

The punctuated equilibrium model of public policy: explaining inertia in Singapore's Mother Tongue policy

Abstract

This paper suggests an explicatory model for language policy reform (or lack thereof) at the level of the state. This is accomplished by assessing the value of the 'punctuated equilibrium' model of public policy analysis (Howlett & Migone, 2011, p. 57), which I argue can be strengthened by a genealogical approach (Foucault, 1971). Singapore's Mother Tongue (MT) policy is used as a case for illustration. There is a consensus amongst local linguists (e.g. Tan, 2014; Wee, 2014) that the current MT policy of assigning an official MT based on one's race is essentialist and untenable in light of language shift toward English and increasing diversity through immigration. Using the model, the MT policy is argued to be part of a larger system of policies that maintain a particular understanding of racial equality through a unique brand of multiracialism. The pressures of increasing immigration and diversity are insufficient as exogenous shocks that might lead to changes to the MT policy. Instead, partisan interests in maintaining this brand of multiracialism serves to entrench existing ethnolinguistic policy positions, contributing to inertia in language policy reform.

Introduction

The intersection between the effects of transnational migration and language policy has often led to studies focusing on the disconnect and tensions between personal agency, individual and collective language ideologies, and structural categories such as race and ethnicity (King & Rambow, 2012, p. 405). In one significant strand of research, the state's modernist approaches to language planning as top-down language management is argued to be at odds with the increasing diversity of polities, especially due to upward trends in global migration and the permeability of national borders (Spolsky, 2009). A common refrain is that the language policies instituted in the cause of nation-building – emphasizing homogeneity and static identities – have

become untenable and unreflective of the complex realities of language use and fluid identities in a late-modern world (Stroud & Wee, 2010; Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018, p. 727). There is therefore a need for language policy reform that takes into account these complexities.

Even as there is a general consensus amongst linguists on a need to shift away from largely monolingual and statist assumptions regarding language (Jaspers, 2018, pp. 707-709), a less examined (yet important) question is why inertia regarding language policy reform persists¹. That is, why language policy reform is often so difficult and slow to be enacted by the state. While not disagreeing with why and what change has to happen, nor a critique of the limits of academic research on influencing public policy, this paper is concerned with *explaining* the practical prospects and challenges of language policy reform in light of globalising forces inevitably faced by nation states today.

I suggest that recommendations and advocacy for language policy reform need to be informed by a realistic assessment of state policy-making processes and dynamics. As Albury (2016, p. 356) contends, a need for community-level and ethnographic perspectives of language policy (cf Ricento, 2006) does not negate the need to understand how governments maintain, implement or change existing language policies. Such a consideration can potentially be facilitated by applying an influential model of public policy analysis – the punctuated equilibrium model – that seeks to understand and explain why and how incremental or paradigmatic changes to public policy can occur (Allison & Saint-Martin, 2011; Howlett & Migone, 2011).

To critically assess this model of incrementalist and paradigmatic change in public policy, I present the case of Singapore and its much-critiqued Mother Tongue (MT) policy. In Singapore, the state recognises three official races, with each racial grouping prescribed an official ‘Mother Tongue’ supposedly representative of its

¹ One apparent example of the obduracy of modernist constructs in language policy is that of the racialist underpinnings of ‘native speaker’. Three decades after Rampton (1990) deconstructed the notion and two decades since Kandiah (1998) decried the implications for non-anglosaxon users of English, universities in the UK and US continue to discriminate the English proficiency of incoming students by virtue of their nationality. TOEFL and IELTS requirements are automatically waived for postgraduate students from countries like Australia, Ireland and Canada, but required for individuals from Singapore where English is an official language and medium of instruction at all educational levels.

culture and heritage. Coupled with a national policy of bilingualism, all students in Singapore's schools must learn English and the assigned MT of their race (i.e. a Chinese will have to learn Mandarin, a Malay the Malay language, and an Indian, Tamil or other sanctioned Indian languages). However, a surge in immigration since the 1990s (Yeoh & Lin, 2013), rise in inter-racial marriages (Tan, 2018), a massive shift towards English as a home language, and corresponding changes in attitudes toward prescribed MTs (Bokhorst-Heng et al, 2010; Starr & Hiramoto, 2018) have all led to an increasingly diverse population. Unsurprisingly, local scholars have clamoured for changes to the state's MT policy that can better reflect the linguistic practices of Singaporeans, instead of one that imposes a reductionist framework of Chinese-Malay-Indian. These include the recommendations for English to be considered an official MT and that citizens should be given a choice of what MT to learn (e.g. Wee & Bokhorst-Heng, 2005; Tan, 2014; Jain & Wee, 2019).

Applying the explicatory (not predictive) model of 'punctuated equilibrium', Singapore's MT policy is theorised not as an isolated tool of governance, but as embedded in and an integral constituent of the state's policy of maintaining a particular understanding of racial equality through a unique brand of multiracialism. In this view, public policies tend to be self-perpetuating, with any changes being incremental and non-disruptive (Howlett & Migone, 2011, p. 56). Moreover, any radical paradigmatic shift in policy can only occur as a result of extreme disturbances to existing institutions, beliefs and practices (Hall, 1993). Yet, the 'punctuated-equilibrium' model itself cannot account for the historical basis of Singapore's multiracialism and racial politics. I argue that the 'punctuated-equilibrium' model can be strengthened through a genealogical approach (Foucault 1971) toward Language Policy and Planning (cf Heller 2018), where I trace Singapore's language policies as intricately linked to its nation building at independence and political economy.

