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CONSUMING IDENTITIES: LANGUAGE PLANNING AND POLICY IN SINGAPOREAN LATE MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT. Much language planning and policy is formulated around notions such as ethnicity and nation and thus does not fit easily with the multilingual dynamics typical of late modern societies that are increasingly characterized by a culture of consumerism and class. Taking its point of departure in a critical analysis of contemporary language politics in Singapore, this paper suggests an alternative approach that takes the notion of sociolinguistic consumption as central, and explores how this may account for everyday language choice among multilingual Singaporean adolescents. The paper concludes by elaborating on the implications of such a framework for the teaching and learning of languages.

KEY WORDS: language planning and policy, late modernity, multilingualism, Singapore, sociolinguistic consumption

Introduction

The historical origins of modern language planning activities can be traced from the postcolonial needs of newly independent nations undergoing statal construction, through the emerging decentralization in the European center in the 1980s with its concern for minority rights, to today's concern with balancing the linguistic interests of new nations in supranational constructions such as a conglomerate Europe and an increasingly integrated Africa (Blommaert, 1996; Pennycook, 2000, Phillipson, 2003; Ricento, 2000). In the majority of approaches to language policy, the underlying dynamics of multilingualism is framed within an understanding of language in relation to society that employs concepts such as locality, authenticity and ownership (cf. Blommaert, 2005; Collins & Slembrouck, 2005; Stroud, 2002). Sociopolitical notions

of identity associated with language, such as gender, race, and ethnicity are invoked as a core part of a dynamics underlying the acquisition, maintenance and revival of languages, in order to account for specific correlative patterns between the macro-sociological distribution of resources and the kinds of constraints placed on particular individuals as they engage in concrete linguistic behaviors.

This dominant approach to language planning and policy has been criticized on a number of counts (Blommaert, 2001; Stroud, 2001; Wee, 2003). Here, we suggest that one major failing of much contemporary language policy is that the sociolinguistic ordering around notions of ethnicity and nation does not fit easily with the multilingual dynamics of late modern societies, which are increasingly characterized by a pervasive culture of consumerism (Bauman, 1998; Baudrillard, 1988), where ''people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices that they possess and display'' (Warde, 1994:878).

Since access to, and distribution of, these goods and practices are highly correlated with socioeconomic standing, we treat consumption as an indicator of class. It is of course possible to approach class as an objective macro-structural category with attention given to the social trajectories of relatively large populations. However, it is also possible to conceive of class in more interactional terms (cf. Bradley, 1996:45), and instead treat it as ''a social category which refers to the lived relationships surrounding social arrangements of production, exchange, distribution and consumption...'' (Bradley, 1996:19–20). Where such relationships implicate inequalities or even differences, it is plausible to speak of an incipient sense of class consciousness and, in this way, considerations of class can mediate other characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, age and sex to the extent that these are also part of the complex set of social categories indexed by differential access to social goods[1] (cf. Rampton, 2006:232; see also Abercrombie et al., 2000:145ff; Archer & Francis, 2006).

[1] There is no doubt that the work of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) on 'acts of identity' is also relevant to our data, since the focus of their work has primarily been on how the choice of certain identity markers manifests the desire to belong to a particular group. However, our focus is on the fact that some such choices are only indirectly identity-oriented, and are instead, motivated by what we call 'sociolinguistic consumption.' The notion of class in the present paper therefore does not necessarily refer to the identification of well-defined groups. Rather, class is a locally managed phenomenon that arises as differences in educational background (or other social indicators) between interactants are indexed. We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

Consumption, we argue, needs to be given a more foundational status in language policy in late modernity as societal developments are generating linguistic hierarchies of value that are massively reconfiguring issues of language and ethnicity into questions of language and class. In this paper, we explore, what we believe may be, one promising take on a class-based approach to language policy, namely one formulated in terms of a logic of life-style consumption. Employing the notion of *sociolinguistic consumption*, we attempt to offer a more comprehensive account of the dynamics of language choice and change, illustrating our discussion with examples from Singapore. Singapore is an especially pertinent case study because it has a consumer culture comparable to that of advanced developed nations (Chua, 2003:3), and exhibits all the characteristics of a society in late modernity. Yet, at the same time, Singapore's language policy continues to be firmly shaped by (conventional) ethnolinguistic frameworks, where correlations between designated mother tongues and associated ethnic identities are officially constructed, with English positioned by the state as an ethnically neutral lingua franca (Wee, 2002). In this sense, it provides a paradigm case of a linguistic community describable in terms of traditional sociolinguistic categories, while, on the other hand, exhibiting a dynamics in accordance with the late modern character of a highly developed consumer society.

In the next section, we detail some aspects of a sociolinguistic dynamics that constitute conundrums for traditional frameworks by briefly describing Singapore's ethnicity based language policy, focusing on what the state intends to achieve with this policy and comparing this with data that indicate the extent to which intention and achievement actually diverge in ways that illustrate the overriding weight of socioeconomic considerations and the critical state of ethnolinguistically based language policy models. Our data here is drawn from interviews with a number of young Singaporeans.[2] In Section ''Sociolinguistic consumption: transforming the economic habitus'', we develop a framework for approaching this divergence with the notion of sociolinguistic consumption, and show how our data, now conceptualized as manifestations of this notion, usefully explain the lack of correspondence between state rhetoric and sociolinguistic reality. In Section ''Reflexivity and discourses of aesthetics in acquisition and language consumption'', we sketch some

[2] The material that we discuss comes from a project funded by the National University of Singapore (R-103-000-041-112), unless specific references indicate otherwise.

implications of our analysis for language acquisition focusing specifically on the role of reflexivity in sociolinguistic consumption. Section ''Conclusion'' concludes the paper.

