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# Inclusion, exclusion, and racial identity in Singapore's language education system

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The multiethnic population of Singapore speaks a wide variety of languages, only four of which hold official status. We consider sociolinguistic issues that arise in connection with Singapore's Mother Tongue (MT) education policy, in which children are assigned a course of language study based on their racial heritage. A survey of Singaporeans from various backgrounds indicates that those of mixed and/or minority heritage do not identify strongly with their assigned MT. Respondents of Chinese heritage differ considerably in their attitudes by ethnolinguistic background; overall, they show more ambivalence towards their assigned MT than respondents of Malay and Indian heritage. Our findings reflect the legacies of Singapore's government language campaigns, as well as a growing enthusiasm among Singaporeans for languages that index distinctive regional ethnic identities.

**KEYWORDS**

language attitudes, language education, language policy, race, Singapore, Southeast Asia

新加坡种族多样,语言众多,官方语言只有四种。新加坡儿童依据其种族承继进行特定的语言课程学习,本文旨在探究与新加坡母语(MT)教育政策相关的社会语言学问题。通过调查不同背景的新加坡国民,研究者发现混血和/或少数族裔受访者对官方指定母语(MT)并非强烈认同。华裔受访者对华语的态度也因其方言背景的不同而存在较大差异;总体看来,与马来裔和印度裔受访者相比,华裔受访者对官方指定母语(MT)持有较强的矛盾心理。本研究充分反映了新加坡语言

  

运动中的承继问题。此外,对可表明某种特定区域族裔身份的语言,新加坡国民对其热情日益高涨。

**关键词**

语言政策, 语言态度, 语言教育, 种族, 新加坡, 东南亚

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In multiethnic societies, the challenge of maximizing equity and inclusion for individuals of diverse backgrounds is particularly salient in the domain of education. A setting often characterized as concerned with the reproduction of dominant ideology and culture (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 1983), schools are generally tasked with socializing students into the 'mainstream' behaviors and norms of the community, including those related to language. Many countries, for example, intend for their education system to teach the dominant ethnic group's language or language variety to immigrant and indigenous minority populations. In the case of postcolonial societies that have preserved colonial language-medium education, however, the relationship between language and education differs considerably, as the language of school is often not equivalent to the home language of the dominant ethnic group.

The Southeast Asian island nation of Singapore, a former British colony, has adopted a distinctive language education policy to manage the interests of its diverse population; while schools are universally English-medium, each student must also study one of the country's three other official languages as a so-called 'mother tongue' (MT). Crucially, each child's MT course of study is determined by their racial identity: Chinese children are assigned to Mandarin, Malays to Malay, and Indians to Tamil (Ministry of Education, 2017). The elegance of this policy disguises a rather more complex reality, in which students of mixed heritage, and those with a heritage that does not correspond to any of these three dominant groups, must navigate a system that was not designed to accommodate them. Moreover, the relationships between the official MT languages and the Chinese, Malay, and Indian populations of Singapore are far from straightforward. Significant portions of each community—and, in the case of Singaporean Chinese, the majority—have historically not spoken the language with which they are now officially associated.

In this paper, we consider data drawn from a survey exploring the views of Singaporeans regarding to the relationship between their own ethnic heritage and their experience with MT study. The section below reviews previous work on the intersection of race and language education; later sections present the situation of Singapore, our study's methodology and findings, and a brief conclusion.

### 1.1 | Language education and race

The study of the relationship between race and language, recently dubbed 'raciolinguistics' (Alim, Rickford, & Ball, 2016), has been of interest to scholars in a variety of fields for many decades. With the advent of new theoretical conceptualizations of race, approaches to questions connected to race and language have evolved and diversified considerably over time. Across the range of frameworks relating to race and language today, one notable commonality is the conceptualization of race/ethnicity as a social construct, rather than a biological reality (see Carter & Virdee, 2008; Smaje, 1997).[1] In the present paper, we also adopt the view, prevalent in sociocultural linguistics and third wave variationist sociolinguistics, that language is a resource with which individuals construct and perform racial identity (Benor, 2010; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Eckert, 2012). Moreover, we will highlight that language planning, including language education policy, does not merely reflect a society's conceptions of race, but also serves as a tool with which states may attempt to reshape racial classifications and identities.

Racial identity intersects with language education in a variety of contexts. Many scholars have investigated the role of race in conventional first and second language education—and, indeed, in education more generally. While there is often no explicit link made between the language being learned and racial identity, ethnolinguistic and sociocultural differences may create challenges for learners from minority and/or marginalized groups, while privileging those from dominant groups. In other scenarios, however, language education is more explicitly connected to race; this is the case in heritage language learning settings. Whether in the context of heritage language learning or mainstream education, questions of language and race may be examined at multiple levels: from the perspective of individual learners, in terms of classroom pedagogical strategies, or, even more broadly, with regard to societal language planning and policy.

