Vanessa Ellen Mei Yin Nah, Francesco Cavallaro, Ivan Panović and Bee Chin Ng*

Multilingualism among the elderly Chinese in Singapore: an oral account

https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2020-2119
Published online May 24, 2021

Abstract: This study aims to qualitatively document the histories of Singapore's Chinese multilingual elderly. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Chinese Singaporeans aged 75 years and above on how and why they acquired the languages they speak and their attitudes towards these linguistic varieties, of which many are declining in usage. Five participants were multilingual and spoke three or more languages fluently; two spoke only two languages and were included for a balanced and holistic perspective. Common themes from the interviews were identified and discussed. One key finding was that communicative necessity and practicality naturally fuelled language learning. Outside of the home, multilingual individuals acquired varieties from conversing with friends, relatives and customers, or as an educational requirement. Language was tied to ethnic belonging, but, generally, pride to speak a linguistic variety was linked to its functional value, not its associated ethnic identity. Unhappiness was expressed at the waning of the Chinese vernaculars and Baba Malay in Singapore today. Such language loss was seen as a sombre, but unavoidable consequence of Singapore's globalisation and modernisation.

Keywords: elderly; language loss; multilingualism; Singapore

1 Introduction

Mrs Rose Choo is an 81-year-old Singaporean who speaks seven languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Standard Malay, Baba Malay, Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. Such multilingualism is not uncommon among Singapore's Chinese elderly, many of whom were born into circumstances that facilitated the

***Corresponding author: Bee Chin Ng**, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore, E-mail: mbcng@ntu.edu.sg. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9189-5898
Vanessa Ellen Mei Yin Nah, Francesco Cavallaro and Ivan Panović, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9376-0513 (F. Cavallaro). https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7021-3293 (I. Panović)

acquisition of many languages (see Section 2). This qualitative research details their histories and explains their perspectives on the current state of the languages they speak, many of which are on the decline in Singapore today.

2 Background

Strategically located at the heart of international trade in Southeast Asia, pre-colonial Singapore was a "linguistic maze" (Kuo 1980) born out of migrants from countries such as Malaya, India, Panjab, Java, Sumatra, Arabia and Armenia, who came to Singapore for trade and commerce. Singapore's establishment as a tariff-free port in 1819 continued to attract foreign traders. As its port and economy grew, the bright commercial prospects the country offered also attracted migrants from countries such as India and China, who were escaping poverty and political unrest (Leimgruber 2013). An increasing number of people from different cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds assimilated and connected on the island, contributing to a diverse range of languages that thrived on it.

Singapore's first census, taken in 1824, reported a large number of different people categorized by their ethnicity, such as Europeans, Bugis, Armenians, Arabs, Indians, Malays, and Chinese (Bolton and Ng 2014). These groups ranged from the native Malays to others who had moved to Singapore in search of work and trade opportunities, and presumably brought their own languages with them. The following years saw thousands more migrants coming into Singapore, leading to a rapid increase in its population. This influx of migrants formed the multicultural and multiracial "melting pot" that is Singapore. Malay as well as a pidginised form known as Bazaar Malay were the prevalent languages. A third variety known as Baba Malay was spoken by the Peranakan Chinese (Chinese who settled in Southeast Asia from as early as the 17th century and who married local Malay women) (Henderson 2003; Platt 1980).

By the 1880s the Chinese were the majority ethnic group, having overtaken the Malays in terms of numbers. In particular, the Hokkien were the largest group among the Chinese and Hokkien was employed as a lingua franca for communication across the different Chinese groups, while Bazaar Malay was the interethnic lingua franca (Lee 2012). However, it was not unusual for speakers of different languages to learn the tongue of their interlocutors through interaction, usually out of necessity to trade and conduct business, or to simply communicate with their neighbours. It was, therefore, fairly common for Singaporeans, especially the Chinese, to know six to eight languages (each to different degrees of proficiency) as a result of language contact. According to the first pre-independence census carried out in 1957, there were at least 33 distinct ethnolinguistic speech

communities in 1950s Singapore, of which 20 spoke languages of genetically diverse origins (Kuo 1980). Even though Hokkien was the most widely spoken Chinese language, with 33% of the population speaking it, other Chinese languages such as Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew and Shanghainese were also spoken (Bolton and Ng 2014). People growing up in pre-independence Singapore were exposed to a multitude of different languages. These people are now in their seventies and eighties in present-day Singapore (Bolton and Ng 2014).

2.1 Singapore

Singapore is a multilingual and multi-ethnic country. The total population is currently around 5.7 million, with 4.03 million being citizens and residents. The ethnic composition has remained largely unchanged over the last 60–70 years and, currently, 74.3% of the resident population is Chinese, 13.4% is Malay, 9.0% is Indian and 3.2% make up the "Others" category (Department of Statistics 2019). In the 1950s, the government decided on four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. English is the language of business, administration and law, and the main medium of education. Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are the designated Mother Tongue Languages (Ministry of Education 2011) arbitrarily assigned by the government to the Chinese, Malays and the Indians respectively, regardless of the actual language spoken at home (see Cavallaro and Ng 2014; Cavallaro et al. 2020). In the 1950s and '60s, Hokkien was the language most understood and spoken by Singaporeans. It was understood by 97% of the Chinese and nearly 80% of the population. Kuo (1980) reports that many Singaporeans from all backgrounds also spoke a form of Malay called Bazaar Malay and that 60% of the Indians spoke Tamil at home. Only 1.8% of the population reported speaking English at home and, remarkably, only 0.1% of the population spoke Mandarin at home.

The launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) in 1979 signalled the start of the rapid shift from Hokkien and other Chinese varieties to Mandarin and English (Bolton and Ng 2014). Over the years, the SMC and the bilingual education policy that has promoted bilingualism in English and a Mother Tongue have resulted in English and Mandarin displacing the Chinese language varieties within the ethnic Chinese community (Cavallaro and Ng 2014; Cavallaro et al. 2020). Table 1 shows that Malay and Tamil have also decreased in use and Mandarin has not increased from 45–47% in the last 15 years.

Singapore has a high rate of multilingualism in the generations that constitute her elderly population today. However, census data does not successfully capture the multilingualism of individual Singaporeans as it only collects data on the "languages used most frequently at home". While it acknowledges a slightly wider

Table 1: A comparison of English and Mother Tongue use in Singapore 1980–2015.