Rhetoric and Reality in Singapore's Language Policy

One way in which state rulings on language contribute to nation-building is by delimiting the parameters of a multilingual variety space and determining what languages should be part of this space, their ideological conception, the range of functions and practices associated with them, and who may have access to them. Ostensibly, Singapore's language policy can be understood as a strategy for managing a multiethnic society, via a mother tongue policy that encourages Singaporeans to be bilingual in English and an officially assigned ethnic mother tongue. The policy recognizes four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. English is supposed to be ethnically neutral, while the others are official mother tongues of the major ethnic communities: Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays, and Tamil for the Indians. To facilitate policy implementation, the state divides the population into four ethnically-based categories, so that 3.2 million Singaporeans are effectively seen as being made up of 76.8% Chinese, 13.9% Malays, 7.9% Indians, and 1.4% Others (2000 Census of Population). There is no official mother tongue for the ''Others'' category, which comprises a miscellaneous collection of various ethnicities that cannot be easily fitted into the first three.

Singapore's language policy is premised on the idea that English is necessary both as an inter-ethnic lingua franca and for global economic competitiveness. This makes it vital that English be ethnically neutral, so that any socio-economic advantages that come with proficiency in the language will not be associated with a specific ethnic community. The mother tongue, on the other hand, is needed to ensure that Singaporeans remain rooted to their Asian heritage even as they compete globally. The policy thus attempts to manage the tension between modernity (construed as a global orientation achieved through the medium of English) and tradition, where each mother tongue is supposedly the cultural repository of values for its associated ethnic group.

Language planning is therefore a pervasive concern of Singaporean society, and in order to sustain its language policy, the state

has long initiated various campaigns in order to encourage particular kinds of linguistic behavior over others. This concern with detailed monitoring of the behavior of individual citizens has earned Singapore the epithet of a ''nanny state'', and Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister, has been quoted as saying (Mauzy & Milne, 2002:35, italics added):

> We wouldn't be here, would not have made the economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters – who your neighbor is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit or where you spit, or *what language you use* ... It was fundamental social and cultural changes that brought us here.

Consequently, two different language campaigns are currently underway. One is the Speak Mandarin Campaign, which was started in 1979, and is aimed at encouraging Chinese Singaporeans to speak their official mother tongue, Mandarin, so as to unify speakers who otherwise belong to many different Chinese language groups. The second is the Speak Good English Movement,[3] which began in 2000, and promotes *non-local*[4] English as good English, in accordance with the stance that English is not the mother tongue of any specific community in Singapore.

Chua (1983:32–33; see also Pennycook, 1994:240ff) points out that Singapore's language policy thus presents English as ostensibly having been ''depoliticized'', as a language that serves a ''purely pragmatic'' function. In contrast, the official mother tongues are intended to serve the ''non-pragmatic'' function of acting as identity markers and repositories of cultural knowledge. But since ethnic culture has been ''relegated to the realm of private and voluntaristic, individual or collective practices that are most pronounced in the form of ethnic cultural festivals'' (Chua & Kuo, 1990:8), with the consequence that ''cultural identity is valorized in the private but not the public domain'' (Pennycook, 1994:244), the overall effect of the language policy is to sharply reduce the potential of any public space for debating the presuppositions that

[3] The term 'movement' is intended to convey the impression that this is a grassroots initiative rather than one initiated by the state.

[4] Official statements sometimes suggest that the campaign encourages the use of 'standard Singaporean English', by which is meant a variety that is exonormatively oriented in its grammatical structure (towards either British or American English) with concessions to the insertion of lexical items that refer to local foodstuffs or distinctive cultural artifacts.

ground the policy's approach to the relationship between language, use, and identity.[5] In spite of itself, however, the state has recently begun to treat at least one mother tongue, Mandarin, as having *both* pragmatic and non-pragmatic functions, arguing that this language should be learnt in order to take advantage of China's economic transformation as well as because it is an identity marker for Chinese Singaporeans. This has created some problems for the language policy, in particular its commitment to multiracialism, since a consequence of adopting a discourse of "linguistic instrumentalism" for Mandarin – where the language is viewed as a resource for economic advancement – is that it potentially compromises the relationship of parity across the three official mother tongues (Wee, 2003). In this way, the state's own discourse is fraught with potential self-contradictions as it attempts to argue for Mandarin's economic value while still insisting that this language is not necessarily more important than the other two mother tongues. This is because as languages emblematic of different ethnic identities, the mother tongues were (originally) of equal importance. However, linguistic instrumentalism threatens this relationship of equivalence amongst the mother tongues since economic considerations – unlike cultural ones – cut across ethnic boundaries.

Singapore's two language campaigns have played important roles in shaping and sustaining "pragmatic" and "non-pragmatic" views of language. The Speak Good English Movement was initiated by the state specifically to combat what it saw as an undesirable trend, where the local variety of English (Singlish) was gaining popularity and legitimacy among younger Singaporeans. The state was concerned that increased use of Singlish would jeopardize Singaporeans' ability to learn "good" English, and that this would then have a detrimental impact on Singapore's economic competitiveness. The campaign's purpose was thus to remind Singaporeans that English is ultimately the language of the Western "other" and has no place in the identity of Singaporeans. The Speak Mandarin Campaign, having had a much longer history, has undergone various shifts in focus. Initially set up to convince the heterogeneous Chinese community that Mandarin was their (sole) mother tongue, the campaign aimed to encourage the abandonment of the

[5] A rights-based approach has never been particularly prominent in public discussions in Singapore, and it is therefore not surprising that attempts frame language policy discussion in terms of rights are largely absent. In making this observation, we neither intend to suggest that a rights-based approach is necessarily worth pursuing, nor that it is unproblematic (May, 2005; Stroud, 2001; Wee, 2005).

other Chinese dialects. In its early days, then, the campaign unambiguously stressed the cultural value of Mandarin. By the 1980s, however, the state was asserting, in addition, the economic value of Mandarin as part of the campaign rhetoric. Because both campaigns are ceremonially re-launched every year amidst much fanfare and media coverage, this allows for the widespread dissemination of the campaigns' messages while not exposing them to any kind of critical appraisal or debate.

