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Singapore: A Linguistic Rojak
Documenting the histories of our multilingual pioneers

Project Aims
- Understand how the negotiation of linguistic differences in pre-independence Singapore led to multilingualism
- Document personal stories of Singapore’s historical linguistic complexity

Methodology
- 5 multilingual individuals above 70 years old
- 2 monolingual or bilingual exceptions for alternate perspectives and balance
- In-depth semi-structured interviews on circumstances of language acquisition and language attitudes
- Identify and analyze the common denominators of multilingualism

Background and Motivation
Singapore has a high rate of multilingualism in the generations now making up its elderly population.
- Census data on literacy rate fails to capture the complexities of this multilingualism
- Failure to account for spoken multilingualism
- No recognition of non-official languages such as Baba Malay and Chinese vernaculars.
In this respect, there lacks an understanding of the intricacy of multilingualism of Singapore’s elderlies.

Circumstances of exposure and acquisition
- Home: Interaction in kampong facilitated acquisition
- Education: English taught in schools
- Employment: Learn languages of colleagues, customers
- Marriage and family: Shared language with spouse was “automatic” language at home and with children

Practical value of a language
- “Language is communication. When people come, what language they speak, I speak that language to them.”
- For future: “Singapore and Malaysia, we were about to merge. So if I take Bahasa Melayu, I gain something.”
- International use: I don’t think you should put Baba Malay as a school subject. It’s better you put French, Spanish [...] because the world needs these.”

Key Findings

Mother tongue language tied with ethnic belonging
- “I still recognize that I’m a Teochew, I should know the Teochew fluently.”
- “If they know that you are Hokkien, and they speak to you in Hokkien, and you don’t understand at all, that is very embarrassing you know!”

Recognition of inevitability of language attrition
- “Sorry to say that nowadays the young children, they don’t even speak their mother tongue language […] they’re speaking English, Mandarin, and I feel that is not very right.”
- “The old ones already old and the younger ones don’t take the trouble”

Practical priority prevails: English and Mandarin at school, while “dialects should be at home, but not in school”

Conclusion
As one interviewee expressed with regard to language use and acquisition: “As it comes along, I just follow what it is.” A common key theme in the accounts was that multilingualism was not an active decision but an inevitable and natural consequence of the necessity to communicate. Circumstances changed following Singapore’s bilingual education policy, which promoted two official languages at the expense of other varieties. This project found while the elderly feel disappointment over the loss of language abilities and ethnic identity among the young, they understand the practical and functional value of English-knowing bilingualism. There is no easy way to reconcile the two, but like the natural flow of their multilingualism, many of the older generation accept this bilingualism as the next natural stage in Singapore’s ever-changing linguistic landscape.

Project Title: Multilingual Singapore
Supervisor: Assoc Prof Francesco Paolo Cavallaro

- Rose Choo, 80 years old, 7 linguistic varieties
- Jackie Choo, 84 years old, 4 linguistic varieties

Category: HUMANITIES
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