Ethnic Group	Language	1980	1990	2000	2010	2015
Chinese	English	10.2	21.4	23.9	32.6	37.4
	Mandarin	13.1	30.0	45.1	47.7	46.1
	Chinese vernaculars	76.2	48.2	30.7	19.2	16.1
Malays	English	2.3	5.7	7.9	17.0	21.5
	Malay	96.7	94.1	91.6	82.6	78.5
Indians	English	24.3	34.3	35.6	41.6	44.3
	Tamil	52.2	43.5	42.9	36.6	37.7
	Malay	8.6	14.1	11.6	7.9	5.6
	Other Indian languages	14.9	8.1	9.2	13.2	12.0

Source: Cavallaro and Ng 2014; Department of Statistics 2010, 2015.

range of varieties – identifying English, Malay, Mandarin, Chinese 'Dialects'[1] and Indian Languages – among these no distinction is made between Standard Malay and Baba Malay. The category "Chinese Dialects" only gives data on Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese, while all other Chinese varieties are broadly termed "Other Chinese Dialects". "Indian Languages" are divided only into Tamil and "Other Indian Languages" (Department of Statistics 2015). Non-official varieties are more significant in terms of proportion of speakers for the older age groups, as can be seen in Figure 1, which shows the English, Mandarin and Chinese vernaculars most frequently spoken at home by Chinese Singaporeans according to age group. The small number of Chinese "dialect" speakers in the young to middle age groups, which make up the majority of the population, could be the reason why the Singapore's National Statistical Office does not survey other non-official languages. Thus, census data does not sufficiently or accurately reflect the diversity of linguistic varieties within the Chinese. Malay and Indian communities.

The data in Figure 1 can be further broken down by considering the results for the major Chinese vernaculars spoken in Singapore (see Figure 2). The results for the younger Chinese Singaporeans show them to be bilingual in Mandarin and English, and it is only as the age increases that the number of languages increases as well.

In these respects, census data may be misleading if taken at face value. There is a lack of information on the complexities of the multilingualism exhibited by Singapore's elderly generations and a consequent lack of understanding of the intricacy of this multilingualism.

1 Note that the term "dialect" in Singapore refers to all the Chinese languages except for Mandarin, even though they are mutually unintelligible.

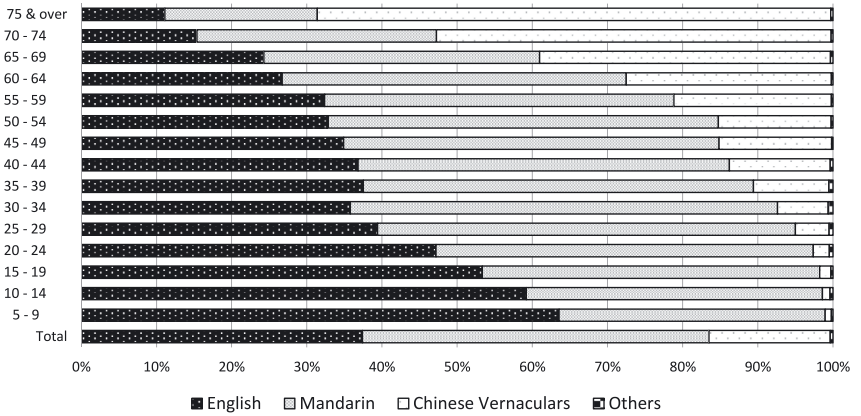

Figure 1: 2015 Singapore census data on English, Mandarin and Chinese vernaculars most frequently spoken at home by Chinese Singaporeans, sorted by age group (Department of Statistics 2015).

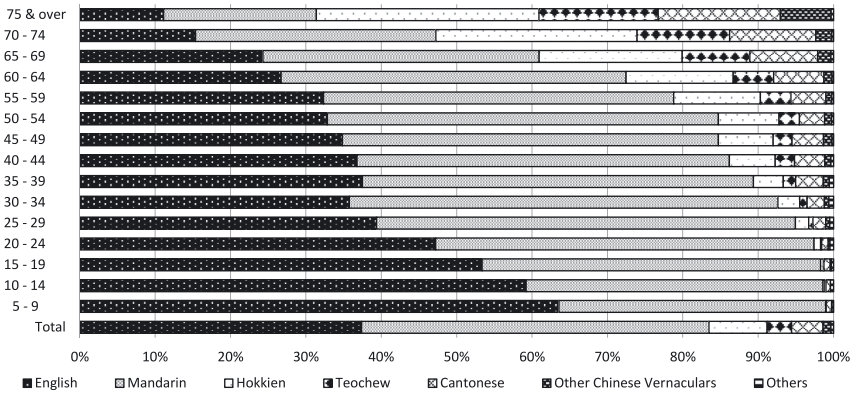

Figure 2: 2015 Singapore census data on the varieties most frequently spoken at home by Chinese Singaporeans, sorted by age group (Department of Statistics 2015).

2.2 Research aims

This study aims to investigate how the negotiation of linguistic differences in pre-independence Singapore led to Singapore's current older generations being generally highly multilingual. The study also endeavours to explore the attitudes of older generation Singaporeans on the gradual loss of their languages over time. By interviewing members of this generation on their multilingualism, this paper

seeks to capture the personal stories of Singapore's older Chinese generations to qualitatively document the nation's historical linguistic complexity. In so doing, the authors hope that it leads to a better understanding and appreciation of Singapore's intricate linguistic heritage.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Participants

A total of seven Chinese Singaporeans aged 75 and above were interviewed. The participant number was limited to enable depth of analysis, as this study sought not to quantify Singapore's multilingualism among the older generations, but to qualitatively study and document its history and their stories. The criteria for choosing the participants was that they should have grown up at around the time when the British relinquished colonial control over Singapore and the implementation of Singapore's language policies. That is, from the late 1950s to early 1960s (Section 2.1). This would mean that their formative years coincided with the period in Singapore's history that was fundamental to the forming of the country's linguistic ecology. The selection was made through the principal author's own network. Five participants were multilingual individuals, two males and three females, and were selected based on the criterion of being able to speak at least three languages. The remaining two participants were bilingual individuals, both females, who spoke only two languages. These two individuals were interviewed as exception cases to provide an alternative perspective and reflect a more holistic and balanced view. The determination of whether or not the participant could speak the language was based on self-reported data. All participants were Singaporean, had lived in Singapore all their lives, and were either Chinese or Peranakan.

3.2 Procedure

Interviews were conducted in the participants' own homes for a familiar setting in which they would feel at ease. Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to consent to the interview being audio-recorded for data collection purposes. The interviews were semi-structured, comprising a set of pre-set questions, and any other related questions asked on the spot that naturally followed from participants' responses. The content of the interviews revolved around the circumstances under which the participants had acquired the language(s) they speak, including factors

such as home and neighbourhood environment, education, employment, marriage and family. Discussion was also carried out on their attitudes towards the languages that they speak and grew up with, usually the non-official languages, and the languages more commonly spoken by Singaporean youths today. Such topics often involved some appraisal of past and existing language policies, the importance of English and Mandarin in Singapore today, and the concept of language loss.

A limitation of this research that must be acknowledged is that, to avoid any meaning loss or alteration that may result from translation, all interviews were conducted in English, with some informal code-switching. This necessitated all participants to be English speakers, which narrowed the scope of participants in terms of excluding multilingual individuals who can speak many languages, but not English. The interviews were conducted by the first author who is a Singaporean Chinese and fluent in Mandarin and English.

The interviews were transcribed from the audio recordings and analysed thematically. Common denominators were identified of how and why participants came to acquire the varieties in their linguistic repertoire and became multilingual, or, in the case of the two exceptions, did not. Analysis was also conducted on the attitudes, mindsets, and opinions of the participants on their languages, their importance, and related language policies.

