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Singapore Voices: an interactive installation about languages to (re)(dis)cover the intergenerational distance

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Singapore Voices is an interactive installation, integrating sound and image in a series of touch-sensitive displays. Each display shows the portrait of an elderly person, standing with the hand turned outwards, as if saying: "I built this nation". Two displays can be seen in Figure 1 below. When the visitor touches the hand or shoulder, they hear a recording of the speaker's voice. Chances are that the visitor will not be able to understand the language spoken, but she or he will indeed grasp much of all that is, in a manner of speaking, "outside" of the words - elements of prosody such as phrasing and speech rhythm, but also voice colour that may hint at the emotional state of the person. Then there is coughing, laughing, a hand clap and so forth. Such paralingual elements of vocal communication are extremely important and furthermore, their meaning is quite universal.

The present article presents the language situation in Singapore, the design and underlying aesthetics of the installation's sonic interactivity, and finally, recapitulates some of the media discussions that the first public showing, in March 2009, engaged. Part of an art and speech research project, the installation aims at bringing attention to the multitude of languages that Singaporeans use on a daily basis, but also the fragility of this linguistic soundscape. It is well-known that language is key to understanding an intangible cultural heritage linked to an immigrant minority: not only that of its geographical origins, but also its communal experience of migration, of diaspora, of integration. Much of this heritage is in great danger of being lost in Singapore. The installation presents eight voices: speakers of Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, Hakka, Telegu, Tamil, Malayalam and Baba Malay. They are telling their own stories about childhood, life during the war, cooking methods and recipes, and so forth. The custodians of these languages are now in their 70s and 80s, and ***Singapore Voices*** places them in focus as individuals. Through the interactive experience of the installation, visitors are able to rediscover the intergenerational distance through listening to and physically feeling their voices. In a condensed setting, they can experience and appreciate a part of Singapore's rich cultural heritage.

The interaction design is built from a principle where different combinations of touching trigger selected excerpts from interviews. As the voices speak, the whole display vibrates with the sound, and in this way, *touching* becomes a metaphor for the necessary effort, on our part, to re-establish contact between generations: necessary, if we want to understand the richness of the culture we are living in. ***Singapore Voices*** lets the visitor sense the individuality, and musicality, of the voices.

Figure 1. Two displays from **Singapore Voices**, *with Joel Yuan's portraits of Mr Choo Mok Chin, speaker of Hakka and Mme Tan Cheng Hwee, speaker of Teochew, Photo taken at the exhibition at Nanyang Executive Centre, Nanyang Technological University, by Martin Reiser. Reprinted with permission.*

Background of the project

The concept for the work came up in October 2008 when I proposed to Ng Bee Chin the creation of a sound installation about politicians' voices for a conference at Nanyang Technological University arranged by the Division of Linguistics and Multilinguistics. Instead of using voices of politicians, she suggested that we work with speakers of Singaporean minority languages. Together with her colleagues and students, Ng arranged a series of interview sessions, which were recorded and videotaped. Joel Yuen, photographer and student at the School of Art, Design and Media, was engaged to do portrait photography. The Institute for Media Innovation provided funds, and Roeland Stulemeijer from the NTU Museum eventually joined, in the capacity as curator. The

concept shaped into a double project of language data gathering and exhibition design. A total of 11 interview sessions were conducted, from which a set of 8 were selected to provide material for ***Singapore Voices***.

Linguistic situation

Officially, Singapore has four languages: English, which is referred to as Singapore's "first" or "administrative" language; "Chinese" meaning Mandarin; Bahasa Malay, which is the "national language"; and Tamil. These are commonly referred to as the "CMIO" categorisation. Every Singaporean has one of the four letters C, M, I, or O in their passport and identity card to indicate which category they are registered in. Some of the confusion related to Singaporean cultural identity, hotly debated over the past decade, stems from the fact that the CMIO is an invention; it was a politically motivated compromise that was introduced to reduce linguistic, historic and ethnic complexities to something manageable.

