yew who said that now thirty years later, the Campaign is only halfway to its Mandarin goal. In a recent interview printed in the Straits Times, Yew said,

We have to resist this trend and keep Mandarin as a living part of the Chinese community and not keep losing out as [people] upgrade from middle education to higher education. This is a big problem. The driving force is career prospects and success. If we don't keep [The Speak Mandarin Campaign] up, it may go down. If we keep it up, it may gradually improve in quality. (Wei, 2000)

## Language Shift and Attitudes

As stated earlier, Singapore is experiencing a language shift towards English and it is occurring rapidly at some level within all ethnic groups and. The Chinese and Indian groups are experiencing the shift most significantly while the extent of the shift is lesser within the Malayan population (Wei, Saravanan, & Hoon, 1997). The use of English among all Singaporeans as a home language increased to 20.3% in 1990 from 11.6% in 1980. Mandarin as a home language also increased to 26% in 1990 from 10.2 in 1980. The use of Chinese dialects fell to 36.7 % in 1990 compared to 59.5% in 1980 (Parkir, 1993). In their study of the Teochew Chinese community, Wei, Saravanan and Hoon (1997) found that this group as a whole has shifted from its ethnic language to one of Singapore's official national languages. "Mandarin and English are now used extensively in the family domain, which was previously occupied by Teochew" (p. 381). The factors that have contributed to this shift include government policies, language status, mass media support, age and generational differences, educational levels, attitudes, and socio-economic status. Gupta and Yeok (1995) found that "in Singapore the shift has been very fast, with, in many families, only one multilingual generation having access to the ancestral language. This has resulted in there being no common language between grandparents and their grandchildren" (p. 303). They attribute this shift primarily as the result of government encouragement of the use of English and Mandarin. The Malays are a more homogenous group and tend to continue to maintain the use of Malay in the home although there is some increased use of English during family activities (Saravanan, 1999).

English and Mandarin are viewed as the privileged languages in Singapore. Mandarin has a higher

prestige over Malay and Tamil because it represents the majority and due to the annual "Speak Mandarin Campaigns." Saravanan (1999) found that within Chinese families, English is preferred during all family activities. Malay families also prefer English for family activities; yet use Malay during times of interaction between family members. Tamil families use the Tamil language only for worship and English for all other family activities

What is interesting is the fact that the perceived low prestige of the dialects is only associated with the language and not the ethnic group in Singapore (Gupta & Yeok, 1995). Wei, Saravanan, and Hoon (1997) found in their study of Chinese Teochews that the majority felt that the ability to speak Teochew had very little to do with one's ethnic identity. They frequently heard comments such as these during their study:

I don't really feel anything if the Teochew language is lost. I don't have much opportunity to speak Teochew anyway. I think it is sufficient to be able to speak Mandarin and English.

I am Teochew. That's that. I was born Teochew. I can't change it. I don't speak the language but I am still Teochew. The Teochew language has not much use in society. So why waste time learning it? (p. 380)

Wei, Saravanan, & Hoon (1997) also found the perception of those not knowing English or Mandarin to be very negative.

A Singaporean born after the war who does not speak English is widely regarded as socially handicapped; his contribution to the nation very limited. Singaporean Chinese who do not speak Mandarin are seen as disloyal to their Chinese ancestry and are culturally deprived. (p. 380)

More and more, English and Mandarin dominate the public domains in Singapore and people feel little need to hang on to their dialects. English has even become a more prominent language for many families. It seems that Singaporeans have embraced the government's policy that English is the key to global and personal success.

## **Challenges for the Future**

As stated earlier Singaporean English, known more commonly as Singlish, seems to be more prevalent as Singaporeans increase their use of English. This type of language is certainly not within the government's goals or standards, but seems to be growing in popularity. With citizens having a verbal repertoire of many languages, the challenge for educators and the government will be to ensure that its people are effective bilinguals. Singapore needs bilinguals who are capable of communicating with one another and with the rest of the world. Parkir (1993) states, "Singapore cannot afford to not be a bilingual society" (p. 88). So, in this multilingual, multiethnic society, is English acting as a bridge between ethnic groups or should English be seen a threat to the various ancestral dialects? Cheah (1997) raises a similar concern, how much of a threat is English literacy to ethnic cultures and values? The Singaporean government has consistently maintained that English is the working language and it provides the link needed with the rest

of the world. Singapore's cultural identity and values are to be passed on to younger generations through the use of Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. How can cultural values be handed down when grandparents and grandchildren in some families cannot communicate with one another?

## Conclusion

Within Singapore, the use of English in both the public and family domains is increasing. As it is becoming more dominant, Singaporeans feel it is the only language with practical value and English-knowing professions have prestige (Schiffman, 1993). Singaporeans have accepted the government's language policy and its bilingual education policy, because they are seeing the benefits of speaking an international language. What is good for the individual is also proving to be very profitable for the country. This very small country has a strong position within the world's global market and it was through the use of English that Singapore achieved its economic success. In order to continue experiencing economic growth and success into the twenty-first century, the English language will need to remain prominent within the Singaporean society.

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