
The effect of Singapore's language policy on multilingualism in Singapore

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Preliminaries

Research project „The Linguistic Ecology of Singapore“

- University of Hamburg
- Excellence Cluster LiMA
- (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

Project team

- Peter Siemund (project leader)
- Martin Schweinberger
- Monika Edith Schulz

Structure of this Talk

Singapore – an Overview

- Sociocultural Background
- Linguistic Ecology of Singapore
- Language Policy and Planning in Singapore

Study: Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

- Motivation
- Research Design
- Findings
- Discussion of the Results

Conclusion & Outlook

Singapore – an Overview

Singapore – an Overview

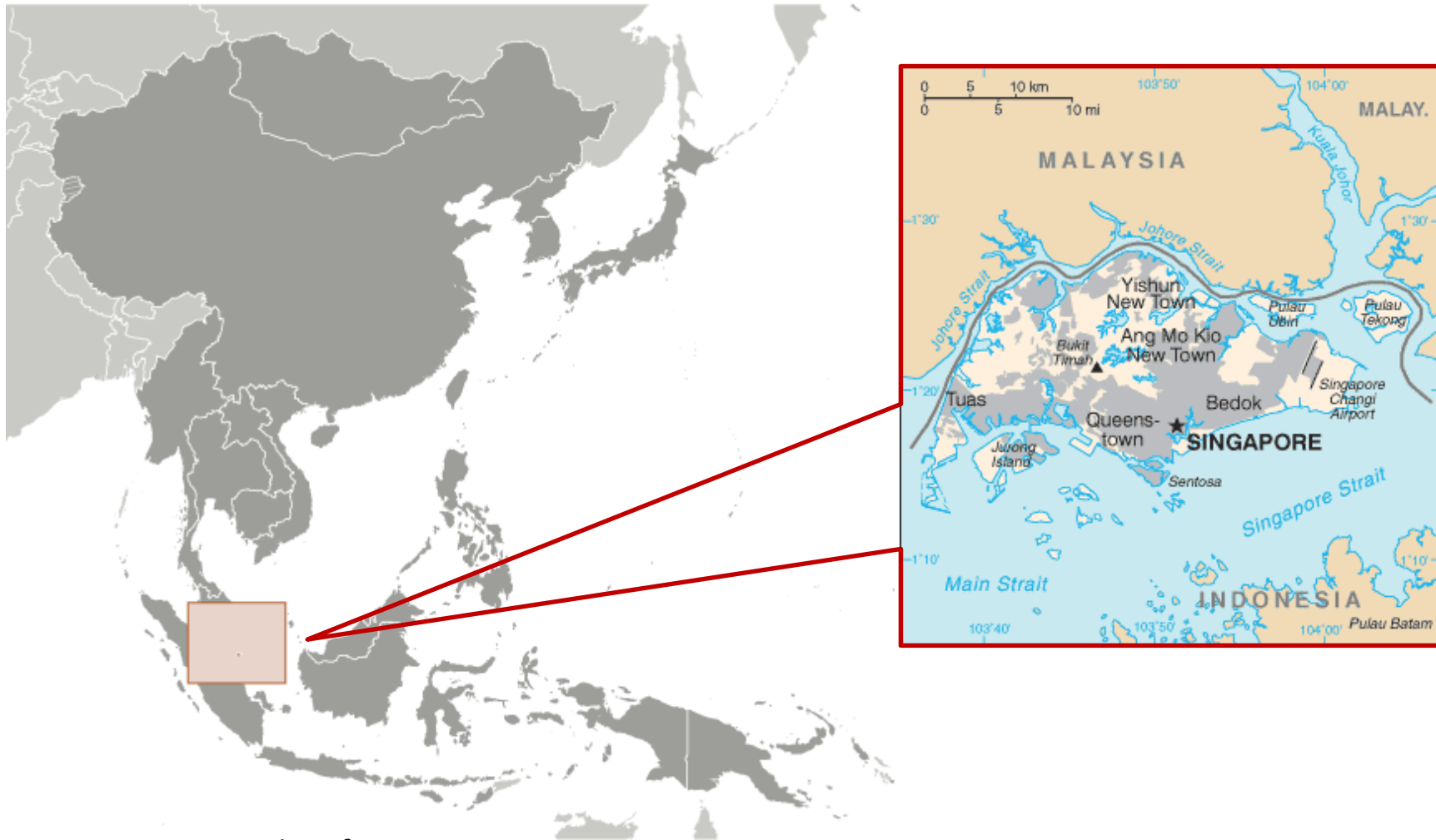


Figure 1: Geography of Singapore.