The purpose of this paper is not to offer a predictive theory that can anticipate future language policy changes. Neither is it a critique of current studies that have chosen to engage with language policy at the grassroots level of interpretive agency or social justice (Johnson & Ricento, 2013). This paper assesses the 'punctuated-equilibrium' model of public policy analysis (Howlett & Migone, 2011) as an explicatory model that can enrich our understanding of language policy reform. The aims are two-fold:

(i) what value might the punctuated equilibrium model provide for sociolinguists interested in language policy? (ii) How might an approach of genealogy in our field enrich such a paradigm of public policy analysis?

In what follows, I first outline the model of incrementalism and paradigmatic changes in public policy analysis, arguing that it can be a fruitful lens to assess conditions for language policy reform. Through this lens, I provide a précis of Singapore's MT policy as part of a larger system of governance, interwoven in the state's vision of multiracialism, before examining the attendant prospects for change as argued by proponents of reform. I then argue that the model may be strengthened by a genealogical approach to language policy and planning.

The model of incrementalism and paradigmatic changes in public policy-making

In studies on public policy analysis that seek to understand and explain how policy-making is enacted by the bureaucracy, Lindblom's (1979) model of incrementalism is arguably one of the most influential to this day (Howlett & Migone, 2011). At its core, the model tries to perceive policy-making decisions as a systematic activity that recognises the need for political consensus and learning by trial and error, rather than as decisions entirely made through rational planning (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). It posits two central tenets that suggest why policy decisions tends to maintain the status quo without too much change:

1. Policy-making is primarily about the distribution of limited resources amongst stakeholders. It is easier to continue with existing patterns of resource distribution rather than negotiate redistribution that would likely be the result of radically new proposals.
2. The modus operandi of bureaucracies tends to promote the continuation of existing practices. The methods by which bureaucrats identify options, and the procedures and criteria for choice are often standardised and predetermined, thus inhibiting innovation and perpetuating existing arrangements.

(adapted from Howlett & Migone, 2011, p. 56)

This is not to say that paradigmatic, large-scale shifts in policy cannot occur. More recent theorisations build on Lindblom's incrementalism by suggesting a 'punctuated-equilibrium' model of how policy changes tend to happen. Empirical evidence in the historical analysis of policies often point to long periods of incrementalism routinely punctuated by shorter spurts of more drastic change, often without regard to how decisions or policies are made. Sometimes, these sudden drastic changes may be catalysed by external forces that are not directly related to policy, and not part of bureaucratic decision-making or policy-making at all (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Moreover, individual policies ought to be seen as interconnected in a wider system with the need to differentiate lower order policy instruments (eg car emission standards) from higher order policy goals (eg the government's stance toward climate change) (Hall, 1993; Howlett, 2011, p. 43). Incremental changes only affect the lower order implementations without disrupting the overarching, more abstract policy objectives. This model of 'punctuated-equilibrium' has become the orthodox position in the analysis of policy dynamics today (Howlett & Migone, 2011, p. 57).

The model is characterised by four methodological and epistemological axioms, outlining certain conditions that need to be in place in order for radical reform to occur:

1. Any analysis of policy development must be rooted in history and cover long periods of years or decades.
2. Political institutions often serve to reproduce existing higher order policy objectives, thereby tending towards the status quo.
3. 'Paradigmatic' change – a process of fundamental rearrangement of most aspects of policy development – is argued to exist. It is theorised to occur only when the policy and political institutions themselves are transformed. In the absence of such institutional transformation, policy changes are hypothesised to be 'incremental' in nature.
4. Paradigmatic transformations or 'punctuations' are usually the result of 'external perturbations' that cause prevalent disruptions in incumbent ideas, beliefs, actors, institutions and practices.

(adapted from Howlett & Migone, p. 58)

Consequently, without 'external perturbations', it would be expected that existing

policies would tend to arrange themselves in a self-perpetuating or equilibrating manner, allowing incremental changes in settings and instruments to occur, but without altering fundamental policy goals (Howlett & Migone, 2011, p. 58). External shocks can arise from obvious externalities (e.g. an earthquake leading to drastic housing policy reform). It can also originate from pressure that builds up over time as incremental policy changes become unable to keep pace with gradually changing factors (e.g. slow increases in immigration that put pressure on the static medium of instruction policy in schools culminating in dramatic policy changes). It is then important to understand that these external shocks are necessary but not sufficient conditions of major policy change. It is only sufficient when *new* political understandings and images of the world suddenly emerge in response to these shocks, of which the visible effects might include electoral change or civil demonstrations that result in new state responses (Dunn, 2016, p. 52).

For this paper, the model can potentially serve as a theoretical lens to realistically consider whether the conditions are indeed ripe for Singapore's MT policy to undergo substantive change, as advocated by many local linguists. Or, if these disruptions will only lead to incremental changes that ultimately sustain the status quo. The possible external shocks that currently exist in Singapore's language policy landscape today might take the form of increasing immigration, and diverse identities and language practices that are incompatible with a MT policy instituted in 1965. Before I consider these questions, the next section will first situate the MT policy within a larger system of higher order policy goals in Singapore.

The MT policy as part of a larger policy system

Since independence in 1965, the MT policy in Singapore is synonymous with a policy of 'bilingualism', which 'has come to be uniquely defined as "proficiency in English and one other official language"' (Pakir, 1997, p. 58). Thus, all students (from Primary One) have to acquire English and the language denoted by their race (i.e. official Mother Tongues) to gain bilingual proficiency through the state schooling system. Three major racial groupings are accorded official recognition, with the Chinese forming 78% of the population, the Malays 15%, and Indians 7% in 1965

(Chua, 2005, p. 4). Each racial grouping was officially associated with a language supposedly representative of the community – Mandarin for the Chinese, the Malay language for the Malays and Tamil for the Indians. English was chosen as an official language to serve as a bridge for interethnic communication, as well as for commerce and trade on the global stage.