Let us travel back in time - approximately two generations - to the heat of a process that was to take Singapore from a British colony to an independent nation. In the 1957 Census of Population, the CMIO was used to describe the resident population as follows: Chinese 75%, Malay 13.6%, Indian 8.8%, and Others 2.4%. The figures have remained essentially identical in all census until today: the most recent Advance Census Release (SingStat 2010) indicates the following proportions: Chinese 74.1%, Malays 13.4% and Indians 9.2% and Others 3.3%. One may be led to assume that Singapore is an ethnically and linguistically settled society. However, the stability is illusory, as it hides the far-reaching language shift that has been going on *inside* the categories given. As will soon be clear, none of the four letters refers ubiquitously to a *language*, but rather to a spectrum of vocal communication modes, as well as ethnicities.

A more nuanced picture of Singapore language usage over the past 50 years has been presented by Cruz-Ferreira and Ng (2008). Figure 2 reveals a very heterogeneous linguistic makeup, in particular for the "Chinese" category. In 1957, a panoply of languages were in use: almost half of the Chinese identified themselves as Hokkien (or Hoklo), a diasporic group originating in Fujian in southeast China, and others self-reported as Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka, Hokchew and so forth. While some of these languages are rather close - for example, linguists generally classify Hokkien and Teochew as dialects of Southern Min, e.g. in (Katzner 2002) - they are considered mutually unintelligible with Mandarin. For example, the Wikipedia entry on Min Nan indicates that "Mandarin and Amoy Min Nan are 62% phonetically similar and 15.1% lexically similar… Amoy and Teochew are not mutually intelligible with Mandarin" (Wikipedia 2010), and another web resource, Glossika, gives a measure of mutual intelligibility between Minnan and Mandarin at 46.1%. Victor Mair estimates that Mandarin is almost as different from Taiwanese, also part of the Minnan group, as it is different from Cantonese (Mair 2003). We can also see that among the Malay, the standardised Bahasa was dominant already in 1957 but there were speakers of Bugis, Javanese and Boyanese around. As for the Indians, linguistically a more heterogenous group than the Malay, more than half spoke Tamil in 1957, almost a quarter Malayalam, and the rest Singhala, Hindi, Telugu, Punjabi and Urdu.

