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Communication Research Problems
In Singapore

by

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Travelling Seminar Papers

Communication Research Problems in Singapore.
An outline by Dr. Peter Weldon - Department of Sociology, University of Singapore.

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Linguistic Communication in Singapore

Singapore has no trained communication personnel to speak on communication, and this should give you a crude indication of the level of communication research. It is at a very low level.

I will trace a little bit of what I think are some of the communication problems in Singapore and I hope to persuade you that there is a situation for a need for research. Briefly, I will try to cover what research is being done and has been done, in the government and in the private sectors. I will concentrate a little more on the people to see how communication is extremely relevant to Singapore. The people is made up primarily of migrant stock - 76% Chinese (rough breakdown). Among this Chinese population, still the most widely spoken language (dialect) is Hokkien, then Cantonese and possibly Mandarin, Teochew, Hainanese, Kek and lots of other minor dialects. Even within the Chinese population in Singapore, there is a fair amount of communication problem.

The first generation migrants who came to Singapore from China will still be primarily fluent in Cantonese or Hokkien - depending from where they come. You have then a Chinese population which is not united in terms of the communication instrument. There is no single language available to the Chinese population in Singapore today, primarily because of the different streams of education.

The National Language

Among the Malay population in Singapore which is about 14% now, and the common language used by them is Malay. The Indonesian languages or dialects such as Boyanese, Minangkabau, etc., have basically disappeared and replaced by Malay, reinforced of course by Malaysia, which is Bahasa Malaysia. Consequently within the last 30 years probably, a lingua franca, namely the Malay language, came into being.

The Minority Languages and Dialects

Among the Indian population, again you cannot say that it has a single language. Tamil is the predominant population and it is therefore the predominant language since most of the Indian population in Singapore migrated from South India. Malayale, Gujarati, Sindhi, etc., are the minor dialects, but Tamil is the most common language among the Indians.
This may be true up to about 30 years ago, because it was only in the last two or three decades we have had the implementation of educational policies and language policies which have been set up by the present government.

The Official Languages

In Singapore, children can be sent to four separate language streams of education - Malay, Tamil Chinese (Mandarin) and English. Having four streams of education (four language choices) in primary education is going to radically alter this language patterns which I have attempted to describe. There are English-educated parents who send their children to schools in which the education materials are presented in the Chinese language, or Malay parents sending their children to schools in the English stream. I would say then that you get an institutional policy which changes radically language patterns.

On top of this and concomitant with this is the language policy of the government of Singapore which specifies that the National Language will be Malay but in addition, there will be other official languages, Tamil, Chinese and English. And consequently, you see official forms and notices in all four languages, which are completed normally in the language you understand best. These are the institutional imports that radically changes what basically is a linguistic pattern that has been brought on by migration.

Institutions involved in Communication

In addition to this policy, you have institutions and schools which are involved in this changing pattern. You can follow these streams of language all the way up to the secondary and Cambridge level. When you get to the HSC level, Tamil and Malay are dropped. This is because at the university level you have two systems only - the Chinese stream in the Nanyang University and English in the University of Singapore where the medium of instruction is English. Again you have this filtering system which is going to change linguistic pattern.

So we have graduates in the University of Singapore, students who have been to Chinese stream all the way up through the secondary schools, switching into English on entering the University of Singapore. We have Malay and Tamil students who come in the same way. Instead of getting people restricted in terms of the communication instruments available to them, you are getting multi-lingual people in Singapore.
Among the number of students that I have, they may not be fully literate in Mandarin, but they can carry on conversation in Mandarin, apart from one or two other dialects. We exploit our students as interviewers in research which means normally that if we are going to interview the Chinese population for instance, they could communicate in Hokkien and Cantonese. It is not unusual then to find Singaporeans being able to handle one or two other languages among the Chinese population.

The Indian students are also similarly placed since they could communicate in more than one Tamil dialect. The educational system is going to have a big impact on means of communication in Singapore.

**Mass Media**

Newspapers are obtainable in all the four languages namely, Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English. In English there are the Straits Times and the New Nation. There are two large Chinese newspapers in addition to other smaller newspapers. The language choice can be reinforced by mass media being available by government policy, in terms of forms, etc., by the educational system and by mass media. Newspapers, however, come from the private sector. Magazines follow the same pattern; they are also available in all languages.

**Radio & Television**

As for radio and television in Singapore, there is a very clear policy again of offering films, shows, etc., in the official languages, plus in the other minority dialects. As part of the official government policy, since both radio and television are in the hands of the government, you have the implementation of government policies in terms of forms, writing, presentation, education, etc. Again there is going to be some discontent on the part of some groups - there not being enough of this kind of film, not enough of this kind of language presentation, etc. But basically there is a choice.

**The Political and Administrative Systems**

The political leaders in Singapore are often multi-lingual, the Chinese political leaders sometimes not only multi-lingual but also capable in the various dialects. We have a Eurasian Member of Parliament, of Portuguese extraction who can speak Malay and who is now learning Mandarin (at a rather late age of 40). There is emphasis then in the political leadership to make the political leaders multi-lingual. Our Prime Minister is a clear example of this, when he gave his National Day speech in three out of the four official languages - except in Tamil. This is bound to have an impact on the population which is being encouraged to being multi-lingual if they see there is a political leadership, and the administrative and school systems and the
mass media system which is multi-lingual.