In addition, the MT policy has been consistently justified throughout the years in ministerial speeches and rhetoric that promulgate MTs as an inviolable link to one's ethnic identity, culture and heritage (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999, p. 240; Wee, 2014, p. 652). On the other hand, English is positioned by the state as an inadequate cultural ballast and should only exist as an economic tool (Wee, 2003).

Applying the aforementioned theorisation of public policy systems, the MT policy can be perceived as a lower order policy instrument that serves three higher order policy objectives. First, it is required to anchor Singaporeans to their supposed ethnic and cultural roots. Second, it is bound up with the state's objective of English-knowing bilingualism meant as a bulwark against Western values [transmitted via English (Wee, 2011, p. 117)] and allowing Singapore to advance its global economic ambitions. Third, it has the purpose of ensuring equality amongst the official racial groupings in Singapore (Chua, 2005; Pakir, 2000; Silver, 2005). Its implementation is seen to prevent minority groups (namely the Malays and Indians) from ending up as 'bivalent collectivities' (Fraser, 1995), where they are disadvantaged due to a lack of cultural recognition and socioeconomic maldistribution. In Fraser's (1995) sense of ensuring social justice, it is an 'affirmative' approach of prescribing group rights and distributing linguistic resources (of English and one MT per race) equally amongst them. In other words, the MT policy is not an end in itself, but a constituent connected to a larger policy system (made up of other policy instruments such as the bilingual schooling policy) of cultural maintenance, economic development, and racial equality in Singapore. Theorising the MT policy as part of a larger policy system has implications for assessing its ease of or barriers to reform.

The critique of the MT policy and prospects for change

After five decades of the bilingual policy, essentialist notions of one-race-one-MT have become increasingly undermined. The state's enthusiastic promotion of English has culminated in a massive language shift, so that English is fast becoming the first home language acquired by younger Singaporeans. The most recent population census of 2010 noted that among Singapore residents aged 5-14 years, English was the home language for 52% of the Chinese and 50% of the Indians (an increase from 35.8% and 43.6% respectively since 2000). English was the home language for 26% of Malays aged 5-14 years, up from 9.4% in 2000 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010a, p. 10). The shift to using English as predominant language at home is most starkly seen in younger families with young children, where 71% of Chinese households with Primary One children speak mainly English at home in 2019, compared to 42% in 1999. For Malay families, the corresponding figures are 67% (18 per cent) and, among Indians, 70% (55%) (Tee, 2019).

Almost inevitably, language shift has led to commensurate attitudes toward English and MTs. Bokhorst-Heng et al's (2010) study of 12 dyads pointed to 'a growing, albeit uneven, sense of ownership, in the way they [informants] position themselves as judge and arbitrators of English usage, and their willingness to rely on their intuitions, and the way they identify themselves with a broader community of English speakers' Bokhorst-Heng et al (2010, p. 152). In other words, the study suggests that younger Singaporeans increasingly see English as integral to their sense of self (Bokhorst-Heng et al, 2010, p. 134). Starr and Hiramoto's (2018) survey of 98 individuals (74.5% ages 18–40 and 25.5% over 40) demonstrated how there was ambivalence toward their assigned MTs, particularly amongst those who reported a mixed heritage. Even amongst informants who reported to be only ethnically Chinese, there is a 'lingering skepticism regarding the connection between Mandarin and Singaporean Chinese heritage' (Starr & Hiramoto, 2018, p. 349). Another survey on ethnic identity involving 2020 respondents (Matthews et al, 2017) reported that about 80% of informants in each of the three official ethnic groups viewed speaking good English as important to being considered a Singaporean, more so than ethnic lineage and heritage markers (also see Lim & Matthews, 2017). All of these studies indicate language attitudes and practices that lie in contradiction to the state's dichotomous stance of English as mere functional tool and MTs as representative of cultural identity.

These patterns of linguistic practices and attitudes are exacerbated by two other factors that have intensified diversity within the Singapore polity – immigration and mixed race marriages. First, Singapore has one of the lowest birthrates in the world. The Total Fertility Rate was 1.20 in 2011, and figures for each race were 1.08 (Chinese), 1.06 (Indians) and 1.64 (Malays) in 2012 (National Population and Talent Division, 2012). As a strategy to prevent economic stagnation, this phenomenon is counteracted by the state’s immigration policy that seeks to boost workforce numbers at all skill levels, encouraging eventual settlement and the acquiring of Singapore citizenship (Yeoh & Huang, 2011; Saw, 2013, p. 1). The 1990s to 2000s saw a wave of immigration that led to the non-resident population (ie non-citizens) increase more than four fold from 1990 to 2010. Immigrants who were non-citizens (1.3 million) comprised 25% of Singapore’s total population in 2010 (5.1 million), compared to 10% in 1990 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010b, p. v). It is highly plausible that these new immigrants will bring with them their own linguistic practices and identities that bear no relation to those sanctioned by the Singapore state. Second, the proportion of registered marriages that are between people of different races has increased steadily the last thirty years, perhaps also partly due to more foreigners living in Singapore. The figure was 8.9% in 1997, 16.4% in 2007 and 22.1% in 2017 (Tan, 2018). Such a trend will presumably lead to more hybrid identities and practices within families that are incompatible with the state’s Chinese-Malay-Indian framework.

It is against the backdrop painted above of language shift, changing attitudes and increased demographic diversity that local scholars have consistently drawn attention to the challenges facing the existing MT policy, and called for reform. The key reasons for why reform has to occur are highlighted and summarised below:

Table 1: Summary of arguments for MT policy reform

Arguments for MT policy reform	Proponents
English is now, in terms of heritage, affiliation and proficiency (Rampton 1990), the de facto MT for many	Stroud & Wee, 2010, p. 186; Bokhorst-Heng et al, 2010; Tan, 2014.