4 Findings

4.1 Multilingual participants

4.1.1 Mrs Rose Choo

Mrs Rose Choo declared that she speaks seven linguistic varieties fluently: English, Standard Malay, Baba Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. She is an 81-year-old Chinese whose father was born in Singapore with mixed Teochew and Peranakan ancestry and whose Teochew mother came to Singapore from China at the age of 14. She grew up in a family of 10 sisters, all of whom were brought up by their paternal grandmother, a Peranakan from Malacca. Thus, though Mrs Choo acknowledges her Peranakan upbringing, she identifies herself as a Teochew.

In Mrs Choo's childhood, her Peranakan grandmother and other paternal relatives spoke only Baba Malay. Baba Malay was hence the language Mrs Choo and her nine sisters used to communicate with their grandmother, who was the key matriarchal figure and head of the household. Mrs Choo's mother spoke only

Teochew. This gave rise to the interesting circumstance in which the daughters learnt both varieties and often served as communication links. Mrs Choo's father was educated and spoke English, and preferred to use this with his daughters. Additionally, Mrs Choo described her neighbourhood *kampong*[2] environment as "one row of houses where we stayed, 23 houses in a row, all mixed dialect", namely Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. She thus acquired these Chinese varieties from interacting with her *kampong* friends.

Mrs Choo stressed that her parents "let us go free. They don't care, speak what you like." She and her sisters switched from one language to another based on whom they were speaking with, and were afforded the liberty to choose their second language in school, the first being English as an educational requirement. While her sisters all chose to study Mandarin, Mrs Choo decided to learn Standard Malay. This decision was in part due to her finding Chinese characters difficult to write and wanting to "escape" learning them. However, to quote Mrs Choo, "the main reason is in my time, Singapore and Malaysia, we were about to merge. So, I was thinking if I take Bahasa Melayu [Malay], I gain something."

Due to the need to help out with her family's financial situation, Mrs Choo was forced to leave school halfway through Primary 6: "I left school with a broken heart. I couldn't study further." She began working at the age of around 17 years old in the sales industry, where she made use of the languages she already knew and began picking up Mandarin as well. In her adult and later years Mrs Choo continued to learn Mandarin from listening to radio stations and watching television programmes broadcast in this language.

Mrs Choo married a Hokkien man who learnt Teochew during their courtship and after their marriage. Today, husband and wife speak Teochew and English to each other every day. Like her own parents, Mrs Choo did not encourage her children to speak a particular language, but Teochew became the natural, "automatic" language of the home and was the first language she spoke with her children. Both parents began speaking English to their children after they entered kindergarten. Mrs Choo never taught her children Malay, believing them able to learn it themselves by interacting with their companions if they had an interest. "They don't even know how to say a word, how to teach? [If] they want to pick up, they go and mix with their friend […] I just leave it to nature."

Although it was mandatory for her children to learn Mandarin in school, Mrs Choo felt that, given the choice, she would still have wanted her children to learn it as their second language over any other language: "Still I think the Mandarin they picked up is the right move […] for future reference, because I know this language

2 *Kampong* is the Malay word for 'village' and refers to housing settlements before Singapore's modern urban development.

is very important." The value Mrs Choo places on the practicality and usefulness of a language is a core reason she believes her mother tongues now on the decline, such as Baba Malay and Teochew, should not be taught in schools. "I don't think you should put Baba Malay as a school subject. It's better you put French, Spanish all these […] because the world needs these sorts of languages. Sometimes, you are posted to a country, you have to know the language." Mrs Choo believes that schools should teach languages for practical purposes. Minority languages, like Baba Malay, are tied to ethnic heritage and are important, but should be learnt from friends and family informally. Any formal teaching should only be of languages useful for the future. She expresses this in the following quotation:

> Most important, you pay attention to English and Mandarin. And for the other languages, don't forget. Pick up and go on learning. Don't let go. Don't always know how to speak English and Mandarin only […] If [Peranakans] don't use their Peranakan Malay, it's a waste isn't it? But forcing is not a good idea. It must come naturally and the person must be really interested.

Mrs Choo distinguished between feeling ethnic belonging to a language and feeling pride to speak it because of its functional value. She feels proud to speak English because "every corner you go, it's English-speaking people. There are a lot. It's an international language. So, I feel proud to speak that language. That is my choice." However, despite identifying it as her mother tongue, she doesn't feel pride to speak Teochew.

> I belong to the Chinese, of course, Teochew. But I don't feel … talk about language, I don't feel that I'm proud that I can speak Teochew.

She does associate it with a sense of identity:

> My sense of belonging to a language? I still recognize that I'm a Teochew, I should know the Teochew fluently. But learning other languages is an advantage for anybody.

Mrs Choo expressed that she would be proud to learn more languages and become a better communicator, and would even learn "ang moh[3] languages" like French and Spanish, if she could. Mrs Choo did not believe learning languages outside of one's culture is detrimental: "I don't say it's bad you know. It's good that you have the culture mix. But remember your own culture. Don't throw away. Must remember it."

On the whole, Mrs Choo grew up speaking a wide range of languages in her family, neighbourhood and work environment. Language learning was natural for her through such circumstantial requirements. She values languages for their

3 Singlish term literally meaning "red hair"; refers to Caucasians.

practical usefulness more than it troubles her that some languages she grew up speaking are fading into disuse in Singapore today. “The old ones already old and the younger ones don’t take the trouble.”

4.1.2 Mr Jackie Choo

Mr Jackie Choo, Mrs Choo’s husband, is an 85-year-old Chinese from a family of nine children: six boys and three girls. His parents were both Hokkien. He speaks English, Standard Malay, Hokkien and Teochew fluently, as well as limited Tamil and Cantonese.

Mr Choo grew up in Kampong Kapo, where many residents were Boyanese and spoke English and/or Malay. He thus acquired these languages while interacting with his childhood friends, often during football games. At home, he continued to use Hokkien with his family members. Kampong Kapo was also near what is now known as Little India, which Mr Choo frequented for meals. He thus picked up some basic Tamil vocabulary.

At school, Mr Choo studied Mandarin. However, he reports that at that time, this subject was weakly emphasised at school and was not compulsory to pass. Explaining why he fared poorly for Mandarin at school, Mr Choo said, “because when I go to the English school, we rarely got Chinese […] so every time, my Chinese is zero!” He also explained that he had little desire to learn the language because, like his wife, he found Chinese characters difficult to write. Comparatively, there was no need to write Hokkien or Teochew, the latter of which he had been exposed to in his kampong, but only properly learnt when he met his wife. After marriage, he spoke Teochew to his in-laws and continued to speak Hokkien to his own relatives. For his own family, Mr Choo described the language of the home as “mostly Teochew, with English in between”, explaining that he began speaking English with his children “because they study English, so I think it’s good that I follow up.” Mr Choo’s children were forced to learn Mandarin in school as a national educational requirement. They did not want to at first, but Mr Choo set aside money each month to hire a Mandarin tutor for them and give them his “full support”. He valued Mandarin for its practical use, which was already emergent back then. “I see most of the people in Singapore speak Mandarin in conversation, and I think Mandarin is important.”