At this juncture, four points are worth noting. First, Singaporean language policy is framed against an understanding of language that conceives of mother tongues as entities owned by their speakers, tied to specific locales, inherited across generations and therefore steeped in tradition (cf. Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983). Second, each mother tongue is rhetorically constituted as the cultural repository of values and traditions for its associated ethnic group, thereby figuring importantly in identity construction. English, on the other hand, is represented as a "purely" instrumental language through appeals to the socio-economic advantages it offers. Third, the policy postulates the equal value of languages by acknowledging that both English and the mother tongue are *equally essential* but for different reasons. In a similar vein, all three mother tongues are seen as being of *equal status* so that no single ethnic group can or should claim privilege over any other. This explicit ruling on the equality of mother tongues is a direct correlate of the state's policy of "multiracialism" (Benjamin, 1976), aimed at preempting the possibility of inter-ethnic conflict. Fourth, the language ideology behind the policy conceives of multilingualism in terms of (a limited set of) serially compounded monolingualisms; it recognizes only "English plus official mother tongue" bilingualism, and according to the state, Singaporeans should ideally be *equally proficient* in both English and their official mother tongue (All Party Report, 1956; Lee, 1983:43). This view of multilingualism promotes a conception of bilingualism as the mastery of officially designated systems, in an ethnic framework that (a) does not officially recognize cross-fertilization between ethnic groups, that is, Malays speaking Mandarin, or Indians proficient in Malay, nor (b) acknowledge the flux and flexibility of multilingual, hybrid economies of communication.

These points represent the cornerstones of a language policy that is oriented firmly towards the construction and management of ethno-linguistic difference. Despite this, the very way in which the

policy has been conceptualized has helped fuel a set of linguistic practices that crosscut ethnically constructed orders of linguistic difference in favor of a multilingual dynamics of consumption and class. This generates a *mismatch* between intention and actuality that is reinforced by general consumerist developments across all sectors of society.

One reason for this is undoubtedly the role accorded to English, which has been promoted by the state as a modern language with significant economic value. English has become strongly associated with educational achievements and material wealth, and is thus a desirable and important language in the minds of Singaporeans. This perception is borne out by Lu's (2005:35; see also Gupta, 1998) examination of statistical data collated over three decades (1980, 1990, 2000), which indicate:

> ... a positive correlation between material wealth and English as principle household language. Distribution of wealth appears to be relatively stable among all families that do not speak English predominantly, while only households with English as the predominant language have a higher tendency to be high-wage earners ...

The state's energetic and encompassing promotion of English can be credited with promoting massive language shift over a period of 30 years (Li et al., 1997:368). The rise of English is most pronounced in Chinese and Indian homes. Chinese homes citing English as the home language rose from 10.2% (in 1980) to 23.9% (in 2000). For Indian homes, the corresponding figures are 24.3% (in 1980) and 35.6% (in 2000). Malay homes show a less pronounced shift to English, possibly due to the close affiliation between the Malay language and the religion of Islam (Kwan-Terry & Luke, 1997:296; Pakir, 1993:75). Nonetheless, these still show a discernible movement towards the English language, from 2.3% (in 1980) to 7.9% (in 2000).

The impact of these developments on Tamil is even more severe due in part to the fact that Spoken Tamil has little or no prestige amongst Tamil speakers themselves, who tend to treat Literary Tamil as the only "correct" variety (Saravanan, 1994:86). Tamil also has little support as an intra-ethnic language of communication within the Indian community, which consists of speakers of other languages such as Malayalee, Hindi, Punjabi, Gurajati. Consequently, many Indians have, with some success, lobbied to offer Malay or other Indian languages (Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali) as the second language in the schools.

TABLE 1

Resident population aged 15 years and above: literate in only English.

Total = 353,801						
Age:	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	Above 65
Only Eng literate:	12.6%	18.1%	28.9%	26%	9.1%	5.3%

The increased use of English in the homes has even resulted in a number of cases where Singaporeans are describing themselves as literate in *only* English, which obviously contradicts the state's desire to promote bilingual proficiency in *both* English and the official mother tongue. Table 1 (adapted from Leow, 2000:75) shows that a significant number of Singaporeans in their mid-40s or younger are claiming to be monolingual in English, indicating that English language monolingualism might be an emerging trend rather than one that is passing.

One interpretation of these developments has been to suggest that Singaporeans tend to "put the instrumental value of a language above the sentimental or symbolic value" (Li et al., 1997:380). In fact, the state has recently argued that, in addition to heritage reasons, Mandarin should also be learned in order to take advantage of China's growing economy, thereby actively conceding that instrumental value is an important motivating factor in language choice. As a result, Mandarin is now becoming so popular that a growing number of non-Chinese parents want schools to allow their children to study the language (*The Straits Times* 30 April 1994). The pragmatic value of Chinese is visible in figures reported in *The Straits Times* (3 September 2005) that show how enrolment in the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry's Shanghainese course has grown from 20 to about 300 in recent years, motivated by the participants' desire to conduct business in China. Similarly, at the National University of Singapore, the Business Chinese module is very popular, with about 100 students enrolling each year.

