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Diversity Management and the Presumptive Universality of Categories: The Case of the Indians in Singapore

Ritu Jain & Lionel Wee

Introduction

The concept of planning, and this includes language policy and planning, is still a largely modernist notion that rests on specific assumptions concerning the nature of rationality. As pointed out elsewhere (Wee 2011), language policy and planning, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, tended to adopt a highly technocratic approach. Consequently, ‘successful language planning, or degrees of it, was understood in terms of the efficacy of planned policy measures as well as the target populations’ propensity to comply with the public policies pertaining to language planning’ (Das Gupta and Ferguson 1977: 6).

And while scholars today are much more appreciative of the ideological bases of language policy and planning, it seems clear that policy-makers themselves are still very much wedded to the idea of policy planning as the successful implementation of a maximally coherent and overarching framework that not only minimizes but discounts the possibility of conflict. This is not to say that the possibility of needing to overcome resistance in order to realize the plan is ignored. Rather, it is to emphasize that the plan itself, qua envisioned desideratum, contains no space for conflict or uncertainty as an ongoing and necessary element of social life. In this regard, Holston (1999: 46, *italics in original*) has criticized such a modernist approach because:

It assumes a rational domination of the future in which its total and totalizing plan dissolves any conflict between the imagined and the existing society in the imposed coherence of its order. This assumption is both arrogant and false. It fails to include as *constituent* elements of planning the conflict, ambiguity, and indeterminacy characteristic of social life. Moreover, it fails to consider the unintended and the unexpected as part of the model.

In this paper, we present as a case study of modernist language planning Singapore’s language policy and how it tries to manage the country’s linguistically most diverse ethnic group, the Indians. We show how increasing societal and linguistic diversity pose significant challenges to the country’s language policy because of the policy’s reliance on formative categories, such as mother tongue and ethnicity. The implementation of these categories, we argue, is problematic because it is undergirded by the ‘rational domination’ that Holston describes. We analyze this policy predicament, tracing the roots of Singapore’s language policy to categories inherited from British colonialism. Contemporary tweaks to the policy, we demonstrate, leave unchallenged the presumptive universality of these categories inherited from the global North (Mignolo 2011).

This raises the question of how language policy and planning can try to unsettle such presumptions so as to better come to terms with the ‘conflict, ambiguity, and indeterminacy [that are increasingly] characteristic of social life’. To this end, our chapter closes with a description of what Singapore’s language policy vis-à-vis the Indians would look like from a decolonial perspective (Mignolo 2007).

The Colonial Roots of Language Policy in Singapore

Early colonial policy regarding the government of Singapore focused primarily on urban resettlement. Various referred to as the Jackson Plan or the Raffles Town Plan, this was the work of a town committee appointed by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1822. Raffles instructed that ‘separate quarters or *kampungs* be demarcated for specific racial and occupational groups’ (Yeoh 2003: 71, italics in original). Consequently, the committee’s proposal sketched out the earliest known map of Singapore’s urban spaces, with different locales allocated to distinct ethnic groups. For example, ‘the Chinese and Indians occupied South Bridge Road and New Bridge Road, while the residence of the Malay royals was located north of the proposed European town between the coast and Rochore River, and next to the Bugis and Arab *kampungs* (Malay for “villages”)’.¹ Even then, there were difficulties in realizing the Plan fully because of ‘the increasing complexity and flux in the racial pattern of the city as the population continued to increase rapidly’ (Yeoh 2003: 71). Nevertheless, the effects of the Plan are discernible in modern day Singapore, with many of these areas still retaining their historical association with the assigned ethnicities.

Since gaining independence in 1965, however, the Singapore government has been wary of the social problems that might come with the entrenchment of ethnic enclaves. To encourage interethnic mingling and conversely, to prevent the perpetuation of ethnic enclaves, the government introduced in 1989 ethnic quotas in its public housing policy. This is known as the Ethnic Integration Policy, and the quotas are intended to encourage social integration, particularly among members of the major ethnic communities. The quotas are supposed to roughly reproduce the proportion of ethnic communities that the national level so that the Chinese are allocated the highest quota, the Malays the next highest and so on. Implementation is refined to the point where slightly differing quotas are regularly set for housing blocks and neighborhoods. As an example, the ethnic quotas for March 2010² were:

Ethnic group	Neighborhood Block	
Malays (no change)	22%	25%
Chinese (no change)	84%	87%
Indians/Others ³ .	12% (from 10%)	15% (from 13%)

Figure 1: Ethnic limits for HDB flats

Once the quota for an ethnic group has been reached, no sale to a member of the same ethnic group is allowed. In this way, the government’s Ethnic Integration Policy affects how individuals belonging to different ethnic classifications may purchase or

¹ HistorySG: An Online Resource Guide.

<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/d489ee4f-a03b-42df-a88d-c924c24ac720>; accessed 9 July 2015.

² ‘Policy changes to support an inclusive and cohesive home’ Housing Development Board press release dated 5 March 2010.