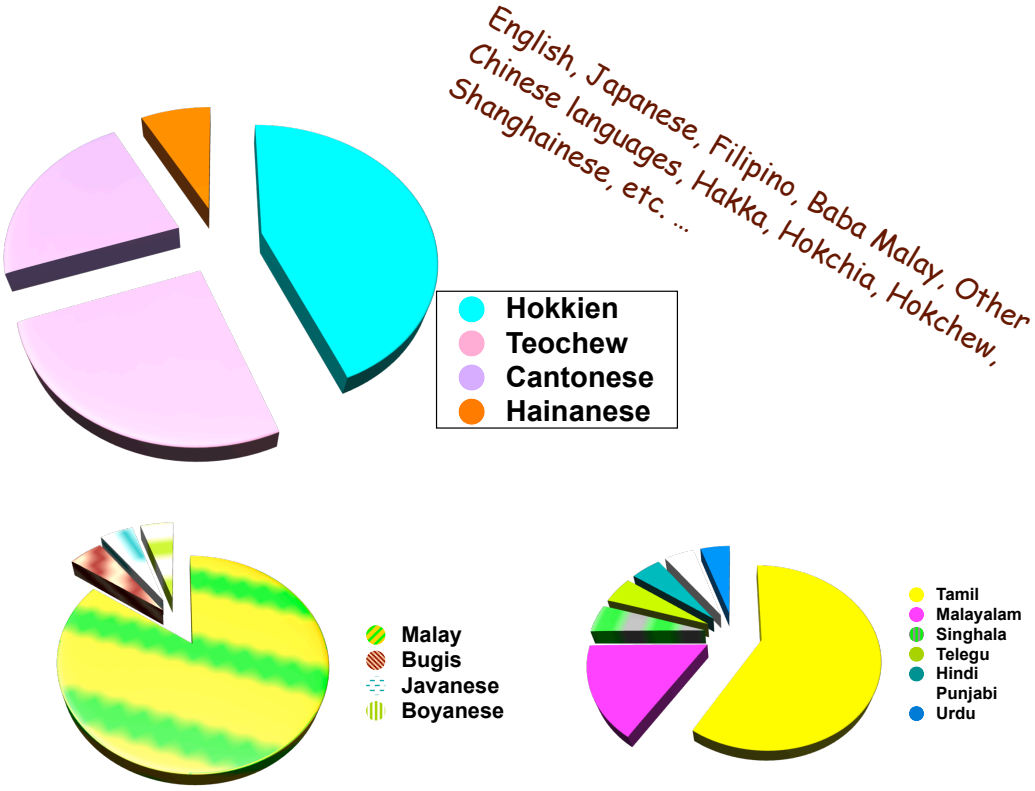

Figure 2. Languages in Singapore around 1957. Illustration from Cruz-Ferreira & Ng (2008), reprinted with permission.

It is thus clear that practically all of the people who were referred to as 'Chinese' in 1957 did not speak Mandarin at home, but other tongues, that linguistically are considered languages. At the time when modern Singapore was born, Hokkien was the *de facto* majority language. For economical and therefore political reasons, it was found that Mandarin should be promoted. It became easier to relegate Hokkien and several other languages to a secondary status if people could be taught to think of them as a "dialects" rather than as "languages". It should be noted that Mandarin uses the term *fang1yan2*[1] interchangeably for the English *language* and *dialect.* The English terms clearly signify different linguistic status, and thereby cultural value. It follows that the Chinese term is broader, and more ambivalent. This semantic nuance was, and still is, exploited politically. Vincent Mair, arguing the linguistic independence of Taiwanese from Mandarin, proposed that the term *fangyan* should be rendered in English as 'topolect', literally "place-speech", to precisely convey the Chinese meaning; he also called for a non-politicised and thorough reclassification of the sinitic languages across the board (Mair 2003).

In Singapore, politics have had great impact on language usage. Lee Kuan Yew has often stated that "our only natural resource is the people", and government policies have aimed to streamline formats of communication. In 1966, the "Bilingual Policy" was

[1] Numerals indicate tones.

declared. It has been vigourously implemented, in particular with the "Speak Mandarin Campaign", launched in 1979 (Promote Mandarin Council 2010), and the "Speak Good English Movement" launched in 2000 (Speak Good English Movement 2010). It is not easy to trace the development of minority languages, as most official statistical material employs only the CMIO. Even the otherwise probing qualitative analysis in the chapter about "successful aging" in *Understanding Singaporeans* (Kau, Tambyah, Tan & Jung 2004), where 20 people identified as "Chinese" had been interviewed on a range of issues, includes nothing about language usage. (For that matter, the book does not contain much about any aspect of cultural heritage, language or other.) By analysing census data in depth, Cruz-Ferreira and Ng were able to deduce information about use of other Chinese languages, as shown in Figure 3. As we can see, between 1960 and 2000, the number of households using other Chinese languages, such as Hokkien and Teochew, was reduced from well over 80% to 25%. Mandarin effectively overtook the cumulative use of all the other Chinese languages in family environments around 1995.