The new emphasis on the instrumental value of Mandarin has led to concerns in some circles within the Chinese community that the language is being learnt for the "wrong" reasons. To the extent that these developments indicate a trend, they point to a potential weakening of the intended relationship between the construction of a Chinese Singaporean identity and Mandarin, since the focus is

now less on the language as an emblem of local ethnicity and more on the perceived economic advantages that it endows its speakers as they conduct business negotiations with China. More generally, these developments are seen to undermine the original multiracial logic of the policy and potentially threaten the equal status that all three mother tongues (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) are supposed to enjoy (Wee, 2003).

A pragmatic orientation is apparent in the wider context of the Chinese ''dialects'', which in Singapore commonly refer to languages other than Mandarin. Even the Chinese ''dialects'', which in Singapore commonly refer to languages other than Mandarin, are seen as valuable linguistic resources by many Singaporeans in today's context of late modernity in spite of their use still being discouraged by the state's Speak Mandarin Campaign. Thus, Leeling, a medical social worker in her early 20s, finds Cantonese extremely useful, even though she herself does not even come from a Cantonese background; her family is Hakka (1)[6] (Hing, 2004:56).

(1)
I: You mentioned that you used Cantonese in your work. How important is Cantonese?
L: Very important because I come across a lot of elderly patients as a medical social worker. Some of them only know how to communicate in dialect. Some know only minimal Mandarin. Dialect helps me to bridge the communication, it also makes them feel closer and help them to open up to you.

Interestingly enough, the dialects are viewed as neither crucial to the speakers' ethnic identity nor to their preservation of tradition or culture, as witnessed in the remarks of Justin, a Hainanese male, whose attitude towards Hainanese seems to echo that of Leeling's towards Cantonese (Hing, 2004:64).

(2)
J: I just consider myself as Chinese.
I: So ... the Hainanese in you is just an extra part [of your identity]?
J: No, I don't see it as a part of my identity, it is just Chinese and it just happens I'm Hainanese.

[6] In the data presented, I = interviewer, other single letters refer to the various interviewees, and a single letter followed by 'M' refers to the interviewee's mother. For example, P = Ping, and PM = Ping's mother.

These examples provide a nice illustration of how the prime effect of the Speak Mandarin Campaign has been to create a space for the resignification of these languages as instrumental, rather than prohibiting their use *per se*.

In all these cases, socioeconomic and pragmatic considerations determine choice of language and how languages are conceived more so than issues of identity or ethnicity. This is also apparent in the emergence of widespread (unofficial) bilingualism that cuts across ethnic boundaries, resulting in speakers acquiring languages (other than English) that bear no official association with their designated (ethnolinguistic) identities. On the one hand, this is an outcome of state funded housing and school policies, which, aimed at preventing the creation of ethnic enclaves, provide structural and institutional encouragement for spontaneous language acquisition across ethnic groups. Edwin, a young Chinese student, is typical of many young Singaporeans when he indicates that, in addition to English and Mandarin, he also speaks some Malay:

(3)
E: My friends, most of them are Malays.
I: All from other classes?
E: Yes, sometimes I can converse with them in a bit of Malay

On the other hand, unofficial bilingualism arises because of the pragmatic desire by many Malay families to acquire Mandarin. This is illustrated by Fandi, a Malay teenager, whose multilingual home environment is underscored by the fact that, in addition to using English and Malay, he and his family enjoy watching Chinese [Mandarin] television programs.

(4)
F: Cause they are ... I mean compared to Malay and some English sitcoms, lah, I find it Chinese ... Chinese sitcoms or [VCDs], lah, quite better cause there are better actor, actresses, actors all sometimes like that. Then the scripts they do then the jokes they make, the comedy all, I think Chinese are better, lah. .... Actually the whole family watch, lah. Then the volume is up then I will understand some of the Chinese words. Then I will bring them to school, talk to the Chinese friends in Chinese, like that, lah.

The foregoing examples suggest that the dynamics of Singaporean multilingualism is no longer simply organized along the lines of

ethnically determined local identities, nor regulated in terms of linguistic ownership and authenticity – if it ever was. Rather, languages are increasingly becoming hierarchically ordered in economic systems of value even where official policy explicitly has tried to rule this out. Speakers now learn and acquire languages for a variety of reasons that have more to do with their perceived use-value than inherent ownership or the performance of ethnic identities. Singaporean language policy as a tool in ethnolinguistic management is thus confronted with a dynamics of linguistic pragmatism that is essentially driven by considerations of consumption that crosscut and undermine ethnicity, and that transform the field of policy into an arena for the negotiation and contestation of class. We suggest that this is not a peculiarity of Singaporean society only but a more general characteristic of societies in late modernity. Below, we elaborate on how these types of dynamics can be understood in terms of a notion of sociolinguistic consumption.