<http://www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10296p.nsf/PressReleases>; accessed 11 February 2011.

³ The categories ‘Indians’ and ‘Others’ are presumably combined to share the same quota because of the relatively small numbers within each group.

sell particular public housing locations. An Indian living in a block where the quota has been reached, for example, will only be able to sell his/her unit to another Indian, thus immediately reducing the market for the seller and adversely affecting his/her ability to make a significant profit from any sale. However, in case the quota for other ethnicities has not been exhausted, there is a possibility that the sale could be to a buyer from another ethnicity than that of the seller.

But while the government today has aimed at deterritorializing ethnic communities in a bid to disrupt the establishment of ethnic enclaves, its language policy in particular largely retains the ethnic categories and assumptions of distinctiveness and separatism that informed the colonial Plan, as seen from the following comments. The first, by Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, indicates a belief that different ethnic communities will always strive to preserve their distinctiveness (quoted in Han, Fernandez and Tan 1998: 163-5):

The Indians have their own method. So do the Malays. The Malays: Islam and also the kinship ties ... I don't think you can erase all that ... Or if you tried to change it, you'd change it for the worse ...
That is an instinct of all human tribes or societies. In every culture, there is a desire to preserve your distinctiveness. And I think if you go against that, you will create unnecessary problems, whether it is with the Indians and their caste or with the Chinese and their clans.

Singapore's language policy is a reflection of this perceived need to help ethnic communities preserve their distinctiveness, while also encouraging inter-ethnic communication and enhancing economic competitiveness. In fact, Lee Kuan Yew, the country's first prime minister, was sufficiently concerned about gross differences in economic development across the various ethnic groups that he 'had to go to anthropology and sociology to seek the reason for this' (Han, Fernandez and Tan 1998: 181). Lee consulted the works of Northern academics such as sociologist Judith Djamour and cultural anthropologist Bryan Parkinson, both of whom emphasized differences in cultural values between the Malays and the Chinese, and came to the conclusion that the most feasible policy was one where ethnic enclaves were eliminated and the different ethnicities encouraged to interact.

The goal of helping different ethnic communities preserve their distinctiveness motivated the recognition of three official ethnic mother tongues, one for each of the major ethnic communities: Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays and Tamil for the Indians⁴. The latter goal of encouraging inter-ethnic interactions motivated the recognition of English as an official inter-ethnic lingua franca – but not

⁴ In addition to being the official mother tongue of the Malay community, Malay is also the national language. But this national language status is mainly symbolic. Malay is used in the national anthem and in military commands, but there is no official obligation to learn the language. The emphasis instead is for each individual to learn the mother tongue assigned by the government as emblematic of the culture and identity of his/her ethnic community. There is consequently no language that strongly embodies a national identity, and cultural identification is instead supposed to be directed towards specific ethnic communities.

as a mother tongue. In 1986, Dr Tony Tan, then Minister for Education, underlined the importance of the bilingual policy (cited in Pakir 2000: 261):

Our policy of bilingualism that each child should learn English and his mother tongue, I regard as a fundamental feature of our education system... Children must learn English so that they will have a window to the knowledge, technology and expertise of the modern world. They must know their mother tongues to enable them to know what makes us what we are.

Similar statements regarding the role that the mother tongue was presumed to play in the preservation of the ethnic group's cultural heritage were also made by other ministers (cited in Wee 2006: 350):

... a knowledge of Mandarin is useful in the propagation of Confucianism to keep alive such traditional virtues as benevolence, love, loyalty and truthfulness.

(Lim Chee Onn, minister without portfolio, 1982 launching ceremony)

But if they [Chinese Singaporeans] concentrate on Mandarin, they have a chance to learn it well. In which case, it can be an effective vehicle to convey Chinese culture and values to the next generation.

(Lee Hsien Loong, minister for Trade and Industry, 1988 launching ceremony)

The government does not wish to accord English the status of an official mother tongue for a number of reasons. One, as noted, English is to serve as an inter-ethnic lingua franca. Two, as the major language of socio-economic mobility, maintaining an ethnically neutral status for English helps ensure that the distribution of economic advantages is not seen as being unduly associated with a specific ethnic group, which would otherwise raise the danger of inter-ethnic tension. And three, English is treated as a language that is essentially Western in nature and thus unsuitable to be a mother tongue for an Asian society such as Singapore.

In contrast, it is the official ethnic mother tongues – all of which are Asian languages – that are considered by the government to be appropriate identity markers. These are the languages that Singaporeans need in order to ensure that they remain rooted to their Asian heritage even as they compete globally. In this way, Singapore's language policy encourages Singaporeans to be bilingual in English and their officially assigned mother tongues by assigning them different sociolinguistic functions: English is pragmatic, the official mother tongues are pastoral (Gal 1989). This official positioning of the languages can be seen from the following statement by Lee Kuan Yew (1984 Speak Mandarin Campaign speech, cited in Bokhorst-Heng 1998: 252)⁵:

One abiding reason why we have to persist in bilingualism is that English will not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue ... To have no emotionally acceptable language as our mother tongue is to be emotionally

⁵ This speech was made in the context of the government urging Chinese Singaporeans to accept Mandarin as their official mother tongue. The same argument, *mutatis mutandis*, applies with regard to the other official mother tongues.

crippled ... Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue...It reminds us that we are part of an ancient civilisation with an unbroken history of over 5000 years. This is a deep and strong psychic force, one that gives confidence to a people to face up to and overcome great changes and challenges.