Singapore – an Overview

Sociocultural Background of Singapore

- City-state of Singapore has a long-standing history as a trading post (pirate's heaven)
- Founded as a British trading colony in 1819.
- Briefly after joining the Malaysian Federation in 1963 Singapore became independent (modern Singapore)
- Today, one of the world's most prosperous countries (Singapore's harbor is one of the world's major ports)
- Per capita GDP is equal to that of Western Europe

Singapore – an Overview

Sociocultural Background of Singapore

- Singapore is an Asian multi-cultural and multilingual melting pot
 - 75 percent Chinese
 - 15 percent Malaysian
 - 10 percent Indian
 - Some ethnic minorities and Eurasians
(cf. Cavallaro & Serwe 2010: 131)
- The Chinese majority is diverse but mostly from southern Chinese provinces (Hainan, Gangdong, Fujian, Guangxi)

Singapore – an Overview

Singapore's Linguistic Ecology

- Four official languages
 - English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay & Tamil (Deterding 2007)
- Official languages reflect the three dominant ethnicities of Singapore and the former colonial power
- Mandarin Chinese
 - Mandarin is not the native dialect of Chinese Singaporeans but of the capital Beijing (northern China).
 - Chinese Singaporeans speak one of various Chinese dialects (Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hokkien, etc.)

Singapore – an Overview

Singapore's Linguistic Ecology

- Dramatic language shift
 - Over the past 50 years
 - Increase in English and Mandarin Chinese as L1
 - Dramatic decrease of Chinese dialects

Singapore – an Overview

Singapore's Linguistic Ecology

- Dramatic language shift
 - Over the past 50 years
 - Increase in English and Mandarin Chinese as L1
 - Dramatic decrease of Chinese dialects (Leimgruber 2013)

	English	Mandarin	Chinese dialects	Tamil	Malay
1957	1.8	0.1	74.4	5.2	13.5
1980	11.6	10.2	59.5	3.1	13.9
1990	18.8	23.7	39.6	2.9	14.3
2000	23.0	35.0	23.8	3.2	14.1
2010	32.3	35.6	14.3	3.2	12.2

Singapore – an Overview

What has promoted this dramatic language shift?

Singapore – an Overview

Language Policy and Planning in Singapore

- Speak Good English Movement

- Speak Mandarin Campaign

Singapore – an Overview

Language Policy and Planning in Singapore

- Speak Good English Movement
 - Launched in 2000 to promote the use of Standard English
 - Aimed against Singlish (local variety of English)
- Speak Mandarin Campaign
 - Launched in 1979 to diminish dialectal variation among Chinese Singaporeans.
 - Annual events with special slogans, e.g. in 1989 “More Mandarin, Less Dialect. Make it a way of life.”

Study:
Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Motivation

- What effect does the language policy have on the linguistic ecology of Singapore?

- Hypothesis

Singapore's language policy has led to a decrease in multilingualism within individuals

Multilingual society : bi- and trilingual individuals (Cavallaro & Serwe 2010: 133)

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Research Questions

- How many languages is a speaker competent in?
- Which languages are speakers competent in?
- Which languages are dominant?
- What are the profiles we encounter within individual speakers?