Sociolinguistic Consumption: Transforming the Economic Habitus

Bauman (1998:24, italics in original) convincingly points out that:

> Ours is a 'consumer society' in a similarly profound and fundamental sense in which the society of our predecessors ... used to deserve the name of a 'producer society'.... The way present-day society shapes up its members is dictated first and foremost by the need to play the role of the consumer, and the norm our society holds up to its members is that of the ability and willingness to play it. ... The difference is one of emphasis, but that shift does make an enormous difference to virtually every aspect of society, culture and individual life. The differences are so deep and ubiquitous that they fully justify speaking of our society as a society of a separate and distinct kind – a consumer society.[7]

Consumption is therefore a key channel for the construction and communication of identity (Baudrillard, 1988; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) and one salient aspect of consumption is that of choice (Bauman, 1998:30; Giddens, 1991:197), since a consumer society is defined largely by the wide variety of goods that can serve as markers of identity. This means that the consumer can be held responsible for the choices s/he makes in the kinds of objects or activities s/he consumes *regardless* of whether or not such choices are freely exercised (Warde, 1994:881). With responsibility and

[7] To accept this is not to deny that societies may differ in the kinds of consumption available and acceptable to members (Savage, Barlow, Dickens, & Fielding, 1992).

choice come the need to be *reflexive*. For Beck (1992:131) and Giddens (1991:81), reflexivity is an important feature of modernity since the outcomes of socio-cultural (as well as scientific-technological) practices involve risks, and therefore need to be constantly monitored and fed back into the conduct of the practices themselves. Thus, actors who are more reflexively oriented can be said to have an advantage over actors who are less so. The emphasis on choice also makes it a rational strategy for the consumer to avoid being overly committed to a particular commodity or identity since this might preclude future choices. As Bauman (1998:28) puts it:

> Identities, just like consumer goods, are to be appropriated and possessed, but only in order to be consumed, and so to disappear again. As in the case of marketed consumer goods, consumption of an identity should not – must not – extinguish the desire for other new and improved identities, nor preclude the ability to absorb them.

Since our interest lies in sociolinguistic consumption, it makes sense to distinguish different ways in which language can be consumed. A primary distinction is between language as the direct object of consumption from language that one is socialized into indirectly, as a consequence of consuming something else, such as participation in various activities. An example of the former might be the desire to learn English because the language itself is seen to bestow strong socio-economic advantages on its speakers (cf. Phillipson, 1992:271ff). An example of the latter might be the acquisition of French in the course of wine-tasting activities. In the former, the intended targets are the autonomous denotational systems themselves (Silverstein, 1998) while in the latter, particular registers are acquired in the context of specific activity types (Levinson, 1992). This distinction is useful because it suggests that even languages that are perceived to be relatively valueless *qua* denotational codes may acquire renewed relevance when associated with activities that are considered important or worth engaging in.

Combining the afore-mentioned distinction with that of choice, we arrive at the following four-way typology of sociolinguistic consumption (Table 2).

Though the dimensions are clearly continua, for ease of exposition, we will discuss four types of examples, where each might be placed in the regions we have numbered from 1 to 4.

Region 1 in all essentials depicts the field of Singaporean state language policy, which demands of its citizens that they become

TABLE 2

Typology of sociolinguistic consumption.

Consumption of language	More direct	Less direct
More constrained	1	3
Choice of language		
Less constrained	2	4

proficient in both English and an officially assigned mother tongue. Region 2 describes a situation where the individual voluntarily decides to learn a language, which in Singapore, would typically be in addition to English and the official mother tongue, such as Mandarin among the Malay population. Region 3 refers to cases where a register is learnt in the context of activities that the individual is obligated to participate in. These might include working and, for Singaporean males, spending at least 2 years in the army as part of National Service. Finally, region 4 refers to cases where a language is learnt in the context of activities that the individual freely participates in, for fun or entertainment. Typical examples include playing soccer, computer games or viewing certain programs. Consumption of these activities may then lead the actors to acquire the associated registers.

While choice refers to the conditions of possibility, we need to bear in mind that consumers generally do not want the choices they make to preclude future possibilities. In one sense, choice is all about maximizing agency/actorhood. Adapting an example from Chua (2003:5), we might note that a consumer could freely choose to buy either a *Nike* t-shirt or a batik shirt. The former, however, is less preclusive because it is "an everyday thing everywhere....whereas the batik shirt, outside of Indonesia ... is exotic and is worn only occasionally, almost ceremonially. The difference in quantum sales between t-shirts and batik shirts can be readily imagined" (Chua, ibid.). In other words, the batik shirt indexes an "ethnic/exotic/traditional" identity which limits the occasions on which the shirt can be worn. In contrast, the t-shirt indexes a casual approach to modern life, and imposes fewer restrictions on its wearability. We explore the implications of this model with respect to sociolinguistic consumption in the following.

Direct Consumption

Sha, a Punjabi male adolescent, comes from a family where a conscious decision was made to prioritize English over Punjabi, thereby choosing a strategy of preclusion.

(5)
S: Then after I went to America, my dad told my mom, lah, 'Don't, don't focus too much on Punjabi. He won't be able to talk to the kids here; he might not do well. Let's teach him proper English first.' Then from there, it started, lah.

Sha's household therefore exemplifies the emerging tendency towards English language monolingualism that the state wants to avoid. In fact, Sha sees Punjabi as a language with extremely limited use value; it is a language with little or no current relevance (*I hate..Punjabi is a language I don't know 300 years old*). Sha's attitude towards Punjabi explains why, despite intentions to the contrary, the state has great difficulty getting Singaporeans to treat English and the mother tongues as being equally valuable.

(6)
S: I hate writing in Punjabi.... I never going to go to Punjab. And Punjabi is such a funny language. ... What is the point of studying it? I hate...Punjabi is a language I don't know 300 years old. Then where we speak Punjabi?