Singaporeans.	
The Chinese-Malay-Indian framework is reductionist and does not account for all identities, especially hybrid ones.	Wee, 2002; Stroud & Wee, 2010, p. 198; Wee, 2014, p. 653.
There has been an influx of immigrants, and large numbers of these new immigrants from North America, Europe, Japan, South Korea etc cannot be expected to comply with the MT policy.	Wee & Bokhorst-Heng, 2005, p. 175; Wee, 2014, p. 654.
The economic values of MTs are unequal (vis a vis the value of Mandarin versus Malay and Tamil) so the MT policy prescribing the language one ought to learn is inherently an unfair distribution of linguistic resources.	James, 2003, p. 109-110; Wee, 2003, p. 216-218; Stroud & Wee, 2010, p. 196-197; Tan & Ng, 2011, p. 337.
Increasingly, sections of the public have begun clamouring for liberalisation of MT policies, or have opted for MTs that are not their actual home language.	Wee, 2003, p. 216-217; Jain & Wee, 2019, p. 22-23.

Accordingly, the key point of reform proposed by scholars (amongst whom Lionel Wee has been one of the most prominent and prolific voices) is that the state ought to allow greater individual autonomy in terms of the choice of MT one learns in school – a shift from state prescription to linguistic self-determination. In Fraser’s (1995) terms of realising social justice, this will involve moving from an affirmative approach (of the state unilaterally distributing linguistic resources amongst recognised groups) to a transformative process focused on the rights of the individual, and deconstructing ideological notions of race and language (Stroud & Wee, 2010, p. 198-199; Wee, 2014, p. 658).

Therein lies the first barrier to reforming Singapore’s MT policy. Wee (2011, p. 111-112) acknowledges how the MT policy is entangled within the state’s vision of racial equality (already discussed in the previous section), so that any drastic change to the

way MTs are currently determined would call for a concomitant change in the way linguistic equality is constructed amongst Singapore's official racial groups. This is further complicated by the fact that any attribution of linguistic rights based on essentialism (ie that the racial groups in Singapore are equal because each group is given the right to learn and use their respective MT) is difficult to be revised or withdrawn (Wee, 2011, p. 26), especially from the perspective of minority groups who are most inclined to perceive such revision as a threat to their already vulnerable social position (Wee, 2011, p. 102-104, 121). This is why Wee (2011, p. 163-188) argues for a deliberative democratic way of ensuring language rights. In Singapore's case, MT policy reform would likely not entail a unilateral enactment by the state, but a long-drawn process of deliberation and negotiation between the bureaucracy and the public in order to construct a consensus [ala Habermas' (1989) 'public sphere']:

The tensions between modernist assumptions and the conditions of late modernity are not likely to go away. If at all, they are likely to be exacerbated as Singapore continues with its global city aspirations. 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; (3) encourage a re-evaluation of hitherto taken-for-granted assumptions; and (4) work towards some shared vision of how these different groups and their different valuations can be reconciled with the broader notion of a (changing) Singaporean identity.

Wee (2014, p. 658)

Taking into account the causal demographic factors (of language shift, changing attitudes, and increasing diversity) and Wee's (2014) argument for how language policy reform can occur in Singapore (via deliberative democracy), the prospects for eventual MT policy reform appear to be predicated on three coterminous factors. These factors may also be theorised as potential 'external perturbations' (Howlett & Migone, 2011, p. 58) leading to paradigmatic change in public policy:

- i. The polity will become so diverse with increasing immigration and cross-marriages, and with linguistic practices unaligned with the MT policy;
- ii. that the electorate will be compelled to demand changes and more democratic processes in language policy-making (Wee, 2011, p. 163-188 ; Wee, 2014, p. 658);
- iii. and the current centralised state becomes willing to cede control to democratic negotiations allowing the tweaking of MT policy to accommodate the electorate (Wee, 2014, p. 656-657).

The next section will consider the sufficiency of each of these factors (i-iii) as external shocks that might catalyse new political understandings (Dunn, 2016, p. 52) and drive MT policy reform in Singapore.

Challenges to reform – the insufficiency of ‘external perturbations’

With regard to (i), it has to be noted that due to local racial politics and sensitivity to maintaining racial equality, immigration is highly engineered by the state to preserve existing Chinese-Malay-Indian numerical proportions (Tan, 2003, p. 753; Yeoh & Lin, 2013, p. 35). The state practices a discriminatory framework when selecting potential immigrants (similar to the points-based system in Australia), not only in terms of skills, but includes race as a key criterion. That is, the majority of immigrants have to fit state-sanctioned racial categories of Chinese, Malay or Indian. The ethnic and linguistic diversity posited by Wee and Bokhorst-Heng (2005, p. 175) as a result of talent immigration from North America, Europe, or Japan and South Korea, has not and is unlikely to come to pass. Instead, such selective immigration processes has led to an ossification of racial groupings in Singapore, and presumably circumscribes the range of home languages besides English that may be in use.

Thus, despite increasing rates of immigration, the ethnic composition of Singapore’s residents have remained relatively stable as a deliberate effect of preserving the government’s multiracial policy. Between 1970 and 2010, ‘the Indian resident population rose from 7.0 per cent to 9.2 per cent, while the Chinese resident population fell from 76.2 per cent to 74.1 per cent and the Malay resident population

from 15.0 per cent to 13.3 per cent’ (Saw, 2013, p. 5). In response to the Malay community’s concern about their falling proportion, the Prime Minister himself has explicitly assured the nation through his National Day Rally speech in 2010 that the existing ethnic mix will be maintained (Lin, 2010).