Mr Choo expressed mixed feelings with regard to the decline of Chinese “dialects”, such as Teochew. He partly attributes this decline in Singapore to the increasing prevalence of Mandarin. On the one hand, from a practical standpoint, Mr Choo reflected only on whether the language still holds communicative value for use in Singapore today. “It’s not a waste depending on the individual. If they think it’s right for them, for their family, I think they should do what they think is

right to use at the time." Furthermore, Mr Choo did not express pride for the languages he speaks, valuing a language for its communicative function:

> I don't take any pride in any languages; to each his own. This all depending on individual. If you think your language is good, then you promote yourself.
>
> Language is just a communication […] when people come, what language they speak, I speak that language to them […] As it comes along, I just follow what it is.

However, on the other hand, Mr Choo also expressed some sadness and felt more attempts should be made to preserve such heritage languages falling into disuse.

> On the long term you feel sad lah, because slowly our mother tongues will deteriorate. And then slowly, might one time just go off. That's why I say the government should promote a bit of this thing. I still feel sad lah, but what can I do alone? Unless the government gives support.

Yet, Mr Choo specified that attempts to teach the Chinese "dialects" in schools should have no formal exams and remain conversational:

> To me I think the government should promote a bit of this dialect in school […] I think don't go in too deep, just general conversation […] I think it's not important to have exams because this is just general speaking of languages, so no need to go into detail.

Mr Choo grew up in a Hokkien-speaking household. However, exposure to other linguistic varieties in his kampong, at school, and after his marriage led to his acquisition of Malay, English and Teochew. He sees language as a tool for communication and, although he expressed sadness over the attrition of his own mother tongues and wished more could be done to preserve them, any such attempts in schools should just teach conversational Teochew or any other Chinese "dialect".

4.1.3 Madam Teo Pheck Har

Madam[4] Teo Pheck Har is a 76-year-old who speaks English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese and some Malay. Both of her parents were Hokkien, so Hokkien was naturally the language of the home and the first language she learnt. To her older brother, three older sisters and herself, her parents spoke exclusively Hokkien. However, they also spoke Cantonese to their neighbours, giving her some exposure to this variety.

---

4 In Singapore, the term 'Madam' is generally used by married women who keep their maiden family name.

In terms of education, Madam Teo learnt English, which was the medium of instruction and the most common language spoken in her school. She also learnt some Mandarin. Having attended school until the secondary level, Madam Teo began working in a hospital as a midwife at around 21 years old. In her work, she found most of her patients spoke a Chinese "dialect" and picked up Teochew from her everyday interactions with them. She also acquired Malay during this period, and was proficient in both languages, but has since forgotten most of what she knew.

When she was 25 years old, Madam Teo married a Hokkien. Her husband spoke Hokkien and Mandarin, but they spoke Hokkien with each other and to their son. She explained: "My husband said they need to learn their own dialect, our dialect. If we don't use, they don't know, they cannot learn." Her husband also spoke some Mandarin to their son. At around 30 years of age, Madam Teo began attending Church, where she properly learnt the Mandarin she had begun learning in school. Today, she speaks Hokkien to her granddaughter, Mandarin to her daughter-in-law, Mandarin and Cantonese in Church to her friends, and Malay to her neighbours. However, she remains most comfortable using Mandarin and Hokkien.

Madam Teo is proud of her dialect group, identifying Hokkien as her mother tongue and thus the most important language one must know. "If they know that you are Hokkien, and then if they speak to you in Hokkien, and you don't understand at all, that is very embarrassing you know!" She thus feels that language is an essential part of one's ethnic identity, commenting also on her granddaughter, who can speak Hokkien: "If she uses English to speak to me, I will tell her, I say: 'You are Hokkien. You must speak in Hokkien!'"

At the same time, Madam Teo also emphasised the practical value of a language. "The most important is to make the other party understand what you are telling them. That's why when my friend says, 'don't speak Hokkien, I don't understand you'. Then I will use Cantonese." She also expressed positive sentiment towards the growing Mandarin-English bilingualism in Singapore today, and felt "dialects should be at home, but not in school". One reason for this is because Mandarin is a neutral Chinese variety that can be taught in schools to all the Chinese ethnic groups: "Because in school there are so many languages. If you choose Hokkien to teach them, they might think that oh why you choose Hokkien, you don't choose my language. I speak Cantonese, why don't you choose Cantonese?"

Madam Teo was born a Hokkien, married a Hokkien, and spoke Hokkien with her parents, siblings, husband and son. Yet, she acquired other languages such as Cantonese, English, and Malay through her schooling, interactions with neighbours, her patients at work and her Church friends. Although she can speak a number of language varieties now and uses the relevant one according to the language of her interlocutor, Madam Teo still feels a strong sense of pride to speak Hokkien as a marker of her Hokkien identity.

4.1.4 Madam Rosie Tan Lai Hoe

Madam Rosie Tan Lai Hoe is an 84-year-old Peranakan who speaks English, Baba Malay, Hokkien and Teochew. She can also understand Mandarin and speak "a smattering of Cantonese". Baba Malay was the most common language in her immediate family and among her relatives; it is her first language and the one she is most comfortable using. Madam Tan learnt some English from her uncles and Hokkien from her grandmother, who spoke more Hokkien with her than Baba Malay. She also picked up some Cantonese from the family's Cantonese servant.

In school, Madam Tan learnt English and Mandarin. However, as Mandarin was not an educational requirement at the time, she had little incentive to put in effort for the subject and fared poorly. She explained:

> During our time, Mandarin was not compulsory. That's why we take it easy. I learnt Mandarin but I take it easy. Every term my Chinese fail but I don't bother because it's not added in the marks.

Currently, Madam Tan rarely speaks Mandarin and is out of touch with the language, but "can understand a little here and there".

Although Madam Tan married a Teochew and, consequently, learnt Teochew, they spoke English at home. English was hence the language Madam Tan and her husband used to converse with their children, who never learnt Teochew. This is something Madam Tan now regrets, as expressed in the following:

> With my husband we normally speak English, that's why our children all brought up speaking English. We totally cut off the dialect actually. […] Because we among my husband and myself we always speak English at home, so much so that the children follow. And only in school they speak Mandarin, otherwise hardly use at home, mostly English speaking. That's why we are wrong. When you all, when babies, infant, we should speak to you in dialect. We are wrong, that's why my children grandchildren all cannot understand dialect.

Even now, Madam Tan continues to speak mostly English at home, because her children and grandchildren do not understand or speak Baba Malay, despite this being the language Madam Tan is most comfortable speaking. She also has no one at home to speak Hokkien with, explaining that "I hardly use [Hokkien], unless I go out shopping, marketing, then I speak Hokkien to the hawkers, to the butchers."

Madam Tan expressed mixed sentiments with regard to the current state of the Chinese "dialects" in Singapore, feeling that their decline is a waste and it would be good to offer them in schools, but that Mandarin should remain the compulsory second language.

> If they introduce dialect […] is good for the children. Even though Mandarin is more important […] Continue with Mandarin lah, it's better.