Another example of direct language choice – more or less constrained – is Ping, a Chinese female adolescent from a Hokkien family. Despite expressions of regret (*But actually we have our own dialect, correct or not?*) (1), Ping's mother and her husband made an early decision to avoid using Hokkien with Ping and her sister (*I never speak to them in Hokkien*) (2), using a mixture of Mandarin and English instead. The state's insistence that Singaporeans be fluent in English and their official mother tongue impacts the school system by having English as the medium of instruction and by requiring students to offer their mother tongue as a school subject. Because of this, in many families, parents may then decide to alter the home environment linguistically so as to better advantage their children, and, as we see in the case of Ping, patterns of language acquisition in the home can therefore be triggered by the inception of a child going to school. Hence, Hokkien is sacrificed because it is perceived to be useful only for communicating with the older generation or those who are not well educated. Its

occasions of use are felt to be extremely limited in comparison with the official languages (though see next section).

(7)
PM: From my side, I feel that it is equally important. It is equally important.
I: Hokkien and English?
PM: Yes.
I: Why?
PM: At least those are old generation like my grandmother-in-law or these. They do not understand English or Chinese but at least the grandchildren can talk to them in Hokkien, they will feel better. ... And I mean next time same thing, if they don't know any Hokkien or whatever, what they are going to talk to their child? How are they going to talk to their children?

(8)
PM: You know my girls they don't know Hokkien ... It is because from young I didn't tell them Hokkien. I never speak to them in Hokkien.

These examples of preclusion fit into Region 1 of our table. But as we noted, there is also significant interest among groups of non-Chinese to gain access to Mandarin as the language is becoming more valued because of the economic development of mainland China. While this scenario fits into Region 2, the motivations are similar to the Region 1 examples. For example, for the Malays, the desire to learn Mandarin must be balanced against their obligation to learn Malay. And while Malay is not perceived to be as valuable as Mandarin economically, it is still an important lingua franca both in Singapore and the region (Mani & Gopinathan, 1983). In other words, if having to learn Malay precludes the learning of Mandarin, there is still comfort in the fact that Malay language is perceived to be of social relevance and value, even if this may not compare to that of Mandarin.

The direct consumption of language therefore leads various households to prioritize particular denotational systems and to eliminate others on criteria that have little to do with notions such as ethnicity. In the next section, we explore cases where an approach in terms of sociolinguistic consumption can provide a homogenous account for why also erstwhile ''valueless'' languages

might acquire renewed significance as specialized registers in the context of various kinds of activities.

Indirect Consumption

Like many male Singaporeans, Justin as well as Delvin, another male, found knowledge of Hokkien to be extremely valuable during National Service (Hing, 2004:52, 54). As a male, Justin has had to spend about 2 years in the army as part of his National Service, where young men of extremely varied socio-economic backgrounds are forced to work and interact together.

(9)
I: At what age did you make a conscious decision to say that dialect is important and you should keep on using it?
D: Around army time. A lot of instructors speak in Hokkien and so do the supervisors. So I realized that if I did not use Chinese dialect, it was difficult to communicate with them.

National Service therefore provides for many young Singaporean males (mainly Chinese, and to a lesser extent, Malays and Indians) a set of experiences in which the Chinese dialects, in particular Hokkien, are resignified as important lingua franca for getting along with fellow soldiers as well as for simply getting things done. Hokkien is considered especially valuable when the speaker wants to avoid being perceived as a snob or elitist (10–11) (Hing, 2004:54).

(10)
J: ... for the Hokkien *peng* [Hokkien for 'soldier'], I will use Hokkien, for higher educated ones, I will use English or Chinese [Mandarin].

(11)
I: Relating this to your NS days ... do you think that your ability to speak Hokkien helped you to adapt to NS life easier?
D: I should think so because sometimes in army life, you get people from all walks of life, not everybody is like me ... JC [junior college] educated ... sometimes they think you are from JC, you are very .. erm ... high up there which is not true ... when you use Hokkien, you tell them that you are at the same level as them, so there's no airs between you and your other army friend ... have better friendships.

These cases fall into Region 3 of our table, where registers are acquired in the course of activities that individuals are required to participate in. Notice here that both Justin and Delvin explicitly point to the use of Hokkien as neutralizing class differences even amongst co-ethnics (*you tell them that you are at the same level as them, so there's no airs between you and your other army friend*). The desire to avoid drawing attention to class distinctions even between co-ethnics is a further indication that status may be attaining a more fundamental role in Singapore society than ethnicity.

We see further examples of status-consciousness when speakers feel obligated to avoid using English *because* it is a prestige variety. So, even outside the army, adolescent Singaporeans sometimes avoid using English to deflect accusations of snobbery. Here are extracts from conversations with two females, Yan, a young Malay, and Ping, whom we have already encountered.

(12)
Y: It is like ... because now is like I have more Malay friends compare last time. So it is like the common language is Malay. Then I shouldn't be talking like one clever person superior. If then, they will think I am such a snob.

(13)
P: There was once I had a friend, Jestina, ah. She speaks English. Then I enjoy speaking to her very much, because I find myself expressing better in English. Then it's like if I speak English with my Chinese other friends, lah, they will say you are acting, acting like you are very educated. .... Majority they are Chinese, what. Then outside you speak English to them, they will think that ... what are you trying to say ... my English is bad? Trying ... me over English?

It is important to note that, for Yan and Ping, use of Malay or Mandarin expresses a *concession* towards, rather than a *desire* for, an ethnic identity. We can understand why when we realize that being able to use English provides opportunities for improving proficiency in a language that they consider far more important than the mother tongues. This is especially clear with Ping, who misses her friend Jestina, with whom she interacted mainly in English. It is not clear why she and Jestina stopped seeing each other. However, nowadays, her friends are mainly Chinese-speaking and as she points out, if she tries using English with them, she is likely to be accused of putting on airs (*they will say you are acting, acting like*

you are very educated). Both avoidance of English and appeal to Hokkien are motivated by sensitivities to class, in this case, the desire to avoid accusations of elitism through the use of an interactionally ''inappropriate'' variety.