This means that the vast majority of new immigrants who become citizens or permanent residents in Singapore must not only fit existing racial profiles generated by the state (i.e. Chinese/Malay/Indian/Others), but that their proportion is calibrated to the same degree as Singapore’s initial racial mix in 1965. In fair reflection of this ‘frozen’ racial composition in Singapore, the majority of immigrants who have attained residency in Singapore were born in Malaysia, and China, Hong Kong and Macau, followed by those from South Asia. This may also be related to the fact that Total Fertility Rates for the Chinese and Indians have historically lagged behind the Malays (see TFR figures on pg 9).

Table 2: Resident population by place of birth (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010a, p. 6)

Place of birth	Number ('000)		Distribution (%)	
	2000	2010	2000	2010
Total	3273.4	3771.7	100.0	100.0
Singapore	2681.4	2911.9	81.9	77.2
Outside Singapore	592.0	859.8	18.1	22.8
Malaysia	305.4	386.0	9.3	10.2
China, Hong Kong and Macau	155.0	175.2	4.7	4.6
India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka	60.4	123.5	1.8	3.3
Indonesia	32.5	54.4	1.0	1.4

Other Asian countries	22.4	90.1	0.7	2.4
European countries	5.5	13.4	0.2	0.4
USA and Canada	3.7	7.2	0.1	0.2
Australia and New Zealand	2.6	4.8	0.1	0.1
Others	4.4	5.3	0.1	0.1

Such a rationale of racial recruitment can imply two linked assumptions: (a) race is seen by the state as an anchoring factor, where cultural similarity would lead to affinity for the local; (b) immigrants who already appear to fit Singapore's official races would be more politically acceptable to the existing polity. Ethnically Chinese immigrants already proficient in Mandarin are assumed to be less likely to upset the racial and cultural equilibrium in Singapore. It is therefore doubtful if the level of ethnolinguistic diversity due to immigration under current conditions will ever reach a tipping point that sufficiently disrupts the state's MT policy. Moreover, any increase in mixed-race individuals and hybrid identities from mixed marriages is likely to be numerically offset by the scale of new immigrants from the Greater China region and the Indian subcontinent.

With regard to (ii), while democratic demand for participatory rights in Singapore might be increasing and younger Singaporeans might have more ambivalent attitudes toward their official MTs (Starr & Hiramoto, 2018), 50 years of the bilingual and MT policy have also seen segments of the existing citizenry imbibing and aligning themselves with the state's ideology of MTs being linked to racial identity and cultural practice. The reproduction of state ideologies with regard to MTs is often seen in public discussions on the subject in local newspaper forums. For example, in 2013, a newspaper opinion piece referred to the aforementioned changing demographics and raised the possibility of recognising English as an official MT in Singapore (Lu, 2013). While some letters to the forum expressed agreement, there

was also an equal number, if not more vociferous respondents who rejected such a scenario. The excerpts below are from letters against the idea of English as MT.

...it [English] has historically never been our native language and we must recognise that. The British may have their dialects, but the English language is part of their societal make-up... Despite it having been our medium of instruction for a few decades, I doubt that we are ready to make it our mother tongue.

(Chee, 2013)

...it [English] is a marker in the way every society employs markers to separate the local from the alien. It is code for “not us”. This interplay of how English is part of us yet kept out of our core psyche has, up to now, defined the balance between being quintessentially local-born Singaporean and imperfect Western cultural clone. That is why the local-born instinctively looks askance at the claim of ‘English as our mother tongue’.

(Wong, 2013)

Bilingualism has been the foundation of our survival and economic success. If English were our mother tongue, what other ‘mother’ tongue should students choose to study? Our mother tongues retain important links to our cultural and linguistic heritage as we work, communicate and enjoy living in a multiracial society where English language is dominant... The choice of English as the first or second language of major economies is probably due to its relatively easy-to-learn characteristics and its common usage in diplomacy, science and technology, academia and international finance after World War II. The key in this century is mastery of English as a vehicle to communicate, while preserving our mother tongues.

(Chan, 2013)

As should be apparent, these arguments against English as MT include notions that English cannot be representative of Singaporean culture, English is only learnt for its

economic advantages, and that only official MTs can offer a link to Singaporeans' cultural roots of Chinese, Malay and Indian. All of these arguments are a direct reflection of dichotomous state ideologies regarding English as economic tool and MTs as cultural bind (Wee, 2003). This reproduction of state ideologies by citizens is corroborated in Starr and Hiramoto's (2018) study, as most of their respondents also demonstrated alignment with state discourses regarding their assigned MTs being representative of their heritage (Starr & Hiramoto, 2018, p. 12).

Consequently, even as Wee (2014) extols the need to deconstruct notions of race and ideology as a first step towards MT policy reform in Singapore, it would mean coming up against a substantial segment of the population against such reform in the first place, many of whom see the cultural significance of English and official MTs as a zero-sum game (i.e. one can only embrace either English OR official MTs as part of one's core identity). As it stands, there has been no organised grassroots movement clamouring for the government to change how MTs are assigned, even if certain individuals might try to circumvent the rules². On the other hand, calls to preserve and offer protection to official MTs (especially Mandarin-Chinese) in the face of language shift to English have frequently occurred in the press (e.g. Ng, 2017), including proposals by local linguists (e.g. Ng, 2014).

With regard to (iii), and perhaps most importantly, the Singapore state remains highly centralised, with the ruling political party showing no signs of democratisation. The People's Action Party (PAP) has been in power since 1959, and the state has often been described as an illiberal democracy (The Economist, 2017, 2019) where elections occur, but which institutionally favour the incumbent³. In characterising the political economy of Singapore, Ong (2007) similarly depicts how political power remains concentrated in the hands of the state, while principles of neo-liberalism are unevenly but strategically applied across various arms of government.