Two reasons emerged from the interview data to account for why Madam Tan feels Mandarin is more important in schools than the Chinese "dialects". First, she noted the prevalence of Mandarin Chinese in the world today:

> Because when you go to China or any foreign country where they speak Mandarin, you have to be conversing in Mandarin.

Second, she also explained that familial circumstances have changed, and the conditions for Chinese "dialect" acquisition are no longer in place for this to occur:

> By and by no more younger generation can speak dialect. Unless their grandparents stay with them and speak when their parents are at work. Their grandparents speak to them in Malay, or Peranakan, Hokkien or whatever dialect. But now no one.

Madam Tan positioned the attrition of Chinese "dialects" and the rise of Mandarin in Singapore as an irreversible circumstance that Singaporeans must adapt to by learning Mandarin and forsaking the "dialects":

> Now everywhere you go they mostly converse in Mandarin. See the young children small, speak so well in Mandarin. Some more now it's compulsory, even the parents have to give up speaking dialect also.

Interestingly, with regards to the pride she feels to speak a language, Madam Tan distinguished between two different types of pride. First, she felt a sense of pride in her Peranakan heritage and identity. Second, she was also proud to speak English, explaining, "Because I am educated in English". Her pride to speak English thus closely relates to her pride to have received an education. This shows the multi-dimensional importance she places on languages – for their cultural significance and for their educational and academic value.

Despite having a wide linguistic repertoire as a result of her upbringing, marriage, and education, Madam Tan currently speaks mainly English. She values languages for their utility, their importance in education, and their associated ethnic identity. She proudly identifies herself as Peranakan, and maintains that Baba Malay is the language she is most comfortable speaking.

4.1.5 Dr Tan Suan Ek

Dr Tan Suan Ek is an 83-year-old doctor, now retired, who opened his own clinic in 1963. He is Hainanese, and Hainanese is his first language, having been the most prevalent language in his home environment as he was growing up. Dr Tan also

speaks English, Mandarin, Teochew, Hokkien and some Malay. He understands Cantonese and knows some basic Tamil words.

Although Dr Tan learnt languages through his interactions with his patients, there were other circumstances in place that helped his acquisition. He was educated in and learnt English at school, and because he was studying to become a doctor, he was required to learn a second language as well. This led to his learning some Mandarin in school, although he describes these Mandarin lessons as lacking seriousness and educational value. "It was just one lesson, and people play the fool only."

Dr Tan acquired many of his languages as a result of natural exposure to different linguistic environments. He described his limited proficiency in Malay as "not much lah, but the thing is can communicate simple things. I learnt it from the bazaar, not learnt it by books." For his acquisition of Teochew, he identified growing up in the Singapore suburb of Hougang as the most important. Sharing similarities with Hokkien, his Teochew aided his learning of Hokkien in Church. "One time was purely I can speak Teochew, a smattering of Hokkien, but now because of the Church event you know, you can speak Hokkien as well." Dr Tan also married a Hokkien, giving him further need and incentive to learn it.

Weighing a language's practical value and associated sense of pride, Dr Tan described a gradual "dilution" in his pride to speak Hainanese, because he evaluated language from a purely functional perspective. For Dr Tan, the value of a language is solely contingent on its utility; languages do not hold pride or ethnic belonging.

> No need to be proud, need useful lah. You can use language as a tool what, it's a tool, useful! If you have no occasion to speak Russian then you go and learn Russian and a few words, people say, what? You're a mad fellow. No use what. If the language is not used, it's useless.

A key theme throughout Dr Tan's interview data was the inevitability of the loss of the Chinese "dialects" in Singapore, such as his own Hainanese. He saw this loss as an irreversible and certain event in Singapore's future, despite the efforts of some dialect associations in Singapore to revive their languages.

> I find ah, whether you like it or not, multilingualism in Singapore, it will go off. Your dialects will go off. But then some of the associations, they try to revive it you know, but actually whether you like it or not it's going to go.

> I think in a matter of time it will go off. One generation two generations third generation they do. The circumstances have changed lah.

Dr Tan detailed these changed "circumstances" in terms of altered customs and family practices in Singapore today. Four main points were identified from his

interview data. First, the increasingly common phenomenon of marriage outside of one's ethnic group was a factor in favour of learning a foreign language over one's heritage language, again from a purely functional perspective:

> They intermarry. The others say you wasting time, you better learn French or something else. You learn this [dialect] for what.

Second, family practices have shifted towards independence from one's parents, and this does not facilitate the essential interaction that would contribute to intergenerational language transmission.

> Those days if a son gets married, it's automatically you stay with the parents. […] Now parents will chase them off also, you go and do your own house. In those days the grandmother will automatically look after the grandchildren. Now say enough, you go look after. Change already you know! They want the freedom also.

Third, even if grandparents interact with their grandchildren, Dr Tan felt the communication customs between these groups have also changed. Due to the value they place on Mandarin in Singapore today, grandparents may opt not to share their "dialect", but encourage their grandchildren to learn Mandarin.

> Even grandmothers ah, instead of teaching the grandchildren her dialect, the grandmother will try to learn a few words of Mandarin you know. […] The grandmother tries to learn a few words from the grandchildren […] so these [dialects] are gone.

Finally, Dr Tan felt that a preference for English among the youth has contributed to the attrition of the use of Chinese varieties, including Mandarin Chinese. He recounted his personal experiences that showed a lack of willingness among the young to converse in Chinese, preferring English to any other language:

> I want to speak to grandchildren, to talk to them, they refuse […] "Where have you been?" "Ma ma dai ni qu na er?" ['Where did your mother bring you?'] You know what they answer? She answers: "We went shopping"! You see, see the point now? Can understand, you speak Mandarin or what can understand. But they answer English.

Dr Tan also feels that due to the proliferation of English, the customs of calling and greeting one's elders have changed. He described how children and youths used to call their superiors or elders by specific titles based on the hierarchical family relationship and whether the relative was from the maternal or paternal side of the family. These Chinese names for calling elders have been replaced by the simple "aunty" and "uncle" in English:

> Po is the mother's mother, is your po po ['Maternal grandmother']. But the other one you call your nai nai ['Paternal grandmother']. […] They separate very clear. But now: "Uncle",

> everybody "uncle" or "aunty", so things are gone. Sad or not sad, you like it or not, it goes off. The customs are gone.

Despite the impending loss of both Chinese "dialects" and Chinese language-related customs, Dr Tan expressed he felt no sadness for this disappearance: "Sad or not sad, circumstances have changed […] the dialects will disappear you know. Like it or not whether you can *tahan* [Malay for 'hold' or 'resist'] the flood coming in, it's a matter of time it will be gone."

Dr Tan grew up speaking Hainanese, but acquired other languages from his schooling and work as a doctor. He feels neither proud to speak a language nor sad that his mother tongue is declining in Singapore, valuing languages only for their functional value. The gradual decrease in the languages spoken mainly by the elderly in Singapore is something he sees as unstoppable, their complete loss being a certainty in the future.