By way of closing this section, we want to highlight that the rationale behind the institution of separate quarters under the colonial Plan was not to create different ethnic groups but rather to reflect what was taken to be pre-existing ethnic distinctiveness. Likewise, in contemporary Singapore, the government's desire to remove ethnic enclaves does not attempt to interrogate the underlying presumption that ethnic distinctiveness is a taken-for-granted fact that must be somehow accommodated or managed. The introduction of Ethnic Integration Policy and English as a lingua franca are such management strategies, aimed at creating public spaces where interactions involving members from ostensibly different ethnic communities can be encouraged while at the same time presumably not requiring these individuals to compromise their ethnic distinctiveness. In this way, Singapore's reliance on formative categories such as distinct ethnic groups and their traditionally affiliated mother tongues remains a cornerstone of its language policy for diversity management.⁶

The policy assumes as its rationale that Singaporeans will want to 'naturally' be competent in the official mother tongues associated with their specific ethnic identities for heritage purposes. It also assumes that English, as the language of the former colonial rulers, carry little or no emotional attachment so that it will, again 'naturally', be learnt on a purely instrumental or pragmatic basis so as to facilitate upward socio-economic mobility. This assumption that English and the mother tongues can be tidily assigned to serve different functions constitutes in the case of Singapore's language policy precisely the kind of rational domination that Holston refers to. That is, as an overly neat arrangement of how different languages can and

⁶ The government has recently acknowledged that an increasing number of its citizens are of mixed ethnicities, and it recently introduced a policy initiative as an attempt to deal with ethnolinguistic hybridity. With effect from 1 January 2011, the state decided to allow Singaporeans of mixed ethnicities to opt for double-barreled or hyphenated ethnic identifications, such as 'Chinese-Malay' or 'Malay-Indian'. However, the implementation of hyphenated ethnic identities still allows the government to cling to its assumption of ethnic distinctiveness and to also maintain its policy of assigning ethnic mother tongues. This is because even hybrid Singaporeans are presumed to have a dominant ethnic identity and this dominant identity is to be reflected as the first member of the hyphenated label. Thus, an individual who opts for 'Chinese-Malay' is someone who presumably feels mainly or primarily Chinese and to a lesser extent Malay. Consequently, for this person, his/her official mother tongue will be Mandarin, following from the government's assignation of Mandarin as the official mother tongue of the Chinese community. Conversely, an individual who opts for 'Malay-Chinese' is someone who presumably feels mainly or primarily Malay and to a lesser extent Chinese. For this person, his/her official mother tongue will be Malay, again, in accordance with the assignation of Malay as the official mother tongue of the Malay community. The two members of the pair are not intended to be of equal status.

should be assigned to different ethnic groups, the policy makes no room for ‘conflict, ambiguity and indeterminacy’ (Holston 1999, see above).

With the foregoing in mind, we now move on to discuss how the language policy specifically tries to address the issues posed by the Indians in Singapore, where we demonstrate the persistent and confounding effects of these formative categories and their rational domination.

The Indians in Singapore

As mentioned above, Singapore’s language policy assigns Tamil as the official mother tongue of the Indian community. Needless to say, this is problematic because it overlooks the linguistically heterogeneous nature of this community. It is perhaps possible to broadly characterize the community as consisting primarily of north and south Indians, although this too oversimplifies the matter considerably.

Up until the 1950s, migrant labor from India, especially from Southern India, was encouraged, leading to an influx of Tamil-speakers although there were also speakers of Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali and Gujarati (PuruShotam 2000: 44-5). Even then, the government was aware that despite the numerical dominance of Tamil speakers, Indian speakers of Hindi could not simply be ignored. The following statement from the All Party Report⁷ (1956: 41, quoted in PuruShotam 2000: 56, italics added) is especially interesting in this regard since it already demonstrates that the government’s awareness that other Indian languages might have to be considered as possible alternates to Tamil:

Mandarin should be the only language to be taught for all Chinese pupils as the compulsory language in English schools, *Tamil for all Indian children (or Hindi or whatever the language the Indian community chooses)*, and Malay for all Malaysian races. In the case of the Eurasian, since English is the mother tongue, the choice of the vernacular should be left to the parents.⁸

The decision to select Tamil over options such as Hindi as the representative language for the Indian population was influenced by the numerical and political dominance of the Tamils whose leadership was extremely sympathetic to the Dravidian movement at its peak in Tamil Nadu at the time of Singapore’s independence/adoption of policy in 1965. The culmination of the movement in the anti-Hindi agitation in the Madras Presidency (India) in the same year, underscored the ideological gap between those perceived of as ‘north’ and ‘south’ Indians (Rai, 2004).