As observed by Motschenbacher (2016), speakers of minority languages or dialects often face unique challenges in the second language classroom. Language instructors are less likely to be familiar with features of these learners' first languages that may transfer to the target second language; curriculum and learning materials are also generally tailored to learners who are native speakers of the majority language. With regard to sociocultural aspects of language learning, learners of various racial identities may encounter challenges in negotiating their social identities as speakers and learners of the target language (Norton, 2012). Studies of African Americans and foreign language learning have supported the view that Black students are discouraged from the study of foreign languages such as Spanish due to the absence of African or Black cultural themes addressed in foreign language curricula, in spite of the existence of communities of African descent in which these languages are spoken (Davis & Markham, 1991; Watterson, 2011). Researching acquisition of Hebrew in Israel, Abu-Rabia (1996, 1999) critiques the curriculum used to teach Arab and Druze Israelis, in which texts focus on Jewish culture and traditions, and finds that students perform better when reading culturally-familiar texts. The significance of race in second language learning is broader, however, than the situation of learners from groups that are racially marginalized within their local communities; as observed by Kubota and Lin (2009), issues of racism, colonialism, and White hegemony are deeply embedded in many aspects of foreign language education on a global scale, particularly in the teaching and learning of English. Over the past decade, along with growing interest in the study of globalization and English as an international lingua franca, scholars have increasingly queried how racial hierarchies and White privilege intersect with the notion of native speakerism and related issues in English language education (Grant & Lee, 2009; Ruecker, 2011).

In contrast to other second language acquisition (SLA) contexts, 'heritage language' (or sometimes 'mother tongue language') learning refers to situations in which descendants of immigrants or members of indigenous groups study a language linked to some aspect of their own racial or ethnic identity; while most frequently used to refer to learners with some prior exposure to the language, the term 'heritage language learner' can also refer to those without such experience (Carreira, 2004; Chinen & Tucker, 2005; Valdés, 2001; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003). Due to the personal connection between heritage language learners and the target language, such learners have been argued to differ significantly in their motivations, needs, and identities from learners in other SLA contexts. Heritage language learning has, therefore, frequently been studied as a phenomenon distinct from conventional SLA (Carreira, 2004; He, 2006).

Regardless of the resulting competence achieved in the language, the act of studying a heritage language is in itself a social practice implicated in the negotiation of identity. Indeed, for learners living in assimilated communities with high levels of interaction with individuals from other backgrounds, heritage language study may be one of the few social practices linking them to a particular racial identity. The social practice of heritage language study is particularly significant in the case of community-based heritage language schools, which often function as key spaces for community interaction, socializing students into the norms of the community as well as strengthening students' sense of racial identity (Chinen & Tucker, 2005; Doerr & Lee, 2009, 2010; Leeman, 2015; Lo, 2009; Oketani, 1997).

Previous research points to strong links between racial identity and perceived and actual heritage language proficiency (see Leeman, 2015). Kang and Kim (2012), for example, observed that second generation Korean Americans' strength of Korean identity correlated with both their actual and self-reported competence in Korean; among

participants at the same Korean proficiency level, those with weak Korean identity were more likely to underestimate their proficiency (288). In a study of Chinese Australians, Mu (2014) found that participants' self-reported level of Mandarin proficiency correlated significantly with a nine-dimensional measure of Chineseness, quantifying alignment to traditional Confucian values. Other work, however, finds that heritage language study and attendance at heritage language schools can highlight differences between the identities and practices of native speakers and those of heritage speakers (Doerr & Lee, 2009; Jo, 2001).

The situation of mixed-heritage learners in heritage language education has received little attention in previous work, with prior research focusing on the role of heritage language proficiency more generally in the construction of identity among mixed-heritage individuals. Regarding language proficiency, research indicates that mixed-heritage individuals' proficiency (or perceived proficiency) in their heritage languages holds profound implications for how they construct their racial identity (Pao, Wong, & Teuben-Rowe, 1997; Shin, 2010). Shin (2010: 216) found that mixed-heritage Americans across a range of backgrounds consistently pointed to language proficiency as a crucial factor in community membership, and conceived of heritage language study as a means of reclaiming a non-White racial identity. Crucially, aside from posing a communicative barrier that limits interaction with a particular community, mixed-heritage individuals' lack of language proficiency may also constitute a perceived barrier to community membership due to ideological factors; in Singapore, for example, although many Chinese Singaporeans are not proficient in Mandarin, Singaporeans of mixed Chinese-Indian heritage who lack proficiency in Mandarin nevertheless report feeling like outsiders to the Chinese community due to a perceived language barrier (Balasubramaniam, 2015).

From a language planning standpoint, issues connected to race often come to the fore in the development of language education policies. For postcolonial societies with a history of colonial-language-medium education, for example, the decision to introduce education in indigenous languages (often referred to as 'mother tongue education' in this context) gives rise to challenges relating to inclusion and equity in terms of the resources and institutional support granted to the languages spoken by particular sub-communities. Banda (2000: 61), discussing language education policy in South Africa, points out that the issue goes beyond merely selecting particular languages and pedagogical models, but also extends to selecting varieties of each language to promote; in the South African context, different varieties of English are associated with different ethnic groups, and the rural 'standard' varieties of languages such as Zulu have been losing prestige relative to emerging urban varieties.