Under these circumstances, the state's centralised stance on maintaining its brand of

² Jain and Wee (2019) observe that increasing numbers of Indian families are opting for Hindi as MT for their children, despite using Tamil or other Indian languages as a home language.

³ Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the PAP has always dominated more than two-thirds of available parliamentary seats (allowing it to amend the constitution at will), and won at least 60% of votes in all General Elections.

multiracialism and racial equality has not softened, but can be seen to harden. One apparent example was the amendment of the constitution in 2016 to reflect a new racial criterion in the nomination of candidates for presidential elections. Specifically, the presidential election would be reserved for a particular official racial group if it has not been represented for five terms (30 years). 2017's presidential elections in Singapore was thus reserved for a Malay candidate. This move was ostensibly to protect the rights of each racial group and ensure fair political representation, but was instead viewed by many (including members of the Malay community) as unmeritocratic, and a political manoeuvre to prevent Tan Cheng Bock, a popular government critic, ethnic Chinese, and former PAP member of parliament, from contesting (Wong, 2017). Far from acceding to public demands, the Prime Minister acknowledged these sentiments as a 'political minus' for the government, but insisted it was a 'fundamental change for the long-term good for Singapore' (Ng, 2019).

In this way, changes to racial and MT policies thus far⁴ must be perceived as mere tweaks and 'incremental' in nature, not indicative of paradigmatic shifts. The broad policy objectives of racial equality and the 'affirmative' (Fraser, 1995) approach of distributing resources and rights amongst racial groups have not changed, and continue to be reflected and made manifest in major, more recent policy instruments such as the reserved presidency. It would be overly optimistic to claim that the state is ready and willing to open a public space for negotiation of the existing MT policy and related racial policies. This is especially when the ethnolinguistic diversity of immigration remains strictly controlled, and the state's definition of official MTs retains a significant level of support amongst the polity.

The 'punctuated equilibrium' model thus demonstrates two layers of obstacles to MT policy reform. First, the MT policy itself is a lower order instrument that supports a higher order objective of racial equality, so it is tied to other policies that reinforce the same policy objectives. Changing the MT policy will mean a need to change all these other commensurate policies such as immigration and the higher order policy objective. Second, as I have argued, the potential 'external perturbations' posited by

⁴ These tweaks include the provision of other Indian languages besides Tamil as MT from 1990, and the move to allow a double-barrelled choice of race for newborns to reflect mixed heritage in 2010 (Kor, 2010).

local linguists are unlikely to trigger ‘new political understandings’ (Dunn, 2016, p. 52) and be sufficient conditions that lead to reform. In this way, the model competently demonstrates the relationship across various policy instruments, and how these policies are resistant to external shock.

Yet, the model does not address why the original higher order objective of racial equality and multiracialism remains immutable, continuing to buttress language policy and planning 50 years after its institution. This is to the extent that the state is willing to enforce its brand of multiracialism in the face of public discontent and political backlash against the reserved presidency. Moreover, there is a need to consider how the MT policy is connected to the wider political economy, so as to uncover other factors for its maintenance. What are the historical and sociopolitical conditions that contributed to this unique brand of multiracialism in Singapore? How might this higher order policy goal and attendant MT policy continue to be tied to the local political economy? Answering these questions might go further in helping to explain the difficulty in reforming Singapore’s MT policy. For this, there is a need to turn to a genealogical approach to understand the bases and perpetuation of racial and language ideologies produced by the state.

Partisan challenges to reform - a genealogy of language ideology and policy in Singapore

A genealogical stance is based on an intent to uncover how everyday understandings become ‘imaginary themes bearing on and continually accompanying immemorial beliefs’ (Foucault, 1971: 16). In Foucault’s approach to historiography, the production of discourse (such as those by the state) is particularly important because it denotes the subject of inquiry that form the conditions through which we consider certain statements to be the ‘truth’ (Ball, 2012). The goal of genealogy, therefore, is to investigate the taken-for-granted timelessness of the system, uncovering the patterns and ordering of discourse produced by the state (Doherty, 2007). This is not to say that genealogy constructs the actual truth or reality, but that the approach offers an alternative account to seeing how the present came to be. Moreover, a genealogical approach is germane to the punctuated-equilibrium model’s axiom of being rooted in historical analysis (Howlett & Migone, 2011, p. 58), so the two paradigms need not

be theoretically incompatible. Though in this case, I look not only at the evolution of policies, but also towards the state's justification of policies via political statements. It is therefore worth returning to the historical origins of Singapore as a nation and its incipient nation-building processes.

Partisan nation-building

Singapore's independence in 1965 was a result of forced circumstance, as the state was abruptly expelled from the Federation of Malaysia (which itself was a former British colony). Historical accounts generally agree that a key determiner for geopolitical separation was a dispute between the Singapore and Malaysian federal government on the guarantee of affirmative action and special rights for Malays in Malaysia (Cheah, 2002, pp. 98-102). Demographically, Singapore's majority Chinese population challenged the predominance of Malays as the 'indigenous' race in the rest of the federal states (Cheah, 2002, p. 94). Singapore's separation from Malaysia was thus a culmination of rising Malay-Chinese tensions, which manifested as a series of racial riots in 1964. Before then, Singapore as a sovereign nation was not an idea nor identity actively pursued by the population (Chua, 1998, p. 29). Further, its residents were largely made up of the descendants of immigrants or were immigrants themselves, so that there were no 'myths of shared traditions' that bound the peoples (Chua, 1998, p. 30; 2005, p. 3).