⁷ The report of the All Party Committee of the Singapore Legislative Assembly on Chinese Education 1956 was prepared following violent protests in the Chinese schools, and it laid the foundations for Singapore’s education policy of English plus mother tongue.

⁸ Notice that in this early report, English is explicitly recognized as the mother tongue of the Eurasians. Nevertheless, the same obligation to be bilingual still applies so that Eurasian students are expected to offer a vernacular the choice of which is ‘left to the parents’.

Despite the official endorsement of the language in Singapore, the regional status of Tamil failed to attract non-Tamil speakers. Many of the 'north Indians' exercised the choice (available only to the Indian community) to opt instead for Malay. Because of its Roman script, Malay was perceived as being less challenging than Mandarin. Despite the apparent socio-economic advantage of learning Mandarin, it was not as popular due to the perceived difficulty of learning the language. Thus, Kuo (1980: 51) points out that in 1978, there were 'more Indians who could understand Malay than those who could Tamil. This reflects the dominant status of the Malay language even among the Indians, especially among the non-Tamil Indians who constituted approximately a third of the total Indian population in Singapore'.

However, the academic underachievement of non-Tamil Indian students who continued to struggle with the officially recognized mother tongues (highlighted by the Singapore Action Committee, 1991) combined with sustained lobbying from speakers of non-Tamil languages drove the government to reconsider and enhance the language options. As well, the rapidly increasing ethno-linguistic heterogeneity of the Indian community resulting from relaxation of the migration policy in the 1990s added further impetus to the need for change.

In 1990, the government finally accepted five additional Indian languages – Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu – as mother tongue subjects in lieu of Tamil or alternate official mother tongues at the secondary school levels. By 1994, these languages were available as optional second languages at all levels of school. Known as the Non Tamil Indian Languages (NTILs), these can be studied in lieu of the official languages. The instruction of the languages is organized by the various community groups who hold classes, employ their own teachers, design their curriculum and set their own assessments except the national school-leaving examinations. The Board for the Teaching & Testing of South Asian Languages (BTTSAL) oversees the delivery of NTIL instruction by these community groups and standardises the examinations across the five languages.

Managing the (m)other tongues

For all intents and purposes, the linguistically diverse Indian community now has institutional support for five additional Indian languages (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu) that is broadly on par with official ethnic languages (Mandarin Malay, Tamil). Nonetheless, no state resources are utilized in maintaining or promoting the NTILs. Rather, government involvement is limited to the conduct of national level examinations in order to ensure parity of assessments for all ethnic languages.

The various language communities conduct language instruction through complementary schooling, and hold lessons during Saturdays on the premises of public schools. Further, these are (potentially) accessible during curricular hours, within school premises, and weighted as any other school subject in assessments. This is because, in a slight departure from the usual model of 'after-school' complementary schooling in community or home environments (Curdtt-Christiansen, 2009; Lytra and Martin, 2010), the government also permits the use of available space in local schools *during* curricular hours if student numbers justify the special community arrangements. The government's expectation, then, is that the availability of the five

languages will lead to their uptake by the corresponding language communities since the minority Indian communities whose languages had not been provided for earlier now have a wider choice of both ‘north Indian’ and ‘south Indian’ languages.

This model of state-community partnership, in which the government offers policy support and the use of state infrastructure while the community retains the responsibility of managing the languages is theoretically supposed to represent a sustainable model for the provision of minority languages in the education policies of multilingual societies. However, this ‘diagnostic and repair’ approach relies on *a priori* assumptions of languages as bounded systems, language communities as homogeneous, and language competence in the putative ‘mother tongues’ as the goal of speakers. As we now see, such assumptions have proven problematic for how the policy has been realized.

Contrary to policy expectations, the institutional provision of the additional languages does not result in uptake by the corresponding speakers (understood here as members of particular language communities). School enrolment data indicate that despite the absence of restrictions on language choice (restrictions that the Chinese and Malay communities are subject to), and notwithstanding the options available, a majority of the target Indian communities often prefer to forego their putative ‘mother tongues’ for Hindi instead. In fact, student enrolment for Hindi has gradually increased over the years to a point where the total number of students for Hindi exceeds that of the total for the other four languages (Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi and Urdu).

Table 1: Student enrolment between the years 2011 and 2017

	Bengali	Gujarati	Hindi	Punjabi	Urdu	Total
2011	683	137	3771	1023	313	5927
2012	741	130	4233	940	317	6361
2013	820	124	4826	857	317	6944
2014	910	114	5531	804	313	7672
2015	995	108	6475	744	322	8644
2016	960	89	6888	675	301	8913
2017	927	89	7199	635	273	9123

Source: BTTSAL

Among speakers whose languages are not represented in the education system (e.g., Malayalam, Marathi, Sindhi), the choice of Hindi, with its national status in India, is perhaps not surprising. What is unanticipated, though, is a similar popularity of Hindi among those whose languages have been made institutionally available. Part of the explanation may be found in the management of the languages that encourage pragmatic decisions over those involving allegiance to family languages.