4.2 Bilingual participants

4.2.1 Madam Helen Tan Kang Neo

Madam Helen Tan Kang Neo is an 81-year-old who was born to a Peranakan family and who married a Peranakan. At home, she spoke Baba Malay and English, the only two languages that she learnt and the two that she speaks today. Madam Tan described growing up along East Coast Road, where the majority of residents attended her school, Katong Convent. Most of the students in Katong Convent were Peranakan as well, and also spoke Baba Malay and English. In school, Madam Tan learnt Mandarin Chinese for a while, but gave it up during the Japanese Occupation in the Second World War, seeing no point to learning it and lacking personal interest to do so.

When she married, Madam Tan continued to live in a Peranakan "bubble" in which Baba Malay and English prevailed. Like her own parents, Madam Tan was match-made to a Peranakan. "The matchmakers, they take rich and rich, marry. So, Baba and Baba marry. That's why they never mix, can't speak Mandarin". Madam Tan spoke Baba Malay and English with her children as well, and they too attended Katong Convent.

As Baba Malay and English were so prevalent in her life, Madam Tan never learnt other languages, such as Mandarin, despite having been exposed to it through friends and at work. She described having a few friends who spoke Mandarin, but would simply request for them to speak one of her languages instead of she trying to learn theirs. "Sometimes we don't understand, we tell them

please speak English or Baba Malay. They ask me, 'You can't speak?' 'Of course, I was from Katong Convent.' 'Oh!' They also understand."

Madam Tan expressed pride to be a Peranakan, but this pride was not tied to the associated language. She saw Baba Malay as, in her life, simply a sufficient means to communicate. She values maintaining a Peranakan circle and expressed happiness and gratitude for her own marriage circumstances:

> If you happen to marry a Hokkien [...] we don't know also. But baba and baba I don't mind. I thank God my husband is a baba.[5]

A year after he retired, Madam Tan's husband had a stroke and passed away at the age of 52. Madam Tan now lives alone, but often goes to stay with one of her daughters. She attends a fortnightly Peranakan service and Bible group at Bethesda (Katong) Church, where she continues to use the two languages she knows best.

Despite having grown up during pre-independence Singapore, a period which, as described above, was characterized by a high degree of societal multilingualism, Madam Tan's home, school, marriage and own family environments kept her in an almost exclusively Baba Malay and English linguistic "bubble" that allowed her to manage with just these two languages. She possessed neither need nor desire to learn any other.

4.2.2 Mrs Lily Samuel

Mrs Lily Samuel is a Teochew aged 78 years old. Her mother was a Teochew and father half Teochew and half Hokkien. Mrs Samuel grew up as the youngest in a family of 14 children. Her father spoke to them in English, while her mother spoke only Teochew. She and her siblings also conversed with their domestic helper in Teochew, but communicated with each other in English.

Mrs Samuel explained that her parents "hardly spoke to us in those days", leaving her to speak English among her siblings and at school most of the time. She attended a Methodist school where English was almost exclusively spoken and where she did not receive further exposure to Teochew or other Chinese varieties. Mrs Samuel's parents allowed them to "do what you want, take up what you want". As a second language was not compulsory then, she dropped Mandarin. She began learning French on her own outside of school, but found it too difficult because "they have a rule, but they have about 100 exceptions to the rule". She thus gave up French as well to focus solely on English.

---

5 'Baba' refers to a Peranakan male.

Mrs Samuel married an Indian man who spoke English and Tamil. With English as the shared common language, she explained, "I never bothered to learn Tamil because my in-laws spoke English also". Without the need to learn another language, she continued to use English. She and her husband spoke English with their own children as well and, although they were required to learn Mandarin at school, English remained the language of the home. Today, she speaks fluent English and limited Teochew. Although Teochew was her first language, she admitted that English is now the language she is most comfortable with. In fact, her Teochew has been criticised for authenticity and accuracy. "I was accused of: Why you speak Teochew with an English accent? You pronounce the words, the intonation, not quite correct! So, I shy away from it."

Although Mrs Samuel identified as a Teochew, she did not feel pride for the language. Despite expressing some sadness over the loss of such varieties, she believed the purpose of language is "functional, to be understood". Furthermore, no language has an associated pride to her, because she does not notice ethnic differences. "I treat everybody about the same, whether you are Cantonese or what. We're all equal, all the same." Like ethnicities, she saw all languages as on the same level, serving the same communicative function. Although she was not against Baba Malay and the Chinese "dialects" being offered in schools, she maintained that they should not be made compulsory because language learning should be natural. She also affirmed that English should remain the most important and emphasised language in formal education because of its prevalence and importance in the world today: "English is the worldwide language."

Mrs Samuel grew up in a bilingual environment, but with no real need to speak Teochew in her schooling years and adulthood, allowed it to deteriorate. The usefulness and necessity of a language was a key factor in her retention of English and attrition of Teochew. She now communicates with her three children and five grandchildren exclusively in English.

5 Discussion

These interviews illustrate that personal histories of acquisition, maintenance and/or attrition of different varieties in the changing multilingual sociolinguistic setting of Singapore are not uniform. Neither can we interpret them easily by simply referring to official language policies. While some of their opinions and attitudes do resonate with certain hegemonic ideological underpinnings of language policies implemented by the state, our interlocutors do not parrot the government's standpoint. Furthermore, their self-reported linguistic repertoires and levels of proficiency do not correspond fully to what the government had set

out to achieve. At the same time, we do not want to fall into a trap of interpreting these mini oral histories as romanticized narratives of sociolinguistic resistance to the official policies. Instead, we propose that these elderly Chinese Singaporeans should be seen as active social actors whose agency has been constrained by the state-sanctioned conditions unfavourable to the maintenance of the linguistic varieties other than the four official ones, but who have nevertheless been managing their multilingual speakerhood across their lifespan by negotiating their own language ideologies with the hegemonic ones while realigning their perceptions of the evolving linguistic market(s) of Singapore with their personal socioeconomic and family conditions.

5.1 Spontaneous language acquisition

A key factor that shaped the participants' linguistic repertoires was their environments while growing up, in their work, and in their own families after marriage. Home environments were instrumental in exposing the participants to different linguistic varieties from an early age. Mrs Rose Choo grew up speaking Baba Malay with her Peranakan grandmother, Teochew with her mother, and English with her father. Madam Rosie Tan spoke Baba Malay with her parents and siblings, Hokkien with her grandmother, some English with her uncles, and Cantonese with their domestic helper. Other participants did not have as diverse a mix of languages at home, but acquired languages through other means, such as exposure to the languages spoken in their neighbourhood. Mr Jackie Choo's close-knit kampong community was one avenue through which he learnt English and Malay, having spoken only Hokkien at home. Mrs Choo already spoke several linguistic varieties at home, but the kampong was an avenue that further enriched her linguistic repertoire with other Chinese "dialects". Growing up in Hougang, Dr Tan was exposed to and naturally picked up Teochew, a variety widely spoken in Hougang at the time.

All studied English at school even if this was not the first exposure to it for some, such as Mrs Choo and Madam Rosie Tan. Madam Teo spoke Hokkien at home, but learnt English at school and Malay and Teochew at work, although she has since forgotten the latter two. As a medical doctor, Dr Tan picked up other languages, such as English and Mandarin, despite only speaking Hainanese at home. In Singapore at the time, with Malay and many Chinese "dialects" prevalent, many learned the languages of colleagues and customers.