Complicating the situation of language education policy is the fact that language planning choices are inextricably tied to broader societal struggles to balance the interests of various ethnolinguistic groups (see Shohamy, 2006; Spolsky, 2004; Tollefson, 2012). Thus, language education policy decisions are often made with broader sociopolitical aims in mind. Language education policy can, for instance, lend greater legitimacy to a particular language, and, in turn, to the community with which that language is identified; given the prominent role of formal schooling in most societies today and ideologies surrounding education and standard language, implementing education via a particular language is one of the most powerful tools a state has at its disposal to grant this sort of legitimacy. As we will see in the case of Singapore, language education policies can also contribute to efforts to redefine the boundaries and nature of racial classifications. In such a context, in which policies are intended to transform the local linguistic and social landscape, it is perhaps inevitable that certain communities and individuals find themselves underserved or unrepresented in terms of the languages promoted by and excluded from the education system.

## 2 | RACE AND MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

Since its founding as a British port in 1819, Singapore has consistently retained a multiracial, multilingual character, with an identity rooted in this pluralism (Chew, 2013; Goh, 2008). Today, Singapore's citizen population of 3.4 million is generally conceived of as consisting of a Chinese majority (comprising approximately three quarters of the

population), Malay and Indian minorities, and a diverse group of 'others' (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2015). The first three of these groups are each associated with a designated official language: Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, respectively. As we briefly outline here, the nature of Singapore's racial groupings, and the languages selected to represent them, result from an array of historical factors.

From the earliest days of the colonial period, Singapore was governed via a strategy sometimes referred to as the "institutionalization of pluralism" (Goh, 2008: 237), in which distinct roles were assigned to various groups organized according to British conceptions of race. In the 1891 census, the colonial government defined the major classes of residents as 'Europeans', 'Eurasians', 'Chinese', 'Malays and other natives of the archipelago', 'Tamils and other natives of India', and 'Other nationalities' (Hirschman, 1987: 562). By the 1957 census, these categories had been consolidated into 'Chinese', 'Malay, 'Indian', and 'Others'. The unity of these classes from an administrative perspective, however, was at odds with the perceptions of individuals within these groups, who emphasized more fine-grained ethnolinguistic and regional identities.

Chinese immigrants to Singapore, for example, came primarily from regions of southern China that were perceived as culturally and linguistically distinctive (Chew, 2013: 47). These groups spoke a range of southern Chinese varieties (primarily Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese), and established separate schools that educated children in these varieties (PuruShotam, 1998: 43). It was only with the rise of nationalism in China and the movement to promote Mandarin as a unifying Chinese language, beginning at the end of the 19th century, that Mandarin was introduced into the community (PuruShotam, 1998: 43). Even as late as 1957, only 0.1% of Singaporeans reported Mandarin to be their MT (Kuo, 1980). This situation did not change significantly until 1979, when the government launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The campaign banned the use of other Chinese varieties in the media and promoted the learning of Mandarin, for the stated purpose of unifying the community under a single variety of Chinese that promised to be more economically useful, in light of the anticipated rise of China (Kong & Yeoh, 2003). Following the initiation of these measures, the use of Mandarin rose dramatically in the country; today, it is the primary home language of 46.1% of Chinese Singaporeans, while only 16.1% primarily speak a non-Mandarin variety of Chinese (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2015).

Singaporean Malays also have a linguistically diverse history. Individuals of this heritage are descended from immigrants from regions within both modern Malaysia and Indonesia. While some spoke Malay, many immigrants spoke other Malayo-Polynesian languages (e.g., Javanese), and initially conceived of themselves as belonging to those ethnic groups, rather than the Malay race (Chew, 2013: 38–43). As in the case of the Chinese community, a unified Malay identity gradually emerged in the context of intermarriage, cultural assimilation, and the rise of Malay nationalism (PuruShotam, 1998: 40; Chew, 2013: 38–43). As a result, by the 1980 census, Malay had completely overtaken the other Malayo-Polynesian languages (Kuo, 1980). Malay continues to thrive among Malays today: 78.4% report using primarily Malay at home, in contrast to the 62.2% of Chinese Singaporeans who report using any variety of Chinese (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2015).

While the majority of Indian immigrants to Singapore in the colonial period came from Tamil Nadu, significant populations hailed from a range of other Indian states and spoke a variety of languages (Chew, 2013: 48–51). Tamil language education first came to prominence in Singapore as a result of Tamil social reform organizations begun in the 1930s that promoted literacy; the institutions and political influence established as a result of this movement are what led Tamil to be selected as Singapore's official Indian language (Solomon, 2012). Today, 37.7% of Singapore's Indian population speaks primarily Tamil at home, 12% speaks another Indian language, while 44.3% speaks primarily English (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2015).

Since independence in 1965, the Singapore government has continued to use the basic racial classification system first established in the colonial period. Today, this system is known as CMIO: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (PuruShotam, 1998: 33). Governmental institutions use these classes in the implementation of various policies, such as racial integration in housing (Rocha, 2011: 106–108). In recognition of the growing population of mixed-heritage Singaporeans, a 'double-barreled' race option (e.g., 'Chinese-Indian') was implemented in 2011; nevertheless, individuals are classified by their first-listed race for administrative purposes (Rocha, 2011: 120).

The governmental CMIO system elides several communities that are generally perceived as separate ethnic groups by laypeople in Singapore. In this paper, we will highlight two of these minority communities: Peranakans and Eurasians. Peranakans, also known as Straits Chinese or Baba-Nyonya, are the descendants of Chinese immigrants who arrived in the region beginning in the 15th century (Png, 1969; Lee, 2014: 20–21). These settlers married local women, resulting in a distinctive hybrid culture and a Malay-based creole, Baba Malay (see Lee, 2014). Many Peranakans later moved to colonial Singapore and became among the earliest learners of English (Hardwick, 2008); this community has almost completely shifted to English today, with Baba Malay now considered critically endangered (The Endangered Languages Project, 2017).