The option of accessing language instruction during curricular hours and within school premises — in what are known as Parallel Language Programs (PLP) — has found maximum uptake in the case of Hindi. The large numbers who exercise this option has facilitated the rapid growth of Hindi as the *de facto* choice among the Indian community. One reason for this growth is that the convenience of ‘mother tongue’ instruction overrides potential language loyalty (among some speakers of represented languages), where choosing a language other than Hindi usually requires the investment of time attending language lessons at community language centers (LC) during Saturdays. Among the various community centers and public schools

accessible to all five languages, the demand for Hindi is reflected in the number of sites it is available in. Of the 365 public schools (primary, secondary and junior colleges) in the country, Hindi is accessible within the premises of 154 in all.

Table 2: Sites where minority Indian languages are available

Language	Language Centers	PLP
Bengali	4	0
Gujarati	1	0
Hindi	12	154
Punjabi	2	3
Urdu	1	0

Source: BTTSAL website

Another reason, though, relates to the status of Hindi in India. While Hindi has little instrumental value in Singapore (especially when positioned against the institutionally and regionally privileged language Mandarin), the status conferred to Hindi by policy in India exerts an influence that overrides its minority status in Singapore. Such ‘subversive’ language decisions among transnational Indian communities are rooted in attitudes and motivations that are in turn influenced by orientations to and evaluation of multiple language policies in their translocal trajectories. For instance, the *three language formula* adopted by the Indian government for shaping language education policy expects competence in three languages (mother tongue, Hindi as the *official* and inter-state link language, and English, the *associate official* and international language) among all students by the end of year 10 of school. Therefore, among families who move between nation-states and affiliate with multiple languages in the process, the very notion of *mother tongue* does not necessarily remain congruent with language identity or fluency. Often, parents speak different languages, undergo education in languages that are not their ‘native’ tongues and just as often lack fluency/literacy in the presumptive mother tongue. In critiquing the relativity of such a definition in a plurilingual Indian society Khubchandani (2008: 373), argues ‘Mother tongue identity and its image in this context do not necessarily claim congruity with actual usage, and these are again not rigidly identified with specific language territories, as is the experience of most European countries either in the past or in the present’.

Following this, parental language decisions for children – in India as well as beyond – are premised on the language experiences and/or expectations of parents as they evaluate factors such as employment and residency statuses in destination societies, as well as subsequent trajectories of mobility. An example in point is that of a ‘Tamil’ family in a “linguistic limbo” (Benesch, 2008: 301) in Singapore: the mother and father, having lived in Bombay and Delhi respectively have received ‘second language’ education in Hindi and ‘third language’ instruction in Marathi and Sanskrit. Even though Tamil continues to be language spoken in their home, neither parent has sufficient literacy in the language to be of any help to the children should they choose to learn it at school. Even so, the parents do not see this as an inadequacy or an impediment to family language maintenance. Their decision for Hindi as the institutional mother tongue for their children follows from similar personal (education) experiences where the language of school was *additive* and complementary to that of the family. These partial competences in multiple languages disrupt received ideas of languages as inherited and/or ethnically defined and demand

a consideration of speakers shifting affiliations to multiple communities and associated languages. In the context of societies with large migratory populations, continual policy reliance on fixed categories such as *mother tongue* and *community* ‘fail to capture students’ multiple, simultaneous and overlapping cultural, ethnic and linguistic affiliations’ (King and Rambow, 2012: 405).

Faced with a possible return to India (or elsewhere) in the future, the parents find Hindi a safer bet for their children than Tamil or any alternate language that may only be temporarily useful. To such a family, the acquisition of a non-ethnic language is deemed ‘additive’ to a multilingual repertoire rather than undermining of a ‘received’ ethnic identity. In their analysis of the residency status of the five non-Tamil language students, Jain and Wee (2017) find an inverse correlation between proportion of citizens and total enrolment in a language. They observe:

[T]he higher the number of citizens, the more consistent the decline over time in student enrolment. For example, Gujarati and Punjabi, with the highest proportion of citizens (...) also have the greatest loss in student numbers between 2011-2017 (...). In contrast, Bengali and Hindi, the languages with the highest proportion of non-citizens have grown consistently over the years. (Jain & Wee, 2017: 8)

Even among those who *don’t* foresee a return to India, Hindi language education (conveniently accessible within school premises) is not only deemed practical but also congruent with a pan-Indian identity given its national stature in India. Despite the convenience of accessibility and the socio-economic advantages associated with the alternatives (Mandarin and Malay) large numbers, including speakers from the southern states (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada speakers⁹) prefer Hindi.