With regard to marriage and family, the language spoken with the spouse seems to have become the "automatic" language of the home and with the children. This is true of Madam Teo and Madam Helen Tan who married within

their ethnic group and shared a common first language. Others who married outside of their ethnic group; Madam Rosie Tan, a Peranakan, married a Teochew, and Dr Tan, a Hainanese, married a Hokkien. While both learnt the language of their spouse, both shared English as a common language and spoke it at home and with their children. Mr and Mrs Choo shared English as a common language, but are unusual in that Mr Choo not only learnt his wife's Teochew, but they also made it the first language of their children.

Madam Helen Tan and Mrs Samuel's circumstances differed from those of the other participants in that they learnt only two varieties at home as children and had little exposure to others in their adolescence and adulthood. Madam Helen Tan spoke Malay and English in her Peranakan family, marriage, and even Church service. Mrs Samuel spoke both English and Teochew at home, but more of the former. Her marriage to an Indian man further reduced her use of Teochew. Both attended schools where English was the medium of instruction and norm among schoolmates. Lacking the varied linguistic environments and exposure of the experiences of the others, Madam Helen Tan and Mrs Samuel did not become as multilingual as the others in this study.

The cases of within-subject language attrition are also evidence of the role the linguistic environment in learning a new language or losing it. Mrs Samuel did not acquire languages beyond the languages that were spoken in her home, English and Teochew. Her marriage and work environments then made it unnecessary for her to speak Teochew, and this language ability was slowly eroded. Mrs Samuel's gradual loss of Teochew is testament to the importance of a natural communicative need in language learning and acquisition, and how the lack of this need can lead to the reverse. Madam Teo, too, reported forgetting the Malay and Teochew she had picked up as a midwife. This was again due to there being no need to use these varieties in her life. Thus, a natural need to communicate is the key factor in language acquisition, and the lack of this need is often a significant reason for language attrition.

5.2 Practical value of a language

All participants agreed that the languages they spoke served communicative functions and thus held practical value. This is a main reason Madam Helen Tan and Mrs Samuel did not acquire any languages other than the ones they had grown up speaking – there was simply no need to communicate in another language. Participants who acquired languages at work did so out of necessity, such as Madam Teo in her work as a midwife and Dr Tan in his work as a medical practitioner. Others saw the pragmatic use of languages for the future. Mrs Choo, for

example, chose to study Malay at school instead of Mandarin like her other nine sisters because she felt this would be advantageous for her, given the imminent merger between Singapore and Malaysia at the time. She and her husband encouraged their children to properly learn Mandarin at school because they felt it was rising in importance. Mr Choo, like Madam Rosie Tan and Dr Tan, studied Mandarin at school but did not take it seriously and fared poorly. This was because it was not a mandatory subject to pass, and also because they could see little use for Mandarin in Singapore then. Mandarin lacked practical use for the participants in their time, so even those who took it at school had little incentive to learn it. This shows the emphasis they placed on a language's functionality as constitutive of its value.

5.3 Inevitability of language attrition

All participants were aware of the decline of Baba Malay and the Chinese "dialects" and expressed that they felt the loss of this language was inevitable. However, they were generally against using formal education in schools as an avenue to preserve these languages. Most, with the exception of Dr Tan, expressed sadness for the impending disappearance of their mother tongues. From a practical standpoint, Dr Tan reported no grievances for the loss of these heritage languages in Singapore as language to him has only one purpose – communication. Although others expressed sadness, many calling the loss of these languages a "waste", the general consensus was that these languages should not be revived in school. Their view was that school is a means through which the young become educated and learn essential skills and knowledge that would help them in the future. Speaking Baba Malay or the Chinese "dialects" was not considered by the participants as a necessary skill to have because these varieties are falling into disuse. Singapore's language policies have been directed at producing English-knowing bilinguals, and there is no doubt that these policies and Singapore's education system wield considerable socialising power that favours English and to a lesser extent Mandarin. These ideologies make these two languages more valuable for all Singaporeans. The participants in this study reflect such language ideologies and practices especially when indicating that Mandarin or Standard Malay should be compulsory in schools and take precedence over the Chinese "dialects" and Baba Malay respectively. In Mrs Choo's words, "the world needs these sort of languages". Thus, despite negative sentiments towards the loss of their mother tongues, the utility and functionality of English and Mandarin prevailed as the prime consideration of language selection in schools, especially in today's globalised world.

5.4 Resolving the paradox

It may appear paradoxical that some participants expressed sadness for the loss of their mother tongues, but, simultaneously, did not wish for these to be taught in schools as part of any revitalisation efforts. However, as discussed previously, the governing usefulness of a language, the traditionally oral nature of these linguistic varieties, and the fact that language learning should be spontaneous were three key reasons for this sentiment. A general feeling among the participants that helps to resolve the apparent conflict is that these languages should have been taught to the younger generations when they were in their infancy and childhood – taught through home exposure to their grandparents and parents who can speak the languages, and not through formal lessons. This is why Madam Rosie Tan specifically discussed her feelings of sadness for the loss of her mother tongue in terms of regret, blaming herself and her husband for not using more Hokkien at home: "We totally cut off the dialect actually […] That's why *we are wrong*. When you all, when babies, infant, we should speak to you in dialect." Dr Tan, too, noted that grandparents these days do not speak to their grandchildren in Chinese "dialects" or Baba Malay, and may even try to learn Mandarin to encourage their grandchildren to use it. He summarised that "circumstances have changed". These attitudes and comments have their basis on the Singaporean government's policy to promote Mandarin at the expense of the Chinese "dialects" through its Speak Mandarin Campaign. The Chinese Singaporean community obediently stopped speaking the vernaculars at home in order to help their children's acquisition of Mandarin.

Mrs Choo agreed the prevalence of Mandarin today is a key reason for the loss of her Teochew and Baba Malay, the latter of which she never spoke with her children. However, unlike Madam Rosie Tan, Mrs Choo does not regret speaking English and occasionally Mandarin with her grandchildren because these are the languages that she felt would help them the most in their education and future careers. Her final stance provides a good explanation to resolve the somewhat conflicting sentiments relating to sadness for the inevitable loss of mother tongues and the simultaneous belief that these varieties should not be taught in schools: "the old ones already old and the younger ones don't take the trouble." The opportunity for her generation of Baba Malay and Chinese "dialect" speakers to expose their children and grandchildren to their mother tongues has passed, and now they are too old to enact any significant change. This leaves the bittersweet, but inevitable eventuality that these languages already on the decline will run their course and disappear.