'Eurasians' refers broadly in Singapore to individuals of mixed Asian and European heritage. One particularly cohesive and long-standing subgroup of Eurasians is the Portuguese Eurasian community, which originated in the unions of local women with Portuguese settlers who arrived in the region in the 16th century (Baxter, 2005: 10–11). Portuguese Eurasians historically spoke Kristang, a creole with a Malay substrate and Portuguese superstrate (see Baxter, 2005). As with the Peranakans, Eurasians were among the first of Singapore's communities to learn English (Wee, 2002). English has subsequently become virtually the sole language of the community, with only a handful of native Kristang speakers remaining (Pereira, 1997: 15–16).

The early shift to English among Peranakans and Eurasians was a precursor of a larger trend. Since independence, Singapore has seen a widespread and dramatic shift towards English. This shift is presumably due, in part, to Singapore's education system, which has been universally English-medium since 1987 (Dixon, 2005: 28). In recent years, however, the domains of English use have spread beyond school and the workplace; the 2015 General Household Survey found that English is now the most commonly-spoken primary home language of Singaporeans (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2015).

The rise of English as a home language has further complicated Singapore's language planning strategies. Upon independence, the government delineated separate functions for English versus the Asian-origin official languages; English was promoted as a neutral, working language, necessary for communication between different racial groups and with the outside world, while the other official languages were meant to serve as carriers of culture and values (Wee, 2003: 214). In line with this division, since the 1960s, the government has pursued a bilingual education policy in which all students must study their official MT as a compulsory subject, regardless of their actual home language background (Dixon, 2005: 25). While the instrumental value of learning Mandarin has become a theme in recent official discourse, the primary rationale put forward for the MT policy has consistently been to instill 'Asian values' and provide Singaporeans with a connection to their cultural heritage (Wee, 2003).

The situation of Singaporeans whose families do not speak an official MT has presented dilemmas for the bilingual education policy (Ng, 2014; Wee, 2002). Despite the rhetoric that students must learn their own MT to connect with their heritage, those of minority heritage have nonetheless been required to study Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil in school. This situation remains essentially unchanged today, although a limited number of additional options, including French and Japanese, have been introduced in recent decades (Ministry of Education, 2017); approval for study of these alternative languages is only given when a case can be made that the student is unable to succeed in conventional MT courses. Students of Indian heritage may also now apply to study one of five non-Tamil Indian languages, including Hindi (Ministry of Education, 2017). Southern Chinese varieties such as Hokkien and Cantonese, however, and creoles, such as Baba Malay and Kristang, are not approved for alternative MT study.

Over the past decade, Singapore's rapid pace of development has prompted a strengthened sense of local identity among native Singaporeans and a corresponding nostalgic wave of interest in local heritage and culture (Hong, 2013; Yang, 2014). Grassroots organizations have begun to teach classes in languages without official status in Singapore, including Hokkien and Kristang (Associated Free Press, 2017; Lim, 2016; Wong, 2017). In the following section, we examine how this reviving interest in local languages, in combination with governmental policies and community language shifts, shape the perceptions of Singaporeans from various heritage backgrounds regarding MT education.

## 3 | SURVEY OF ATTITUDES TOWARD LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND RACE IN SINGAPORE

To better understand how Singaporeans view the MT education policy in relation to their own identities and language proficiencies, we carried out an online survey in the spring of 2017. The following sections outline the methodology and findings of this study.

### 3.1 | Survey methodology

An online, English-language survey on the Qualtrics platform was completed by 98 respondents born in Singapore. Respondents were primarily young adults, with 74.5% ages 18–40 and 25.5% over 40. Participants provided information on their ethnic and linguistic background, and indicated their level of agreement with a series of statements regarding their attitudes towards the official MT they studied in school and the MT they most identify with, as well as their satisfaction with their proficiency in these languages.

This survey is not meant to constitute a balanced or representative sample of all Singaporeans, but rather is intended to focus particularly on how Singaporeans who do not fit into the dominant racial categories of the CMIO system negotiate their identity in relation to MT education. In the process of data collection, therefore, participation was invited from any individual born in Singapore, but recruitment emphasized those who identified as falling outside of the major racial categories. As a result, of the 98 respondents, 52% reported having either mixed ethnic heritage or a heritage other than Chinese, Malay, or Indian. The most common alternative ethnic classifications mentioned were Eurasian (24.5%) and Peranakan (13.3%); the most common mixed-heritage background was Chinese-Peranakan (8.1%). In terms of the major racial classifications, 51% of respondents reported being at least partially of Chinese heritage, 21.5% reported at least some Indian heritage, and 8.2% reported at least some Malay heritage; in the findings section, we will consider, among other questions, whether Singaporeans who report a connection to these classifications identify more strongly with their assigned MT language, relative to those who perceive themselves as having a heritage distinct from those with official associated MTs.