As already mentioned, the Chinese were the most numerous and organized via various clan and business associations that they established themselves. However, the presence of Singapore as a Chinese state would not be politically acceptable in a Southeast Asian region dominated by Malay-speaking peoples in Malaysia and Indonesia (Chua, 2005, p. 4). The Malays were indigenous to the locality, but were a numerical minority unable to dominate local politics. The Indians were fewer in number than the Malays, and were also mostly immigrants like the Chinese (Chua, 2005, p. 4). Thus denied of a common history and identity to justify Singapore's *raison d'être*, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) turned to economic 'capitalist development' to fill the ideological vacuum and unite its citizens (Chua, 1998, p. 31).

In this vein, Singapore was characterised at independence by the government as economically vulnerable without the larger Malaysian hinterland of a market for its manufactured goods, and without natural resources that it could easily exploit. Chua (1998) describes this discursive construction as such:

‘Political separation [from Malaysia], which led to the apparent collapse of the anticipated larger Malaysian market for Singapore’s fledgling industrialization, might be said to have placed the economic viability of the island nation in serious jeopardy. The PAP government astutely seized upon this apprehensiveness, turning it into an ideological means with which to highlight the problem of guaranteeing the ‘survival’ of the new nation and how this could only be achieved through economic development.’

(Chua 1998, p. 31)

Importantly, the state upholds the same rhetoric to this very day by casting Singapore’s survival and vulnerability as a permanent condition. Thus, Singapore’s economic success is often denoted by the state as fragile and easily compromised without the continued care of a capable government in the hands of the PAP (Tan, 2018, pp. 13-14).

The notion of multiracialism and equality amongst all races was then developed out of a perceived necessity to enable all to have a sense of citizenship and belonging to the newly-formed nation, as well as a prerequisite to maintaining harmony between racial groups and national stability (Chua, 2005, p. 18; Rocha & Yeoh, 2020). As Chua (1998) surmises,

‘By promoting group rights in a cultural sphere which is restrictively circumscribed by racial boundaries, the state is able to claim for itself a neutral stance towards all racial groups, without prejudice or preference... it erases the grounds upon which a racial group may make claims on behalf of its own interests without ostensibly violating the idea of group equality that is the foundation of multiracialism itself.’

(Chua, 1998, p. 36)

Without belabouring the origins of racial definitions and their use for administrative expediency, suffice it to say that the newly independent Singapore government inherited from their former British colonial masters, a convenient brand of social classification which was ‘orientalist’ and colonialist in approach (Purushotam, 1998, pp. 57-64). The concepts of race and multiracialism were hence used to legitimate and rationalise strategies of administration, where ‘race is essentialised as an unchanging feature of the population so as to ground various specific ways of disciplining the social body’ (Chua, 1998, p. 34). In this way, race was strictly defined by patriarchal descent⁵, and one’s race would determine one’s culture as well as the languages one will have to acquire in the state education system.

In Kathiravelu’s (2017) analysis, the Chinese-Malay-Indian model allowed the further legitimisation of the ruling party’s position by maintaining a divided social structure that gives rise to a constant anxiety amongst the populace that this harmonious relationship between the races might breakdown. This, in turn, reinforces the ideology of survival/vulnerability and sustains a belief that only a strong PAP-led state can manage Singapore’s diversity.

Consequently, at the very outset, Singapore’s nationalism was based upon commercial interests and its precarious position (as described by the state) in a global market. This was coupled with the need for a lingua franca for inter-racial communication; the need to foster cohesion amongst various linguistic and ethnic groups, whilst ensuring equality for all the official races. The exigencies of nation-building, as characterised by the ruling party of the time, then led to the choice of according official status to one language per racial group. English was chosen as a racially ‘neutral’ language that could serve as a bridge for interethnic communication, and essential for industrialisation and economic survival of the nation (Gopinathan, 1980, p. 181).

Language ideologies and ‘commercial nationalism’

⁵ From 2010, one’s race can now be a choice between that of either parent, or a double-barrelled incorporation of both (Kor, 2010).

Crucially, the ethnolinguistic and instrumental ideologies behind language policies are reflected in and perpetuated by government discourse even to this very day. In Wee's (2003) account,

'The Government's attempt to accommodate the presence of English alongside the mother tongues has therefore led to a relationship of complementarity being constructed in the sense that English and the mother tongues are assigned to separate and non-competing domains. English is the language of access to Western science and technology while the mother tongues are supposed to provide links to ancient cultures and values.'

(Wee, 2003, p. 216)

This is borne out by the following excerpts from two speeches. The first is a speech by Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's then Prime Minister in 1984 to the Chinese community. The second is by a cabinet minister launching the Speak Good English Movement in 2010.

'One abiding reason why we have to persist in bilingualism is that English will not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue... Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. It also unites the different dialect groups. 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.'

(Bokhorst-Heng, 1998, p. 252)

'First, why we use English in Singapore. It is certainly not our mother tongue. We use English because it is currently the language of science, technology, commerce and the internet. In other words, it is a portal to knowledge. We use English because we are a multi-lingual, multi-racial society – and English is the neutral language that enables all of us to communicate with each other. We also use English because Singapore is a small and open city, and we need to be relevant to the world – to provide

goods and services; and to trade with all corners of the globe. English is the most common second language in the world.’

(Balakrishnan, 2010)

The state’s consistent rhetoric of instrumentalism has also pervaded its discourse surrounding Mother Tongues, where the economic value of learning these languages are emphasised in addition to their cultural value. Anticipating the importance of China’s growing economy in 1985, Ong Teng Cheong, then Second Deputy Prime Minister, opined that:

‘The Chinese learn and speak Mandarin not only because it is the common spoken language of the Chinese community, representing our roots, but also because the economic value of Mandarin is increasing, particularly after China has started its economic transformation and adopted the open-door policy ... We shall no doubt face competition in our trade and economic activities with China, but we have an edge over others in our bilingual ability.’

