Tram Nguyen- Bilingualism Interview

Forced to Adopt a Mother Tongue

A 20-year old Chinese Singaporean majoring in English literature at Drexel University, Lee Wang speaks fluent Singlish, Mandarin, and English. Although Singlish is her native language and the main means of communication within her family in Singapore, Lee has been practicing American English and Mandarin since relocating to the United States for college. This interview will elucidate Lee's perception of the Mother Tongue concept through an interrelated discussion of her bilingual experience and Singapore's language planning and national identity-building process.

"How can we make sense of the terms *mother tongue*, *native language*, and *dominant language*?" I inquire Lee, pondering whether this is a good question to initiate our conversation about bilingualism. Lee admits that she has thought about these analogous terms before, "The idea of 'mother tongue' troubles me. I guess that for most people, the language that they learned as a child at home, from their mom and dad, is their mother tongue. In Singapore, however, we have a mother tongue 'bestowed' upon us."

I met Lee two years ago through a mutual friend. My first impression of her was that she spoke native-like American English, which distinguishes Lee from my other Singaporean friends who converse in Singlish, an English-based creole language used colloquially in Singapore. A 20-year old Chinese Singaporean currently in her junior year at Drexel University, Lee left Singapore—where she was born and grew up—to study English literature in the United States with a goal of becoming a TESOL instructor (1, 2, 3). I have always assumed that her languages are English, Chinese, and perhaps one other language, and my interview with Lee confirms that she considers herself fluent in Singlish, English, and Mandarin (4, 6). To my great puzzlement though, Lee appears uncomfortable when being queried to define and affirm her mother tongue, and asks me for permission to return to this question later. She however immediately declares that Singlish is her native and dominant language while English and Mandarin have been formally learned as "second languages" since she entered elementary school (5, 7). Before coming to the States for undergraduate

studies, Lee used Singlish on a daily basis to communicate with her parents, siblings, and friends in Singapore; English and Mandarin were reserved for more formal interactions such as academic-related activities, co-curricular meetings, and interviews (8, 9).

Lee's bilingualism provides the basis for her identity construction, instilling in her an abiding interest in exploring languages and cultures, and allows her to more easily understand the complexity and the subtlety of different linguistic expressions. Despite identifying herself as a language enthusiast, Lee sometimes feels uneasy about her own process of acquiring languages. "It is not natural. It has been all planned," she said, mulling over how language planning in Singapore has affected her identity as a Chinese Singaporean. According to Lee, language planning has played a crucial role in Singapore's nation-building process, especially after the country gained independence from Britain in 1965. As Singapore encountered a postcolonial complex of a racially diverse society characterized by the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) quadratomy, its leaders were confronted with the challenge of building a common national identity for all Singaporeans. In an attempt to unite Singapore by stimulating a greater sense of collective identity, racial harmony and cultural tolerance, the government elected English as Singapore's utilitarian language that helps create connections across ethnicities, encourage interactions among different nationalities, and ensure social development and mobility. The government also affirmed that all the ethnic languages play an equally important role in developing Singapore's national culture, and thus initiated various language movements and policies from the late 20th to early 21st century to promote the principle of equal treatment to all languages.

Despite the principle of equal treatment, language discrimination or more precisely, unfair treatment of an ethnic group based on their language practices, still ensues. Lee states the example of the Speak Mandarin Campaign that the government launched to discourage the use of "subversive" or "inappropriate" Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, and Teochew,

which are deemed to hinder the amalgamation of a unified Chinese Singaporean identity. In suppressing all Chinese dialects except Mandarin from school curriculum, entertainment programs, and the mass media, the government endeavors to refashion language habits and preferences and restrict the options that people can choose in their consumption of cultural products. The ban means that some speakers of non-Mandarin dialects hold the status of a minority group and have no authority over the way popular culture is delivered and made available. For instance, Lee's uncle who originally came from Hong Kong can only watch Cantonese movies that are dubbed in Mandarin because he cannot access any dialect programs on television. Furthermore, the most serious consequence of the Speak Mandarin Campaign is the disintegration of familial bonds due to the inability to speak dialects in the younger generation of Chinese Singaporeans— in Lee's case, she can speak Singlish or Mandarin to her parents, but is unable to communicate with her grandparents in Hokkien (10). Daily correspondence between Lee and her grandparents is often reduced to simple greetings and affectionate pats, and she finds this communicative gap to be a "family tragedy." Lee trusts that the generational transmission of cultural values would be deficient if the elders and the youngsters do not share the same level of language proficiency (31).