### 3.2 | Survey findings

Figure 1 indicates the distribution of perceived MT languages among respondents reporting heritage in the Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, and Peranakan groups. Notably, of the heritage groups, it is only the case for one group,

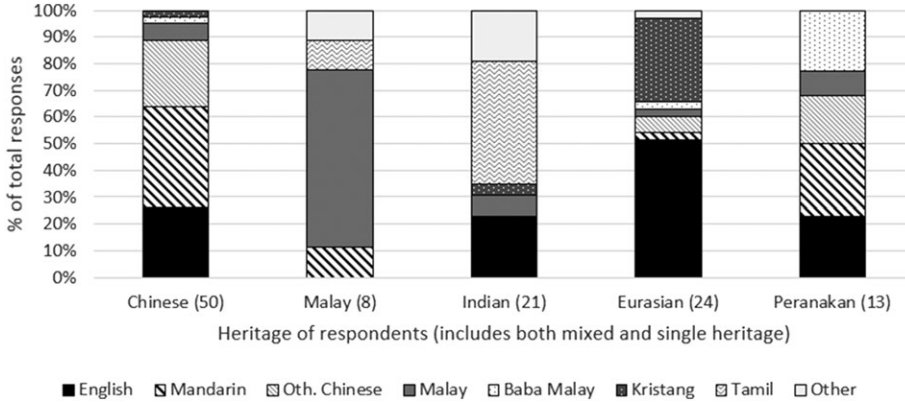


**FIGURE 1** Responses to, "What language(s) do you consider to be your mother tongue?" arranged byheritage group (respondent numbers given in parentheses)

those with Malay heritage, that the majority of respondents report that their perceived MT corresponds to the official MT this group is assigned in schools. Nonetheless, for those respondents with Chinese and Indian heritage, the official MT does constitute the most common perceived MT. Given that the number of Singaporeans who identified Mandarin as their MT in 1957 was vanishingly small (Kuo, 1980), the fact that this Chinese variety is the most commonly-identified MT of Chinese respondents here is reflective of the dramatic success of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

Also of note in Figure 1 is that, among the Eurasian heritage group, only two responses mention a language that is offered as an official MT in schools; the vast majority of responses in this group identify English or Kristang, neither of which may be taken to fulfill the compulsory MT requirement. The perception of many Eurasians that English is their true MT is a longstanding phenomenon that has posed a challenge to the government's separation of the functions of English versus MTs (Wee, 2002); the prominence of Kristang as an MT among these respondents, however, is something not previously noted in the literature, and likely results from recent language revitalization efforts (see Wong, 2017).

Finally, among the Peranakan heritage group, only a minority identifies the language historically spoken by Peranakans, Baba Malay, as their perceived MT. This distribution results from the fact that the majority of respondents with Peranakan heritage are of mixed Chinese-Peranakan background, reflecting the increasing intermarriage of Peranakans with the larger Chinese population. Indeed, of the four respondents who report being solely of Peranakan heritage, none list Mandarin as their perceived MT, while all but one list Baba Malay. In contrast, of the eight respondents with mixed Chinese-Peranakan heritage, six identify Mandarin as an MT, and only two mention Baba Malay. While these are small numbers, this trend suggests that it is intermarriage specifically, rather than general cultural assimilation or language education policies, that has led to the increasing acceptance of Mandarin as an MT among those with Peranakan heritage.

Figure 2 indicates respondents' level of agreement with statements regarding whether they feel that the MT they studied in school corresponds to their 'true' perceived MT, and whether they would have chosen a different language or dialect to study if the option had been available. The respondents have been arranged into three groups: (1) those who are entirely of one of the 'dominant' heritage backgrounds, either Chinese, Malay, or Indian; (2) those who report partial Chinese, Malay, or Indian heritage; and (3) those who report no Chinese, Malay, or Indian heritage.

Looking first at the top question, respondents reporting a single Chinese, Malay, or Indian heritage are significantly more likely than those with mixed heritage to agree that they feel the MT they studied in school is their true MT ($t(68) = 39.9119$, $p = 0.0002$).[2] Even among respondents of only one dominant heritage, however, the level of agreement with this statement is only at an average level of 'somewhat agree' (corresponding to five on the

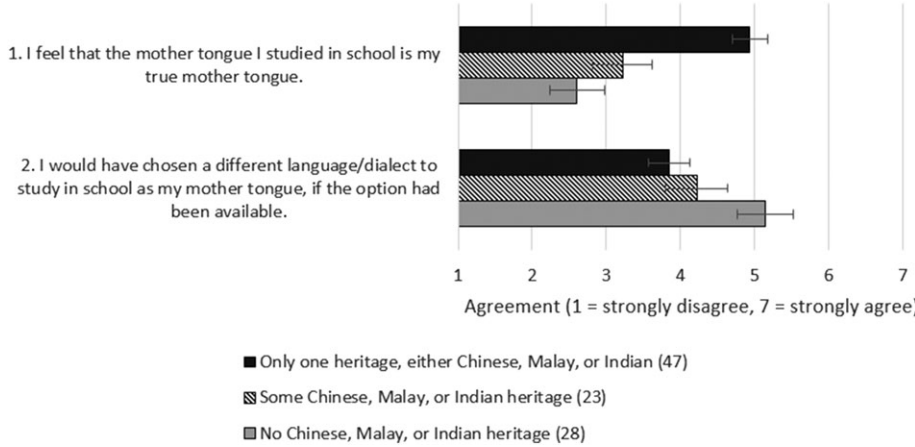


**FIGURE 2** Average level of agreement with statements relating to MT study, by heritage group (respondent numbers given in parentheses)

horizontal axis); this number breaks down to 4.78 for those of Chinese heritage versus 5.27 for those of Malay and Indian heritage, reflecting a lingering skepticism regarding the connection between Mandarin and Singaporean Chinese heritage.