6 Conclusion

Following Pierre Bourdieu's theorizing of "the economics of linguistic exchanges" and symbolic/linguistic capital (1977, 1991), we understand the sociolinguistic setting of Singapore as a complex and dynamic *linguistic marketplace* in which various linguistic varieties have different symbolic and, consequently, economic values. Furthermore, we agree with Kathryn Woolard's critique of what she sees to be an oversimplification in Bourdieu's focus on "an integrated linguistic market, one integrated under the sponsorship of the state" and "the role of 'cultural' institutions (whether we consider them as state, civil, or state masquerading as civil) such as the school, the communications media, and the family in the genesis, maintenance, and autonomous reproduction of the hegemony of the legitimate language over other co-existing varieties" (Woolard 1985, p. 740). Instead, Woolard posits the existence of alternative markets where linguistic varieties and practices other than those legitimized by the state are valued and circulated.

In Singapore, the government has been actively defining the linguistic marketplace through its language policies aimed at producing English-knowing bilinguals so that English and (in the case of Chinese Singaporeans at least) Mandarin have become the varieties with the highest symbolic capital. Such valuation of English and Mandarin is something all our interlocutors seem to accept, even those who do not speak Mandarin. Their personal histories, however, testify to the existence of domains conducive to acquiring and using other varieties (such as a close-knit kampong, a workplace, or a Church where services are conducted in vernaculars). They also provide examples of alternative perceptions of the linguistic market and revalorisations of the available linguistic varieties, as in the case of Mrs Choo who opted to study Malay instead of Mandarin having expected it to be more valuable after the merger with Malaysia, or Madam Tan who, having remained in a Peranakan "bubble", saw no incentive to learn Mandarin.

Language planning in Singapore has been predicated on the ideological construction of mother tongues as cultural anchors and English as a culturally neutral medium of inter-ethnic and global communication (but see Tan [2014] for a discussion of the need to reconceptualise English as a new mother tongue in Singapore). In order to unify dialectally heterogeneous Chinese Singaporeans, the government officially recognised Mandarin as their sole community mother tongue and marker of their supra-dialectal, pan-Chinese identity. Since the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), Mandarin has been actively – and successfully – promoted at the expense of other non-Mandarin Chinese varieties. Bokhorst-Heng and Wee (2007) argue that the SMC has been successful because it has been discursively constructed around pragmatism, "the commitment to

rationality with the aim of achieving practical results, particularly in order to ensure continuous economic growth", as well as communitarianism, "the willingness to prioritise the needs of the community over those of the self" (325), both of which are rooted in Confucianism. While initially promoted for cultural and heritage purposes, Mandarin was subsequently reframed also as an economically valuable variety given China's growing economic strength. This discourse of "linguistic instrumentalism" that frames Mandarin as a language of economic advancement has created a disbalance among the three officially recognized "mother tongues" (Wee 2003), but it certainly resonates well among several of our interlocutors who rationalise what they see to be the inevitable loss of the vernaculars in favour of the economically powerful Mandarin. At the same time, they do not seem to have fully embraced the discourse of communitarianism – for those who articulate their ethnic identification in relation to linguistic varieties they speak, or used to speak, it is the dialect groups they still identify with (Hokkien for Madam Teo, Teochew for Mrs Choo, etc.) rather than Mandarin as marker of a pan-Chinese identity.

We can clearly see this when we analyse why the government's efforts to motivate Chinese Singaporeans to give their children Mandarin (Pinyinised) names instead of their dialect ones have by and large failed while the SMC has succeeded in having them abandon the "dialects" in favour of Mandarin, Bokhorst-Heng and Wee (2007) argue that Singaporeans were convinced of the "pragmatic and communitarian rationales" of the SMC measures, but "it was not clear that were any such rationales behind the Pinyinisation of personal names" (331). In other words, while convincing pragmatic reasons may have been given for the ongoing language shift to Mandarin, no such reasons were given for cutting off family ties and erasing onomastic or linguistic indexes of ancestry.

As our interviews also illustrate, official language policies in Singapore have been successful in discursive decoupling of one's ability to speak a "dialect" from their ethnic identification with the respective "dialect group". This discursive shift – that language is primarily a communication *tool* with a pragmatic value, more so than a *symbol of* and *condition for* ethnic belonging – should be seen as a reason why even those interlocutors who regret the loss of non-Mandarin varieties, accept it as inevitable, especially if they have other symbolic markers of their intra-Chinese ethnic belonging, such as personal names or specific customs, traditions or foodways.

Acknowledgments: The researchers would like to acknowledge Mrs Rose Choo, Mr Jackie Choo, Madam Teo Pheck Har, Madam Rosie Tan Lai Hoe, Dr Tan Suan Ek, Madam Helen Tan Kang Neo, and Mrs Lily Samuel for kindly consenting to participate in this research project. We wish to acknowledge the funding support

for this project from Nanyang Technological University under the Undergraduate Research Experience on Campus (URECA) programme.

References

Bokhorst-Heng, Wendy D. & Lionel Wee. 2007. Language planning in Singapore: On pragmatism, communitarianism and personal names. *Current Issues in Language Planning* 8(3). 324–343.

Bolton, Kingsley & Bee Chin Ng. 2014. The dynamics of multilingualism in contemporary Singapore. *World Englishes* 33(3). 307–318.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. The economics of linguistic exchanges. *Social Science Information* 16. 645–668.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cavallaro, Francesco & Bee Chin Ng. 2014. Language in Singapore: From multilingualism to English plus. In Yvette Slaughter & John Hajek (eds.), *Challenging the monolingual mindset*, 33–48. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Cavallaro, Francesco, Bee Chin Ng & Ying Ying Tan. 2020. Singapore English. In Kingsley Bolton, Werner Botha & Andy Kirkpatrick (eds.), *Handbook of Asian Englishes*. New Jersey: Blackwell-Wiley.

Department of Statistics. 2010. *Census of population 2010*. Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Department of Statistics. 2015. *General household survey 2015*. Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Department of Statistics. 2019. *Population trends 2019*. Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry.

Henderson, Joan. 2003. Ethnic heritage as a tourist attraction: The peranakans of Singapore. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 9(1). 27–44.

Kuo, Eddie C. Y. 1980. The sociolinguistic situation in Singapore: Unity in diversity. In Evangelos A. Afendras & Eddie C. Y. Kuo (eds.), *Language and society in Singapore*, 39–62. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Lee, Cher Leng. 2012. Saving Chinese-language education in Singapore. *Current Issues in Language Planning* 13(4). 285–304.

Leimgruber, Jacob R. E. 2013. The management of multilingualism in a city-state: Language policy in Singapore. In Peter Siemund, Ingrid Gogolin, Monika E. Schulz & Julia Davydova (eds.), *Multilingualism and language diversity in Urban Areas: Acquisition, identities, space, education*, 229–258. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

Ministry of Education. 2011. *2010 Mother tongue languages review committee report*. Singapore: Ministry of Education.

Platt, John. 1980. Multilingualism, polyglossia and code selection in Singapore. In Evangelos A. Afendras & Eddie C. Y. Kuo (eds.), *Language and society in Singapore*, 63–83. Singapore: NUS Press.

Tan, Ying Ying. 2014. English as a "mother tongue" in contemporary Singapore. *World Englishes* 33(3). 319–339.

Wee, Lionel. 2003. Linguistic instrumentalism in Singapore. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 24(3). 211–224.
Woolard, Kathryn A. 1985. Language variation and cultural hegemony. *American Ethnologist* 12(4). 738–748.