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Research Design

- 300 language background questionnaires
 - 150 questionnaires from students of Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore
 - 150 questionnaires from students of various polytechnic universities in Singapore
- Friend-of-a-friend approach: student research assistants used their social networks to gather the data
- Mix of questions from questionnaires traditionally used in educational studies and questionnaires used in cultural identity questionnaires (Cavallaro & Ng 2009)

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Research Design

- Four different types of questions
 1. Language background profile
 - Languages spoken, proficiency, acquisition
 2. Language use profile
 - How often, in which situations, with whom
 3. Educational and socio-economic background
 - Types of schools, housing profiles
 4. Language attitudes
 - Attitudes towards the concept of „mother tongue“

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Results

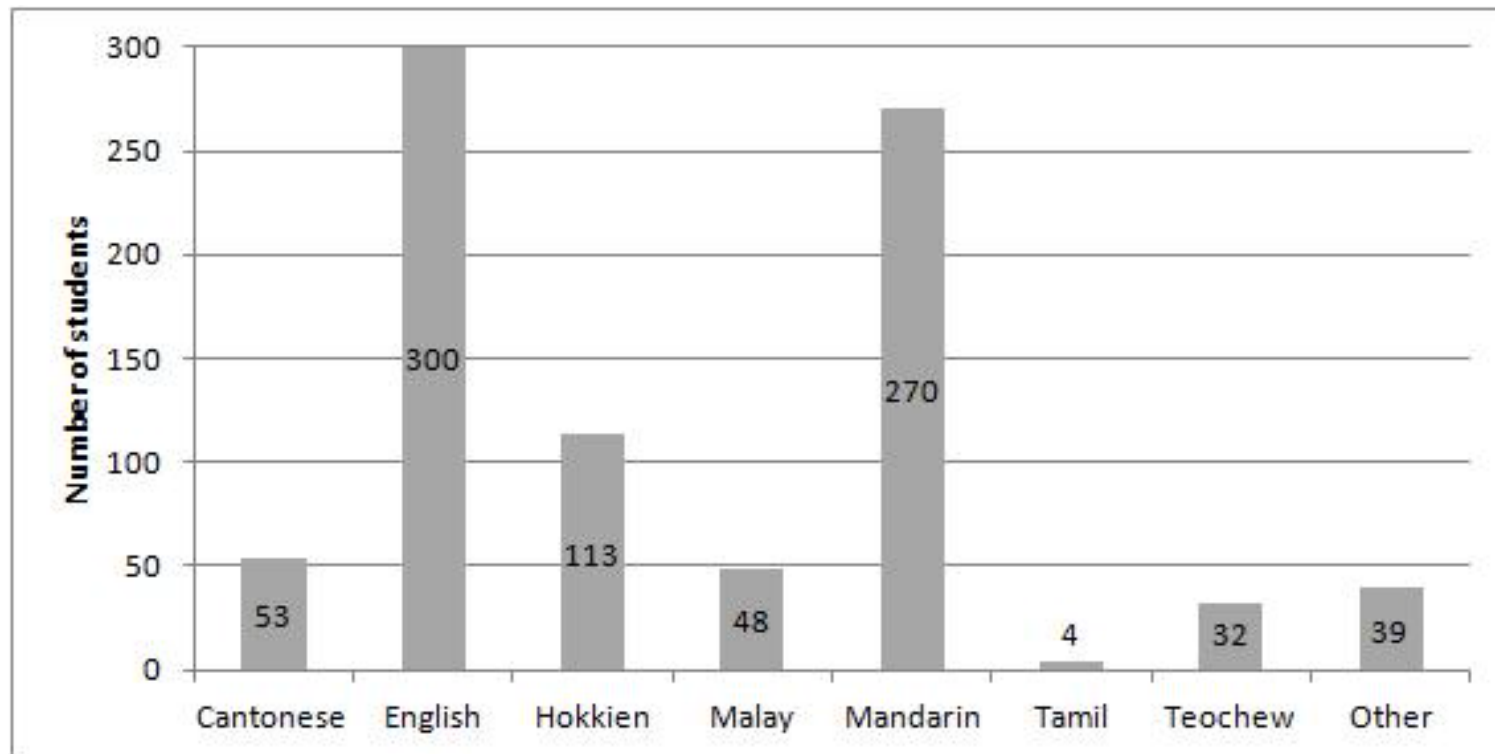


Figure 2: Languages spoken by Singaporean students.