Examining the responses to question 2, those with no Chinese, Malay, or Indian heritage are significantly more likely than the other two groups to agree that they would have chosen a different language or dialect to study ($t(96) = 1.17$, $p = 0.0084$). The distinction in behavior among the three groups in response to these two items indicates that, among those of mixed heritage with some Chinese, Malay, or Indian background, while there is substantial ambivalence regarding whether their assigned MT truly corresponds to their ethnolinguistic heritage, these doubts are not significant enough to prompt them to wish they had studied a different language in school; in contrast, individuals who have no perceived connection to Chinese, Malay, or Indian heritage express considerable dissatisfaction with their MT course, despite the practical benefits of learning a major language of the community.

In light of the fact that respondents with mixed heritage backgrounds responded rather differently from single-heritage individuals regarding their perceived MT, Figure 3 focuses on those who fall into only one of the heritage classes: either Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, or Peranakan. As suggested in Figure 2, regarding questions 1 and 2, Eurasian and Peranakan respondents reject the notion that their assigned MT in school corresponds to their perceived MT, and show a strong desire to have selected a different MT; while the numbers of Malay-only heritage respondents are small, they show the opposite pattern, with Chinese and Indian respondents more ambivalent. Eurasian and Peranakan respondents also give extremely low ratings to question 3, as they perceive little connection between their MT classes and their ethnic heritage. Chinese respondents give the lowest rating to question 4, and the lowest rating to question 5 among the dominant heritage groups; these items relate to respondents' satisfaction with competence in their assigned and perceived MT. The widespread perception of poor performance in Mandarin among Singaporean Chinese is a phenomenon that has been observed in previous work (e.g., Theng, 2016).

As discussed in the prior section on race and language in Singapore, the local category of 'Chinese' is a conflation of a variety of ethnolinguistic groups from Southern China that used to be considered relatively distinct. Looking more closely at respondents of Chinese heritage who studied Mandarin as their MT, Figure 4 indicates the attitudes of Chinese respondents arranged into three groups: (1) those who report having only Cantonese heritage; (2) those who report some other single ethnolinguistic heritage (Hokkien, Hakka, or Teochew); and (3) those who report having

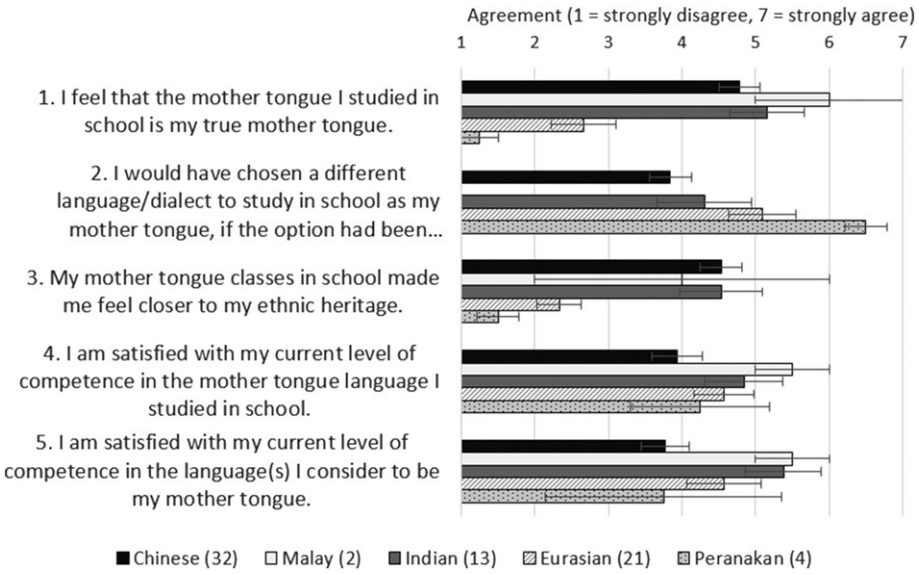


**FIGURE 3** Attitudes by ethnic heritage among single-heritage respondents only (respondent numbers given in parentheses)

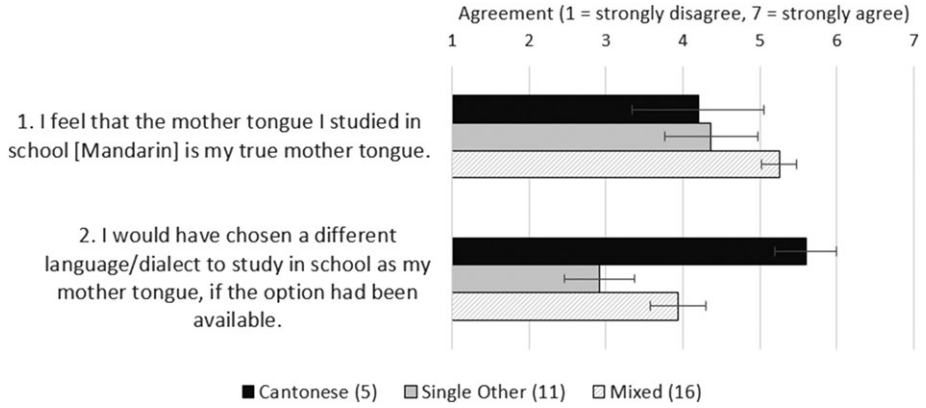


**FIGURE 4** Ratings of two attitudinal questions by respondents of Chinese heritage who studied Mandarin as their MT in school, arranged by Chinese ethnolinguistic background (respondent numbers given in parentheses)