Basically, I think I have described a situation which I hope most of you being mass media specialists, will agree, demands a great deal of research. What is the development of multi-lingual in Singapore, what is the impact of multi-lingual policy, what is going to happen to dialects, etc. What the relationship between overseas Chinese in Singapore as contrasted with overseas Chinese in other areas of South East Asia, linguistically, where Mandarin for instance, has not been encouraged; in Indonesia where no Mandarin is being taught during the last 15 years, since the closure of the Chinese stream of education. I think these things you will agree demand some kind of research.

Research on Communication Problems in Singapore.

The Colonial Experience

From experience, as a citizen of a neo-colonialist imperialistic power, the United States, it is fairly easy to say that the British newspapers encouraged a lot of mass communication research, a lot of mass communication training in Singapore and of course this is true. Most of you know the history of mass communication institutes and training in the United Kingdom, which is not the most exemplary for mass communication experts.

Research Capability in the Universities

Basically, in the education system you just don't have any mass communication department. My feeling is pretty much along the reasons given. We have not got into the point where people seriously believe that communication is a science. Although I think there is another reason and that because the emphasis in Singapore up to the last five years have been in primary and secondary education, and not in the institutions of higher learning. In other words, I think the emphasis is in getting established multi-stream, multi-media education trying to work out language problems among the population on which these language policies are going to have the most impact - on the younger population.

I think most of the input in the educational system has occurred at the primary and secondary school levels. Even now there is emphasis on vocational training, but in the areas of communication and of language, the emphasis has been at the lower levels.

Only now, for instance, in the university do we have a faculty discussing the merits of having a second language required at the post graduate level. Again you would think that consistent with the kind of language policy that I outlined for you, that this would have been the requisite quite a long time
Research Capability in the Private Sector

In the private sector there are one or two market research firms who do national mass media indexes. There is one which operates in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangkok which turns out an annual multi-media index, mass media index, which is available to anyone who has $5,000. There are other firms that run monetary programmes, television surveys, etc., the kind of normal commercial mass media research which most of us are familiar. But again the level of sophistication with one or two exceptions, is not very high. People are still doing the old 'fly by night' interviews after the movies to find out what the impact of advertising was, to interview people on ad hoc situation to evaluate a particular mass media effort.

The review of the new government policy which has come in, in the last year which I think will have an even greater impact on an already fairly confusing and difficult situation linguistically concerned with the evaluation. In Singapore now all students beginning in the primary schools are required to take a second language. We are trying to train people to be multi-lingual in an extremely early age. Most South East Asian nations like Japan and Korea, have had experiences with multi-lingualism. The Philippines with their kind of different patterns emerging, a Filipino-English which is akin to Tagalog, etc. It is highly likely there would emerge in Singapore a multi-media type, multi-linguistic type switching back and forth between languages. That Mandarin in another 20 years in Singapore will not be similar to Mandarin spoken in China or Taiwan, that English in Singapore in another ten or twenty years will not be similar to the kind of English that is spoken in the United Kingdom, and for that purpose, say in the United States or in the Philippines.

We are going to have changes in linguistic forms, as we are going to have changes in people's capabilities to speak different languages. This in itself is a firm commitment on the part of the government to changing linguistic patterns on what is regarded as already an extremely confusing linguistic pattern which has the kind of impact that will just demand that research be carried out. I don't think there is so much of a lack of trained people, as most people do. I think there is a lack of commitment to research on the part of the three main institutions which I have outlined - the private sector, the government and the university. And even if there were a commitment, this commitment also has to be computerised in terms of funds, personnel, organizations, etc. This is a problem which is general throughout. We have the interest and the people but we do not have the money.

In this respect, I cannot think of any other organization which can help us more in this kind of a situation than Amic.
ago in the university. Just because the university has not caught up in terms of teaching of things like this, does not mean that research has not been done in the university. The Department of Sociology has a number of projects going. The Political and Science Departments has one semester season going on community centres which is concentrating on communication between community centres. The Department of Social Work and Social and Administration at the University has done some work in the area of communication in playgroups among children of different races, in some of the housing development board flats, which you can see, ecologically, bring about a situation in which people, if they are going to interact, must cut across different languages, so they studied play practices among children: what kind of languages are spoken, what are the media of interaction between children of different races, of different streams of education, etc.

The research capabilities in the university have been limited to academic departments, we have a small handout which you can all get from the Department of Sociology where you can look over some of the research problems that have been undertaken by students and by some undergraduates.

Research Capability in Government

The research capability in the government is again generally low. Radio and television has a research section. Again you would think it should be extremely active. We have a policy of broadcasting in many languages, so as to reach as many people as possible. Are they receiving them? Are the people switching languages. Are people who were trained in one language stream watching something in another language stream because they have taken it as a second language?

The recent Statistic Commission of Inquiry has urged research sections to be set up in the government - in the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Education Ministry of National Development and in the Ministry of Finance. And seemingly, some of these research sections will be concerned with the problem of communication in language.

In general there is not a strong research emphasis in government on the area of communication, despite the fact that language policy has a definite commitment on the part of the government. There is little evaluating research to catch up with the impact, the effectiveness, etc., of what I regard as an extremely far reaching policy.