Thus, the Singapore government’s language policy for dealing with the diversity of Indians does not go much beyond adapting the extant mother tongue policy, where an identified language community is expected to demonstrate fidelity towards and therefore a default desire to be competent in an affiliated putative mother tongue. While categories such as ‘ethnicity’ and ‘mother tongue’ were in the past used to ‘discipline the difference’ (PuruShotam, 2010) among the various communities and to drive language policy, the case of the Indians demonstrates that fragility of such classification. Even as the policy aims ‘to support these community groups in keeping their mother tongues and cultures alive’ (MOE, press release, 07.03.2007), the prominence of Hindi across different Indian sub-groups illustrates that the very consumers of such plans contribute to confounding the apparently neat correlation between community and mother tongue. The language affinity among the transnational Indians in Singapore also indicates that even as heritage languages may be deemed by some as being necessary for accessing community and ethnic cultures, they may also be construed as helping to foster ‘in students ties to a common home nation and a shared sense of past’ (King and Rambow, 2012: 408). Among these multilingual and migratory populations, the preference for Hindi is suggestive of a diasporic amnesia through which traditional and historical rivalries are backgrounded in order to evoke a shared identity or culture. The attraction that Hindi holds for

⁹ The states traditionally opposed to the elevation of Hindi as the national language of India.

Indians of different ethnic backgrounds therefore disrupts policy assumptions of identities as inherited and static.

Observations

The roots of this modernist policy, as we have shown, can be traced back to Singapore's colonial beginnings. Such an approach does not give sufficient consideration to the impacts of transnationalism, diasporic longings and a sense of national identity that is not necessarily premised on a speaker's or a community's current membership in a nation-state. Given increased rates of global mobility, speakers (whether of their own volition or, as in the case of younger children, because of parental decisions) may oftentimes make language education choices on the basis on contingent and anticipated places of residence where knowledge of specific languages might prove advantageous, quite separate from any sense of loyalty to some notion of mother tongue.

A number of specific observations are therefore worth making and elaborating on regarding the policy for the Indians. One, the government's mistake is to assume that what many Indians want is to replace Tamil with a more appropriate mother tongue, that is, to replace one mother tongue with another. This is not completely wrong, since there are clearly some Indians who want to offer alternatives such as Bengali or Punjabi because, for them, these other languages are considered better representatives of their ethnic culture. However, as the large number of Indians who prefer to opt for Hindi shows, there are also those for whom the issue is not about finding an appropriate mother tongue; rather, it is about being able to offer a language that they feel better addresses their multiple goals of marking their Indian-ness whilst also providing them more promising pathways for upward socio-economic mobility.

Two, the source of this mistake is deep. It lies in the government assumption that all ethnic groups have an identifiable mother tongue that they are intent on preserving. Again, such an assumption is not completely off the mark, it becomes problematic – from a policy perspective – if this is treated as a goal/desire that can be attributed to the ethnic group *en masse* with little or no allowance for divergent and more nuanced viewpoints. Unfortunately, this is an assumption that is not easily foregrounded for critical evaluation. This is because, as we have seen, the assumption is foundational: it undergirds the specifics of Singapore's language policy, where every ethnic group is assumed to have an 'instinct' to preserve its mother tongue without which it would be 'emotionally crippled'.

Three, and perhaps not surprisingly, the essentialist link that is assumed to exist between distinct ethnic groups and their associated mother tongues also means that languages are themselves assumed to be necessarily distinct autonomous systems. This is why the mother tongues are all assumed to be mutually unintelligible, and the officially prescribed solution to this communication dilemma is to introduce yet another language as an inter-ethnic lingua franca, in this case, English. Such an approach holds no place for the fact that multilingual competence, rather than involving multiple competences in monolingual bounded systems, actually involves partial or truncated competences in multiple languages as well as the ability to combine resources from these languages so as to creatively produce hybrid constructions (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck 2005; Otsuji and Pennycook

2010). And in an interesting discussion that compares language practices in South Asia under pre-colonial and colonial conditions, Canagarajah (2010) suggests that the imposition of strictly regulated language names by the British ruling authorities, where boundaries between languages were assumed to correlate unproblematically with systematic differences in language practices, only served to create rather than resolve communicative, cultural and identity issues. Canagarajah (2010: 19) describes language, communication and community in the period prior to Western colonization thus:

Since South Asians live in a heterogeneous community where they expect to interact with others from different languages and cultures on a daily basis, South Asians are always open to negotiation. Negotiation of language differences is the norm rather than the exception. Furthermore, there is no expectation of a common language as the basis for these interactions. Sometimes, there is no common language available, and even to expect one would be to impose one's own language as the vehicle for communication.

Canagarajah (2010: 24) then contrasts this with the effects of colonization and decolonization:

South Asian scholars have pointed out that colonization had dire implications for language and social life in the region. Mohan (1992) documents how unitary constructs of linguistic identity and speech community were put to use in colonies to categorize people ... For people who grow up with multiple languages in their everyday life, unitary notions of identity are reductive.