a mixed Chinese ethnolinguistic heritage (e.g., Hokkien and Cantonese). In response to the first question regarding whether the MT they studied in school—in this case, Mandarin—is perceived as their true MT, we observe a trend such that those of mixed heritage, meaning of an ethnolinguistic background encompassing more than one Chinese variety, agree more strongly that Mandarin is their true MT ($t(41) = 1.6576$, $p = 0.105$). A more dramatic difference is evident in the second question; respondents of only Cantonese heritage are significantly more likely to agree that they would have selected a different language/dialect to study than the other groups ($t(41) = 2.2136$, $p = 0.0325$); of the five Cantonese heritage respondents, four rated this question as 'agree,' and identified Cantonese as the language they would have preferred to have studied. In contrast, while also of single heritage, respondents of Hokkien, Hakka, and Teochew backgrounds are even more unlikely to agree that they would have liked to switch MTs than those of mixed backgrounds; this distinction likely reflects the lower ethnolinguistic vitality of these Chinese varieties relative to Cantonese, which benefits from its status as the primary language of Hong Kong and its associated entertainment industry. Taken together, these findings indicate that both intermarriage and the decreasing vitality of Hokkien and other non-Cantonese, non-Mandarin varieties of Chinese are factors that contribute to some

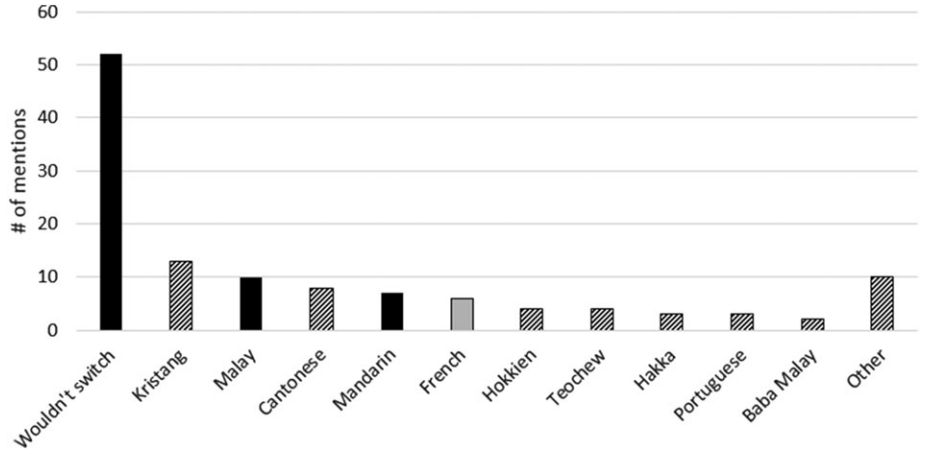


**FIGURE 5** Responses to, "If [you would have chosen a different language to study in school, if the option had been available], which language/dialect would you have chosen, and why?" Black indicates languages available for MT study. Solid gray indicates available to certain students who cannot cope with conventional MT study. Striped indicates not currently available for study in schools

Singaporean Chinese individuals viewing Mandarin as their true MT and as an acceptable language to study as their MT in school.

Finally, Figure 5 gives a breakdown of which languages respondents would have preferred to study for their MT course in school. As indicated, approximately 53% of respondents reported that they would not have switched to a different language or dialect. This number is surprisingly high, given the ambivalent feelings expressed in the rest of the survey. The majority of these 'wouldn't switch' responses refer to Mandarin; several respondents explicitly noted the utility of Mandarin in explaining why they would not have switched: "I am pretty certain that I would have still learnt Mandarin ... particularly with the indisputable relevance of Mandarin today given a rising China along with an influx of mainland Chinese migrants."

The majority of the 'switch' responses identified a language that is not currently available for study in Singapore schools; moreover, most of the languages selected have some connection to the region and its associated heritage groups. Thirty-eight per cent of respondents with some Chinese heritage reported a desire to have studied a non-Mandarin Chinese variety. Of these, Cantonese had the strongest showing; while Hokkien is the historically dominant variety in Singapore, and once served as the lingua franca of Singapore's Chinese community, only 8% of Chinese respondents reported a desire to have studied this variety.