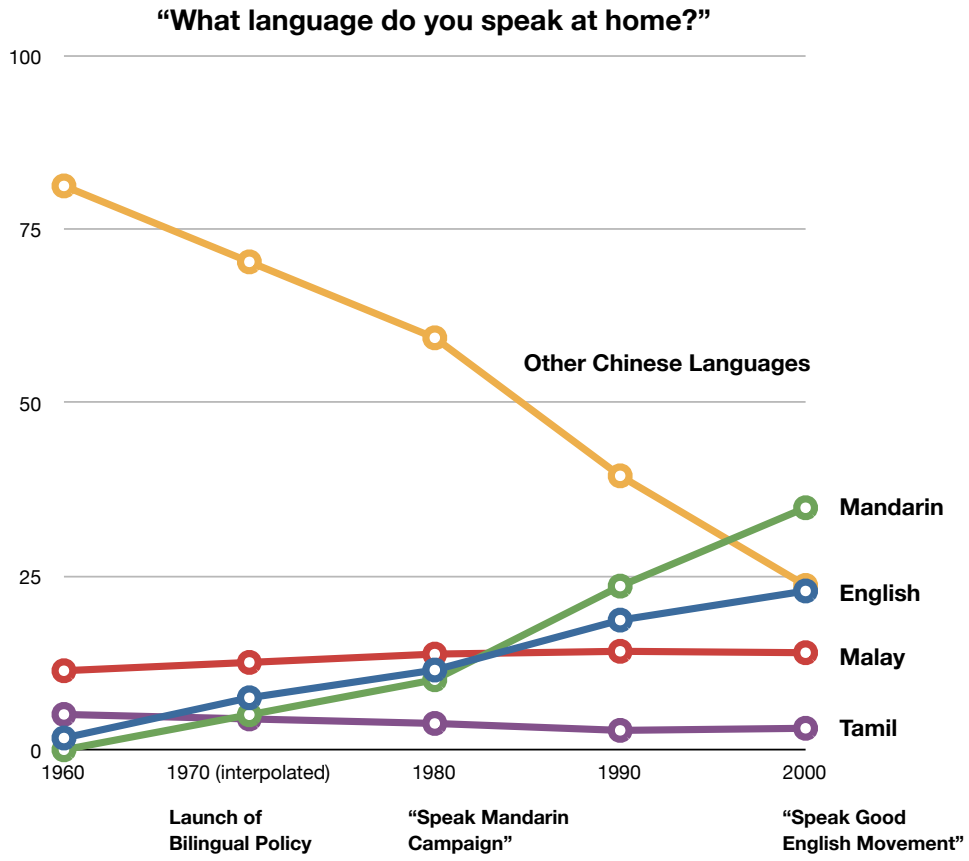

Figure 3. Language data from Singapore Census 1960--2000. Diagram based on Cruz-Ferreira & Ng (2008). Note that data from 1970 were not available and interpolated values are included here as an estimation.

Over the past three decades, Singapore media have become entirely dominated by English and Mandarin. The process of reducing Hokkien presence in media started in the 1980s and is now all but complete. (Some news broadcasts can be heard on radio FM95.8, and people can tune in to online stations such as http://www.fm1012.com.cn/ which is broadcast from China, though there will not be much local Singapore news there.) A breakdown of language usage in 2005 is given in Figure 4, showing the success of the Bilingual Policy. It is expected that a close reading of the 2010 National Census will show the dominance of English and Mandarin to have increased, with steadily more people preferring them to any of the minority languages, more often and in more daily situations.

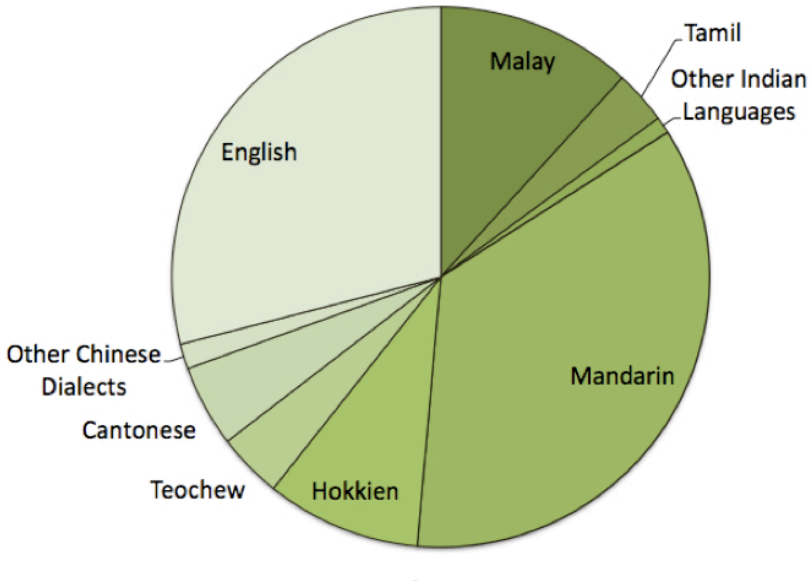

Figure 4. Languages in Singapore, ca 2005. Illustration from Cruz-Ferreira & Ng (2008), reprinted with permission.