Musing over Lee's distress about her lack of familial communication, I ask her whether there exists a similar communicative gap in the larger societal context and whether a mutual language is necessary to unify the nation. She offers an intriguing observation that although Mandarin fails to connect the Chinese Singaporean population, Singlish does aid the cultivation of a unified Singaporean identity. It is extremely complex to conceptualize Singlish though. As I reveal my confusion about whether Singlish is a language or a "dialect" of English, Lee acknowledges that perhaps she is not exactly sure what Singlish is. With English being currently spoken by people all over the country, rather than being used solely by the elite few during the British colonial period, the language adopted a local flavoring that shares some linguistic similarities with Malay, Hokkien,

Cantonese, and Mandarin and prompted the formation of Singapore English, or Singlish today. The Singaporean government even attempted to dismiss the use of Singlish through the Speak Good English Movement, arguing that Singlish's alleged incomprehensibility would make Singaporeans culturally and economically incompetent in the age of globalization. As school officials and language instructors wish to protect Standard English, back in Singapore, Lee studied British English in all levels of schooling. She however feels like she had not really learned "real" English until she came to the States. At Drexel, she must discard the use of Singlish because otherwise her professors and friends would not be able to understand what she is saying (13). In addition, her dream to become a TESOL teacher prompts Lee to further distance herself from Singlish and to practice speaking in "perfect American accent" (11).

Given that Singlish is considered a substandard and undesirable variant of English and acts as an impediment to cross-cultural communication, why does Lee believe that this language unifies Singaporeans? Lee praises Singlish for its hybrid and liberating qualities, and as an irreplaceable part of the Singaporean identity (20). "It is always fun to see people getting confused when I speak Singlish at machine-gun speed," she giggles, confessing her love for the language's mangled fusion of English phrases and Chinese grammatical structures with Hokkien, Malay, and Indian dialects (17). She concludes that the construction of a society where everyone speaks Standard English is futile, because language constantly incorporates different linguistic elements in a variety of other languages and will therefore transform itself, as exemplified in the case of Singlish. Since contemporary Singapore witnesses an increasingly large number of inter-ethnic marriages, and of transnational economic activities and communications, learning English will mean learning the language within its changing local and global context, rather than "fixating on an established and unevolved form of the language." I agree with Lee that Singlish will not be detrimental to social development if it remains an informal register alongside the Standard English promoted by the

government as the formal register. The government's efforts to advocate the efficacy of Standard English, although reasonable, might never totally alienate Singlish from the Singaporean pathos.

Lee then returns to my initial question about her definition of "native language" and "mother tongue," or of any similar terms that are used interchangeably. At last, she remains consistent with her original answer: Singlish is her native language, the language of her homeland that she grew up speaking (18). Mother tongue, meanwhile, is as a forced concept being internalized in the young generation through mandatory schooling. According to her country's bilingual education policy, English is the official language of instruction in all school curriculums, but it is compulsory for students to achieve high proficiency in their Mother Tongue—Mandarin for Chinese, Malay for Malays and Tamil for Dravidian-speaking Indians. Such a policy was enforced because the government believes that English, as the lingua franca of world trade, science and technology, would empower Singaporeans to become competitive employees in a globalized market, while the Mother Tongue Languages would allow the general population to appreciate Eastern culture through their native languages, to maintain their respective ethnic identity, and to respect and safeguard their Asian heritage. However, Lee senses that if she follows the government's line of reasoning, the mother tongue that she should have studied is Hokkien, the "first language" of her parents and grandparents, not Mandarin. As the government aims at promoting a "culturally prestigious" Singaporean identity both by advancing Mandarin as the sole representative of Chinese culture and by prompting a mindset that prizes Standard English above Singapore English, Lee believes that the young generation in Singapore has been "forced to adopt a desirable mother tongue."

Although Lee discerns that language planning more or less helps facilitate communications between the diverse races, fortify social stability, and position Singapore well in the global economy, the prevailing questions of whether language policies catalyze or wreck the construction of local and

national identity remain. In Singapore, language planning does not simply help create a unified Singaporean identity but has instead become a didactic medium through which the government can project their assumptions, however problematic or fallacious, on how a Singaporean identity should be constructed. The discrimination against certain language options have resulted in some serious consequences, such as the disruption of generational transmission of historical knowledge and cultural heritage. In the end, both Lee and I concur that the efficiency of the government's language policies should be carefully reexamined, perhaps not in terms of the intrinsic qualities of the language such as its capacity to generate economic benefits and higher social status, but in the sense of how national identity should be defined and nurtured through the way people use language.