The distribution of creole languages and their associated lexifiers here is also worthy of note. Several respondents with Peranakan heritage selected Malay as their desired MT, providing explanations such as, "Malay, being closest to Peranakan," indicating an assumption that Baba Malay (a.k.a. 'Peranakan') would never be an option in schools. Eurasian respondents, in contrast, tended to select Kristang over Portuguese, its lexifier, perhaps because they are aware of the recent grassroots Kristang language revitalization movement. This distinction illustrates how language revival campaigns can shape a community's perception of what languages hold the legitimacy necessary for use in the domain of education.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

To balance the interests of its multiethnic, multilingual population, Singapore has adopted a range of intersecting strategies. Of these, we have highlighted the CMIO racial framework, in which individuals are classified as Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Other for various institutional purposes, and the English plus Mother Tongue approach to bilingual education, in which all students are required to attend school in English for the purpose of fostering a common national working language, and to additionally study Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil for the purpose of preserving their various cultural identities. As we have established, the connections between each of these languages and the groups they are meant to represent are far from undisputed, in part because these racial groupings are somewhat novel conglomerations of historically ethnolinguistically distinct populations; in the case of Mandarin, this perceived connection is even more tenuous, because the language has a limited history in the region.

The notion that the MT education policy is in place to ensure that Singaporean children develop a strong connection to their heritage encounters problems when it comes to the racial class of 'Others,' who have no official associated MT. The government appears to have approached this issue, in part, by encouraging the assimilation of minority groups into the dominant racial classes. Peranakans, for example, have been administratively merged into the larger group of Singaporean Chinese and are expected to adopt Mandarin as their MT (Lee, 2014: 381). Eurasians, on the other hand, have remained culturally and institutionally distinct from the dominant groups; in regard to compulsory MT study, no governmental solution or narrative has been offered to address their dilemma. The MT system is also challenged by the increasing number of mixed-heritage individuals, who, as we have demonstrated, are skeptical regarding the link between their assigned MT and their heritage.

The survey of Singaporean attitudes towards MT education presented above found that individuals of Malay heritage demonstrated the highest levels of satisfaction and perceived affiliation with their assigned MT, followed by those of Indian heritage. Individuals of Chinese heritage varied by ethnolinguistic background, with those of solely

Cantonese background expressing a desire to have studied Cantonese rather than Mandarin; trends suggest that those of mixed ethnolinguistic heritage may perceive a stronger affiliation with Mandarin than those of a single heritage. Chinese-background respondents also expressed more dissatisfaction with their MT proficiency relative to those of Malay and Indian heritage. Thus, while Mandarin is the most prominent language of the three official MTs, and is connected to career opportunities in Singapore and elsewhere, this utility has not translated into greater enthusiasm for or affiliation with Mandarin as an MT, reflecting lingering resistance to the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The findings of this small-scale survey illustrate the need for further research exploring the impact of ethnolinguistic heritage on attitudes within the Chinese community.

Respondents of Eurasian and Peranakan heritage indicated little perceived affiliation with their assigned MTs, and disagreed strongly that studying an MT in school made them feel closer to their ethnic heritage. When it came to alternative MTs they would have preferred to study, Eurasians identified Kristang, and, to a lesser extent, Portuguese, while Peranakans were somewhat less likely to mention Baba Malay than Malay. Despite this difference, these findings, in conjunction with the previous attitudinal data, suggest considerable enthusiasm among both Peranakans and Eurasians for the development of MT courses that align more closely with their heritage. This issue is particularly salient among Eurasians, who see little connection between themselves and any of the currently available MT languages. The interest Peranakan and Eurasian respondents have demonstrated here with regard to the historical creoles spoken by their respective groups represents a significant shift away from the prior emphasis on English observed in both of these communities. Because Peranakans and Eurasians were early adopters of English in colonial Singapore, identification with the English language was a salient means of performing their distinctive ethnic identities in the past. As use of English has become commonplace, however, these groups are, arguably, increasingly turning to Baba Malay and Kristang as resources to index ethnic identity. A larger follow-up study may identify generational differences in how members of these communities construct their identity in relation to English and heritage languages.

Our findings also highlight one respect in which Singapore's approach to bilingual education has been quite successful: that is, in promoting the notion that the second language studied in school ought to be a student's heritage language. The majority of respondents expressed a desire to have studied a language connected to their own ethnic heritage, rather than a world language (e.g., French) or a community language associated with a different ethnic group (e.g., Mandarin). Indeed, it is presumably the successful uptake of this view that accounts for the sense of exclusion and dissatisfaction with MT study reflected in the responses of mixed-heritage and minority-heritage respondents in the survey. Moreover, after the implementation of 'in lieu' options for certain European and Asian languages, which are taught in external language centers to relatively small numbers of students, skepticism has increased regarding official claims that permitting other minority languages for MT study would be logistically impractical and detrimental to national unity. If current trends continue, and interest in Singaporean heritage languages continues to build, options for MT study may be further expanded. Alternatively, as the mixed-heritage population of Singapore grows, the link between compulsory second language study and ethnic heritage may be increasingly deemphasized, with families instead encouraged to select the second language of their choice, regardless of their background.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] We follow Smaje (1997) and many others in grouping the notions of 'race' and 'ethnicity' in the following discussion. While these two terms are sometimes used to refer to different classifications in particular cultural contexts and academic

traditions, the words are often used synonymously and are constructed based upon similar ideologies regarding the grouping of individuals on the basis of factors including perceived regional ancestry. In our discussion of race in Singapore, we adopt the community practice of using the term 'race' for classifications such as 'Chinese' that would more commonly be referred to as 'ethnicity' in modern Western traditions.

[2] All statistical findings reported are generated by unpaired two-sample t-tests.

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