The linguistic shift in Singapore has been seismic. How can we understand the way in which such radical changes have affected millions of people? Are different parts of the population affected in different ways? It is clear that much is gained by reducing the number of official languages in a society: for example, national education becomes more equitable and less expensive; social tensions may be bridged and ghettoisation reduced. A more or less strongly felt patriotism might emerge. Benedict Anderson has shown how print-language control is paramount for the creation of a sense of belonging-together. Discussing how European *nations* were formed in the 19th century, he writes in *Imagined Communities* that

> *[V]ernacular languages-of-state assumed ever greater power and status in a process which, at least at the start, was largely unplanned. Thus English elbowed Gaelic out of most of Ireland, French pushed Breton to the wall, and Castilian reduced Catalan to marginality. (Anderson 2006, p. 78).*

If these changes in Europe were largely unplanned, the same cannot be said about Singapore's modern history. Indeed, the Singaporean situation is different from that of Europe or the Americas 150 years ago. Anderson continues:

> *In those realms, such as Britain and France, where… there happened to be, by mid-century, a relatively high coincidence of language-of-state and language of the population, the general interpenetration* [in media, business, literature etc] *did not have dramatic political effects. (These cases are closest to those of the Americas.) In many other realms, of which Austro-Hungary* [where Latin was replaced by vernaculars such as German, Magyar and Serbo-Croat] *is probably the polar example, the consequences were inevitably explosive. (ibid.)*

Singapore embarked on a process going exactly the opposite direction. It has all but completed the inoculation of not just one, but two languages-of-state, thus going from several vernacular languages-of-the-population towards a state-bilingualism. It is generally argued that this process was necessary in order to avoid the political and social turmoil that most of its neighbours have experienced. The economic ambitions qualified the decisions taken for Singapore several decades ago. Gains in many areas are obvious, but costs in some are not; cultural capital is extremely difficult to measure. There are things that will be lost when minority languages dissipate. For example, knowledge about individual history and language-carried heritage can no longer naturally be transferred from elders to youngsters in a direct communication channel; the general cultural landscape may become rootless and materialist; and expressions of national fervour may appear contrived, even engineered. Can an artwork be a probe to measure cultural capital? Going beyond quantitative statistics and listening to individual stories, what has happened in Singapore? Internet in Singapore is fairly open, and there are often discussions about language and cultural identity. To catch a glimpse of the tone of voice of online exchanges, consider a few coMments on SgForum from 2005. Posts are reprinted here as published, including more or less common Singlish expressions and rather inventive orthography:

> *Govt banned dialect is really something wrong. Whats wrong with the langauge?? (Ogbunwezeh, 29 Sep `05, 9:47AM)*

> *the gahment want us chinese to be able to speak fluent mandarin. because if you are chinese, and if you can't speak mandarin fluently, you are a disgrace to the chinese. (this is MM Lee Kuan Yew's thinking) in fact i don't agree with him. if your chinese sarks, at least be able to speak your own dialect. because dialects are your roots.....not mandarin (lamo, 29 Sep `05, 12:07PM)*

> *its ironic.. Lee Kuan Yew is currently learning mandarin as a language… needs a tuition teacher some more. (SBS3572Y, 29 Sep `05, 12:11PM)*

> *Really ironic. But at least dun ban la, really lost the root liao. Now i can only speak hokkiien to a small group of ppl like those old ppl, my family n some of my friends. My hokkien getting worst as time goes by as nobody wanna speak hokkien, nowadays all young ppl speak ang moh. I think hokkien they only know, knn, ccb, pch those type of hokkien vaulgar words. (lamo, 29 Sep `05, 12:31PM)*

Can negative feelings about language loss be remediated? Can we find ways to create awareness about the richness of Singapore's cultural heritage that lies in its many languages, expressing a variety of experiences and lifestyles? Can an artwork serve to bridge the distance between generations? Such questionings formed the background of our work.