Canagarajah may indeed be right that for those who have grown up with multiple languages, unitary notions of identity can be deeply reductive. Nevertheless, one of the effects of colonization has been to entrench such unitary and reductive notions of identity in the colonized populations, notions that, as we have seen, remain extremely difficult to discard even in the aftermath of decolonization, for both government and populace. Where language policy is concerned, the Singapore government has to straddle the horns of a dilemma: abandoning a unitary notion of language, identity and community risks a backlash from the more conservative segments of the population; at the same, keeping to such a notion fails to properly reflect the increasingly diverse and complex realities and aspirations of yet other members of society. In the section that follows, then, we explore how language policy in Singapore may be decolonized.

Decolonizing Language Policy in Singapore

According to Mignolo (2011: 122):

The task of decolonial thinking is that of unveiling the rhetoric and promises of modernity, showing its darker side, advocating and building global futures that aspire to the fullness of life rather than encouraging individual success at the expense of the many and of the planet.

For Mignolo (2011), this 'darker side' of modernity is coloniality and in fact he often uses the term 'modernity/coloniality' to indicate just how historically and inextricably

intertwined the two are for him. The goal of decolonial thinking, then, is to critically interrogate the ‘long term processes involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power’ (Mignolo 2011: 52, quoting Smith 1999).

Miller (2014: 162-3) points out that for Mignolo, there are two key differences between postcolonial studies and decoloniality, their points of origins and their claims of universality:

Mignolo locates postcolonial thought in former British and French colonial contexts. Edward Said’s Orientalism is exemplary here. Decoloniality, sharing much in common with postcolonial thought, instead originated in the thinking of African and Afro-Caribbean thinkers and activists in former Spanish and Portuguese colonial contexts ...

But more than this geographic and genealogical difference, Mignolo is concerned about any discourse’s claims to universality. In that sense, decoloniality remains vigilant in its desire to produce new worlds – pluralities of epistemically disobedient, communal social organizations – rather than to make globalist or universalist claims. Postcolonial thinking, Mignolo argues, tends to make (at best) unconscious or (at worst) imperialist claims that collapse regionality into globality.

While we share Mignolo’s skepticism concerning claims to universality, we are less concerned with the provenance of various discourses. That is, ideas that have their origins in the Global North as well as the Global South are equally prone to the temptation of making universal claims, and such universality is deeply problematic especially in relation to language policy, where abstract policy formulations that fail to take into consideration the specificities of individuals’ and communities’ goals and desires are doomed to failure (Sowell 2004). Hence, it is more important to focus on the presumptive universality of categories rather than where specific lines of thinking may have come from. Mignolo (2011: 10) himself emphasizes the critique of universality as the more important project:

Decolonial thinking and options (i.e., thinking decolonially) are nothing more than a relentless analytic effort to understand, in order to overcome, the logic of coloniality underneath the rhetoric of modernity, the structure of management and control that emerged out of the transformation of the economy in the Atlantic, and the jump in knowledge that took place both in the internal history of Europe and in between Europe and its colonies.

The rejection of universality cannot, however, mean a shift towards an obsession with particularity for the simple reason that as a form of management, language policy has to be formulated on sufficiently general grounds – both in terms of the conceptual categories that it draws upon (e.g. language, mother tongue, community, identity) and in terms of the actual community or communities to which it applies (e.g. the Tamil or Hindi languages, the north/south Indians, the Indian community). ‘Sufficiently general’ patently is not the same as ‘universal’ because it attempts to straddle the line between the universal and the particular while appreciating that what counts as ‘sufficient’ will of necessity vary from one context to another.

Bearing in mind the foregoing, what then would a decolonial approach to Singapore's language policy vis-à-vis the Indians look like? It would consistently foreground the need to question the basis on which specific categories are being appealed to, even as it acknowledges the 'fictive' nature of such categories (Beck in Slater and Ritzer 2001: 266). That is, there would have to be reflexive awareness of the contingent and historically situated nature of such categories, including the different kinds of interests that such categories have served and may continue to serve. In this regard, it is useful to consider Wee's (2014: 655) remarks about the importance of cultivating public critical discussions between state and citizenry as well as amongst the citizenry itself 'about whether or not a specific language (such as Mandarin or English) necessarily constitutes the mother tongue (or not) of, say, Chinese Singaporeans, and what might be given as reasons for adopting one position or another'. This also requires that the state be willing to 'move away from a narrow understanding of bilingualism (i.e. competence in the official ethnic mother tongue for heritage identity purposes and in English for pragmatic/instrumental reasons) to acknowledge the value of "unofficial" multilingualism, where a Malay Singaporean's partial knowledge of, say, Tamil or Japanese or French is valued as one significant manifestation of a global citizenship'.

The consistent focus here is on raising reflexive awareness of the different goals, values and assumptions of different segments of society, which are not necessarily going to fall along traditional ethnic boundaries (Wee 2014: 658):

In particular, both the state and the citizenry have come to expect that policies will be characterized by parity (i.e. equality of treatment for all ethnic groups) and ineluctability (i.e. essentialized links between language, culture, and identity). But as society becomes more diverse and complex, more nuanced understandings of parity and ineluctability are needed. For example, it may be that equality has to be understood at the level of the individual ... instead of the ethnic group. And it may be that divergences from essentialized links (such as a Chinese Singaporean with French as his/her mother tongue) should be accepted as the norm instead of just being tolerated. The tensions between modernist assumptions and the conditions of late modernity are not likely to go away ... This means that the state needs to commit itself to a range of activities: (1) more consistently engage the citizenry in discussions about the relationships between language, culture, and identity; (2) create greater awareness of the fact that there are diverse groups with different valuations of these relationships ...