The issue of appropriate language for a given activity bears on the mode of consumption, since language (among other semiotic resources) mediates the experience of the actor. Although officially positioned as an ethnically neutral language that Singaporeans are encouraged to learn for socio-economic reasons, English is also the language in which the leisure activities of many Singaporeans are conducted. Because of this, English is inextricably intertwined with the pursuit of these activities and any attempt to substitute a different language creates a sense of dissonance. This scenario falls into Region 4 of our table, and is illustrated by Fandi, who has a strong interest in wrestling. Although he does not really enjoy reading, he will occasionally read books on wrestling despite the comprehension difficulties this poses, adamantly rejecting any possibility of reading about wrestling in Malay (*Because what they are doing there is all in English*).

(14)
I: Let's say if you are given an article on your [wrestling]. You prefer to read that in English or Malay or you are fine?
F: English.
I: Why?
F: Because what they are doing there is all in English. So if they are translated back into Malay, some words can't be...
I: It's not quite accurate, that kind of thing.
F: Not quite.

This is a slightly different situation than Fandi's preference for Chinese sitcoms over Malay ones (5) mentioned earlier. There, the languages contribute to shaping the content of the programs. Here, however, despite the (albeit) hypothetical scenario where translation from English into Malay preserves the content, Fandi still expresses a preference for English. This influence of language on the mode of consumption comes as no surprise, since consumption is not a matter of valuing commodities for their strictly material or utilitarian values. Equally, if not more, important is that the symbolic aspect of consumption and language forms a very influential part of what Featherstone (1995:75) refers to as ''commodity-signs'' – the value-added aspect of English. For

Fandi, as we have seen, wrestling is simply not the same if consumed in Malay rather than English.

In these cases, we observe that the impetus for a specific language choice is primarily instrumental in nature. The denotational system or register is learnt/acquired because it is seen to service some activity or confer some advantage. It is in this sense that we may speak of the commodification of language in late modernity (cf. Budach, Roy, & Heller, 2003). This is not to suggest that other social categories are irrelevant, but these tend to be, as we have shown, mediated by considerations of consumption and class. The appeal of this approach is further illustrated by how it may account for language acquisition, to which we now turn in the next section.

By way of summary, we note how denotational systems that are perceived to be relevant to a wide variety of activities and identities are more desirable than systems that are perceived as limited in comparison. Also, denotational systems can themselves be perceived as markers of class so that some are actively pursued while others are avoided. Relevant here is the fear that failure to learn valued systems whilst being saddled with less valuable ones may result in an ''inability to acquit oneself of the consumer's duties, that turns into bitterness at being left behind ... shut off or excluded from the social feast to which others gained entry'' (Bauman, 1998:38). Therefore, strategies of *preclusion* become important, especially with direct language consumption. Second, in the case of indirect language consumption, we have seen how the consumer to be interested in the register only so far as it facilitates participation in the relevant activity. There is no motivation to further acquire other lexical items or grammatical constructions. Furthermore, the association between register and activity may lead consumers to reject the option of switching registers,[8] for fear that this might compromise the conduct of the activity.

In the final section, we suggest ways in which the notion of sociolinguistic consumption throws light on a specific strategy of language acquisition.

[8] This may involve a switch of denotational systems (such as watching a Korean movie in Korean or after it has been dubbed in English) or not (such as the state's suggestion that Singaporeans use 'good English' instead of colloquial English – known as 'Singlish' – even when interacting family or close friends).

Reflexivity and Discourses of Aesthetics in Acquisition and Language Consumption

On an everyday basis, the sociolinguistics of consumption is apparent in how speakers go about acquiring new multilingual practices as well as in the way in which these practices are discursively conceptualized, specifically in relation to the micropolitics of identity work in late modernity. Fandi's reference to picking up some Chinese words and using them with his Chinese friends in school is an indication of how instrumental-pragmatic language choices also implicate dimensions of identity work. As a Singaporean studying in the English-medium educational system, Fandi is all too aware that competence in English carries great symbolic value as a marker of prestige. And being Malay, Fandi knows that there is a social expectation that he speak Malay since it is supposed to mark his ethnic identity. But because Chinese has no bearing at all on either his identity as a Singaporean or as a Malay, Fandi can afford to "dabble" in Chinese without worrying about being marked as an "unsophisticated" Singaporean or as a Malay who has lost touch with his ethnic roots. In this sense, the use of Mandarin also allows Fandi to liminally slip between established and regulated categories and identities.

However, there is another sense in which sociolinguistic consumption underlies a particular notion of identity with implications for acquisition, namely through *reflexivity*, a pervasive characteristic of late modernity where actors pay greater attention to performance aspects of language use (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). By reflexivity we mean that actors who are "highly deliberate and self-aware" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004:380) about language use are more likely to be successful users of language. They are more able to strategically modify their linguistic behavior based on past experiences and, as a result, are better able to deploy their linguistic resources in future contexts so as to achieve their goals. Although more research is clearly needed on this matter, it therefore seems plausible to suggest that performance-oriented actors are also better able to adopt an aesthetic perspective on language, in the sense of taking pride and pleasure in language performances rather than narrowly viewing it simply as a device for effecting transactional/communicative goals. This is relevant because the same object can be appropriated in different ways, and it is particularly the ability of adopt an aesthetic point of view, even to "the most everyday choices of everyday life" that "most rigorously distinguishes the different classes" (Bourdieu, 1984:40).