(Bokhorst-Heng, 1998, p. 254)

With regard to the Malay language, the Home Affairs Minister suggested that ‘the rapid economic growth of South-east Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, would place Malay in a more important position’ (The Straits Times, 4 July 1994).

By producing such discourse aimed at justifying its language policies, the Singapore state’s endeavour of nation building might be characterised as one of ‘co-creation’ where citizens are encouraged to identify state and economic imperatives as their own (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011, p. 600). In Singapore’s case, and in particular, the positioning of English and MTs as it is to be used by citizens invokes the logic of neoliberal capital in a hegemonic global market, where neoliberalism might refer to a mode of governance that encourages ‘people to be free and self-managing in different spheres of everyday life’ (Ong, 2007, p. 4). In Foucault’s (2008) terms, Singapore’s stance toward languages might be an instantiation of ‘how the overall exercise of political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy’ (Foucault,

2008, p. 131). Such state discourse contributes to the ‘multiplication of the enterprise form within the social body . . . It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 148). That is, English and MTs are to be learnt by citizens for its instrumental value so as to enable the whole of society to be competitive in a global neoliberal regime, a form of ‘commercial nationalism’ (Volcic, 2009; Lu, forthcoming).

Beyond the policy considerations and interconnectivity highlighted by the ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model, a genealogical approach can enrich our anticipation of the ideological bases for language policy. In Singapore’s case, the lack of reform of its MT policy is also intricately tied to the partisan discursive construction of Singapore as a nation always on the brink, of economic vulnerability, and precarious racial harmony. Shifting from an affirmative to transformative approach (Fraser 1995) by deconstructing current notions of race and MT and de-emphasising racial constructs, as Wee (2011) suggests, will likely undermine this very edifice on which the ruling party builds its legitimacy and right to rule. Further, the MT policy is a reflection of the state’s neoliberal stance, where Singapore and its citizens have been positioned to compete in the global economy. We are reminded by the ‘punctuated equilibrium model’ that the MT policy is part of a larger network of policy instruments, in this case, of advancing the nation’s economic progress. Reforming the MT policy by recognising English as a Mother Tongue will necessitate a new narrative for why Singaporeans have to remain bilingual. Viewed through its current neo-liberal lens, Singapore and its citizens risk becoming less competitive in the global economy. The persistence of the MT policy in its current form might therefore arguably be contiguous with the position of the PAP as the ruling party in Singapore, and its centralised, yet neo-liberal style of governance (cf Ong, 2007).

Conclusion

This paper suggests an explicatory model for language policy reform (or lack thereof) at the level of the state. This is accomplished by assessing the value of the ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model of public policy analysis (Howlett & Migone, 2011,

p. 57), which can be strengthened by a genealogical approach. The case of the MT policy in Singapore is used to illustrate such an endeavour.

First, the MT policy must be perceived as a lower order policy tool enmeshed in a network of other policies (cf Howlett, 2011, p. 43), in order to fulfill higher order policy objectives of multiracialism and racial equality in Singapore. As Wee (2014) notes, reforming the MT policy will involve a commensurate shift in how race and its link to language is understood in Singapore. It will mean transforming the manner through which racial equality is maintained, and will affect how these other related policies are implemented.

Second, based on the reasons that local linguists have given for why the MT policy should change, I argued for the conceptualization of these conditions as plausible ‘external perturbations’ (cf Howlett & Migone, 2011, p. 58) that might initiate new political reactions and understandings (Dunn, 2016, p. 52), and serve as a catalyst for language policy reform – (i) increasing ethnolinguistic diversity incompatible with the MT policy; (ii) a polity compelled to clamour for and participate in change; (iii) a state willing to negotiate and democratise its policy formulation processes. However, in line with the theorisation that institutions tend to reproduce existing policies (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003), the state’s reductionist ideology of multiracialism often results in a whole system of attendant policies and state discourses (e.g. in immigration and affirmative racial rights) that serve to prop up, reinforce, and indeed, constitute the ideology itself.

Finally, the perpetuation of this brand of multiracialism is accounted for by attending to the historical bases of racial and language ideologies in Singapore’s nation-building. I argued that multiracialism and the MT policy can also be perceived as lending legitimacy to the PAP’s partisan interests in holding on to political power, as well as its neo-liberal stance of governance.

This paper presents a useful case for language policy analysis that focuses on the procedures of policy-making at the level of the state. It is of relevance to other contexts since the kinds of issues that Singapore is attempting to deal with (i.e. global mobility, a desire to maintain a sense of national unity in the face of patterns of

migration) are not unique to this nation-state. As the ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model might theorise, Singapore’s MT policy is part of a larger system of policies and institutions that perpetuates itself. The ruling party’s essentialist brand of multiracialism and partisan interests in legitimating its political power, are seemingly incompatible with rising diversity. Yet, far from affording impetus for change, these have instead contributed to *inertia* in the state’s language management. Inertia is an apt metaphor for the ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model of policy dynamics. It draws attention to the observation that the bureaucracy has a tendency to do nothing or stay the course in its actions, unless acted upon by a sufficient external force.

This is not an apology for state language policies that are ultimately disempowering and inequitable. But even as analysts critique the effects of language policies, we must not forget how the policies exist as part of a larger political economy and institutional system. Reforming the MT policy in Singapore necessarily involves a concomitant transformation of how Singaporeans perceive themselves as (de)racialised individuals and a polity, and possibly, a change in regime. It will not be a task without conflict.

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