In the specific case of Singapore's policy regarding the Indians, this would mean consistently engaging members of the Indian community/communities by encouraging critical discussions over changing assumptions (on the part of the government as well as the community/communities) about what kinds of languages are being valued and for what purposes. There would have to be open and reasoned discussions about issues such as the following: Why are Indians of different ethnicities choosing Hindi? How should this influence government consideration of fresh community requests (e.g., Malayalees for Malayalam) for accommodation of their languages in policy plans? Given the numerous ethnic languages among the community, can the government practically extend such support to more languages? Can or should the government be doing more (such as encouraging Higher Mother

Tongue options) for the NTILs so they are more on par with the official mother tongues? Or, given that many Indians study languages that are not their ethnic languages, should the government offer the option of studying these at simpler levels (as third languages) than available currently? Are Indian students, whose languages are not institutionally available, at an academic disadvantage in the education system? Are there Indians who would prefer not to have any mother tongue instruction at all? What are the implications of these government initiatives for the status of Tamil as the official mother tongue, if any? What are the implications for developing a sense of belonging and identity as Singaporeans?

In fact, the government has for some time now already been actively engaged in public discussions with Singaporeans about their concerns, aspirations for themselves and for the country as a whole. For example, the Feedback Unit is a government agency set up in 1985 for the public to register their concerns, and its revamp in 2006 into REACH ('Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home') is intended to facilitate a deeper level of engagement between government and citizenry. In addition, there have been three major attempts to get Singaporeans involved in thinking about the nature of Singapore society: the Singapore 21 project in 1997, the Remaking Singapore exercise in 2002, and most recently, the Our Singapore Conversation exercise in 2012. The latter was initiated in August 2012 and is envisaged as a series of dialogues between the state and the citizenry on the kind of society that Singapore ought to be. What needs to be done in the case of language policy is for the discussions to take on a more meta-critical stance, where 'common sense' assumptions about the relationship between language and identity are held up to scrutiny.

Admittedly, such discussions can highly emotional, especially for community members who see the relationship between language and identity in more essentialized terms. But a failure to openly and sensitively deliberate on such matters can have unhealthy consequences, for three simple reasons. One, it leads to a widening gap between official language policies and the actual experiences and aspirations of different individuals. Two, it creates tensions for those individuals who feel that only the voices of those who hold conservative or traditional values are being officially recognized or sanctioned. Three, only through such open and carefully conducted deliberation can any tensions arising from conflict and ambiguity be temporarily resolved – temporarily because of the fact that social life contains inevitable elements of indeterminacy, and changing circumstances will require a revisiting of extant policies as well as the assumptions that undergird them.

Conclusion: Theorizing Diversity Management

Watson (2009: 2272) notes that 'approaches to planning which have originated in the global North are frequently based on assumptions regarding urban contexts which do not hold elsewhere in the world (and often no longer hold in the North as well)'. And while she (2009) focuses her own discussion on the effects of neoliberalism on economically impoverished urban populations, she is quick to acknowledge that urban tensions involve the 'poors' are not 'the only rationalities at play' (2009: 2269). In this regard, the case of the Indians in Singapore provides a strong reminder of the other tensions that also need addressing.

We have seen that although the ethnic categories that were used to establish the language policy of Singapore were necessary and useful for nation building, the increasing linguistic heterogeneity among the Indian community is exposing the progressive redundancy of such foundations. Therefore, even progressive initiatives that attempt to extend policy goals of ‘ethnic’ language maintenance are defeated by a continued reliance on binaries such as ‘majority—minority’, ‘ethnic—non-ethnic’, ‘mother tongue—non-mother tongue’, etc. As the case of the Indians in Singapore illustrates, identities cannot be tied to a language, an ethnicity or even a nationality and are contingent, temporary, and partial. Policies that understand and accommodate the ‘in-between’ statuses and constructed identities of transmigrant communities have a better probability of success than those that tweak implementation processes while retaining their obsolete foundations.

And while Watson (2009) is right to argue that planning should not be based on global North’s ‘consensus model’, what the Singapore case study demonstrates is that the shift should not necessarily be towards ‘a conflict model of society’ that is embedded in a Southern perspective (Watson 2009: 2267). The appropriate response, in other words, is not to attempt to replace Northern categories or perspective with Southern ones. Such a move would only attempt to replace one system of dominance with another (Connell 2014: 218). Rather, it is more relevant to call for consistent attention to the situatedness of all categories. This reflexive attention to how different social actors are committed to various formative categories provides, in our view, the most promising way forward in restructuring language policy towards a more properly decolonial and sustainable trajectory.

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