In light of the foregoing, we now focus specifically on English language acquisition. We have already noted that English is a highly prestigious language in Singapore, figuring not only as the medium of education, but also as the language of informal interactions outside the classroom for many young Singaporeans. English, therefore, is relevant to (at least) Regions 1, 3 and 4 of our table. Given this importance, we now look at how reflexivity and aesthetics can influence English language proficiency.

Sha, our Punjabi informant, is both highly sensitive to performance aspects of language and, among his peers, his proficiency is one of the highest. His good command of English is in no small part due to the fact that he and his friends actually enjoy learning and practicing new English words. On encountering an unfamiliar English word, they make it a point to look up its meaning in a dictionary, and to consciously practice using the word until it becomes a naturalized part of their linguistic repertoire.

(15)
S: ... if we say we don't know a word, we normally go and look it up then we continuously use it in sentences while we are talking then ... until we can actually know how to use the words, lah.

They also enjoy reading out loud to each other, thus incorporating an element of conscious display into their peer-oriented use of language. To put the matter rather paradoxically, through the ratification of one's peers, self-conscious language performances become naturalized, and a means by which the successful performer acquires symbolic capital. Such performances of language use, where particular attention is paid to language form and where the actor's use of linguistic forms are opened up to evaluation (cf. Bauman & Briggs, 1990), are increasingly coming to constitute routine aspects of how Sha and his friends interact; acquisition increasingly involves the use of performance and display in contexts of play and attention to linguistic form. In the example below, Sha comments positively on his friend's (Hari) ability to read jokes well.

(16)
I: Does anybody read to you now during English class, beyond English class, your friends?
S: My friends sometimes Hari will bring materials he downloads from the Internet or some jokes or stories or things like that. He does read to us cause he knows how to read jokes.

I: Do you like it?
S: Sometimes it's very funny the jokes he reads.

Given such peer orientation, we are not surprised to find that Sha enjoys reading aloud in class when called upon to do so by the teacher. In fact, he takes reading aloud as an opportunity to practice his delivery. Notice that Sha talks about the activity in symmetrical terms, where he feels there are opportunities for him to improve his English *both* when he is doing the reading as well as when he is listening to someone else read. The awareness of the performance aspects of language use and the desire to be able to perform language well, already a key feature of Sha's peer-oriented activities outside the classroom, recurs inside the classroom as well (*I am listening more to the way the teacher stress and I try and learn reading skills from the teacher*).

(17)
S: In primary school when I used to read I used to read for the sake of ... when I was read to, I listen more for the sake of listening to the story. Now when I am read to, I am listening more to the way the teacher stress and I try and learn reading skills from the teacher. I don't listen just to hear the story anymore.

It is important to note that Shiv is not only aware of language use as performance, he also *enjoys* performing, thus tying language acquisition to the notion of leisure.

The difference in attitudes towards reading and confidence in English between Sha, on the one hand, and Edwin, on the other, is significant. Edwin attends the same school as Sha, but has problems with English. Edwin is concerned about being asked by the teacher to read aloud in class, fearing that he might embarrass himself (18). He also prefers not to initiate any exchanges with the teacher even if this means not understanding the lesson. Finally, Edwin treats reading as a chore; the possibility that reading might be pleasurable appears to be alien to him (19).

(18)
E: I mean not used to speaking aloud ... When you stand and read, lah, a lot of eyes are looking at you. Quite ... I am quite those shy one, lah.
...
I: As if like let's say you read wrongly and oh, everybody is looking at you. Everybody knows your mistake.
E: And laugh.
I: And they laugh at you.

E: Yes.

(19)
I: Ok, would you be happy if you receive books for your birthday?
E: Nope.
I: No?
E: I don't read.

In comparison with Sha, Edwin might be considered a "flawed consumer" (Bauman, 1998:38). Both appreciate the importance of English, but Edwin's inability to enjoy language performances limits his use of the language, leaving him only able to treat English as a commodity that serves highly specific transactional goals. The aesthetic aspects are lost. For Edwin, English as a denotational system that he is obliged to consume (Region 1) and English as a register that he acquires in the course of playing soccer or computer games (Region 4) are strictly separated. In contrast, Sha's ability to appreciate the aesthetic and performance aspects of English allows him to usefully connect his use of English both inside and outside the classroom, making him a much more successful sociolinguistic consumer.

LPP in Singapore, as in many other countries, impacts the education system. It is for this reason that we have closed our paper with a comparison of Edwin and Sha, who follow drastically different patterns of sociolinguistic consumption and face significantly different outcomes vis-à-vis (English) language proficiency. Singapore's language policy thus needs to revisit the idea of languages as authentic expressions or cultural repositories of ethnic identities, and appreciate that patterns of multilingualism are increasingly constructed around displays of consumption. Such a re-orientation should allow a reconceptualization of language learners in alternative discourses of motivation.

Conclusion

Many authors are aware of the types of tensions that we have illustrated here between a politics of language concerned with ethnicity and a sociolinguistic dynamics revolving around economics. In fact, much of the debate on the linguistic effects of globalization, studies of language maintenance and shift, and even first and second language acquisition research, have attempted to grapple with and reconcile these tensions. However, it still remains that much language policy is formulated by linking sociopolitical struc-

ture, the nature of linguistic markets, and individual agency to notions of ethnic or national identity, with class hardly figuring in the equation (cf. Brown & Ganguly, 2003). The current approach therefore contributes to alternative vistas on language shift and language maintenance by showing that building a politics of language on a conceptual division between (ethnic) identity and instrumentalism, between a private, non-economic sphere of action and a public economically suffused sphere, may be in need of rethinking.

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