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Results

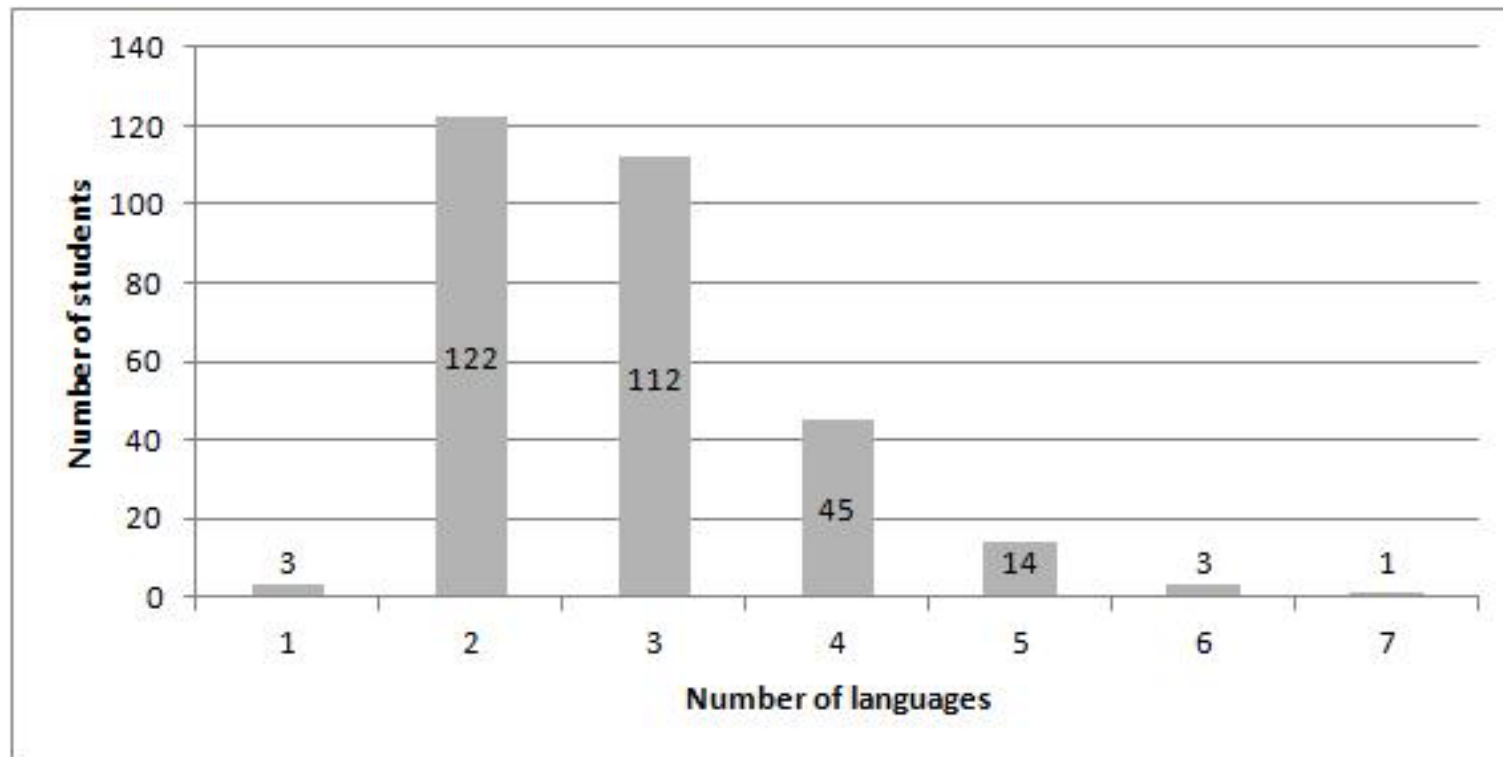


Figure 3: No of languages spoken by Singaporean students.

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Results

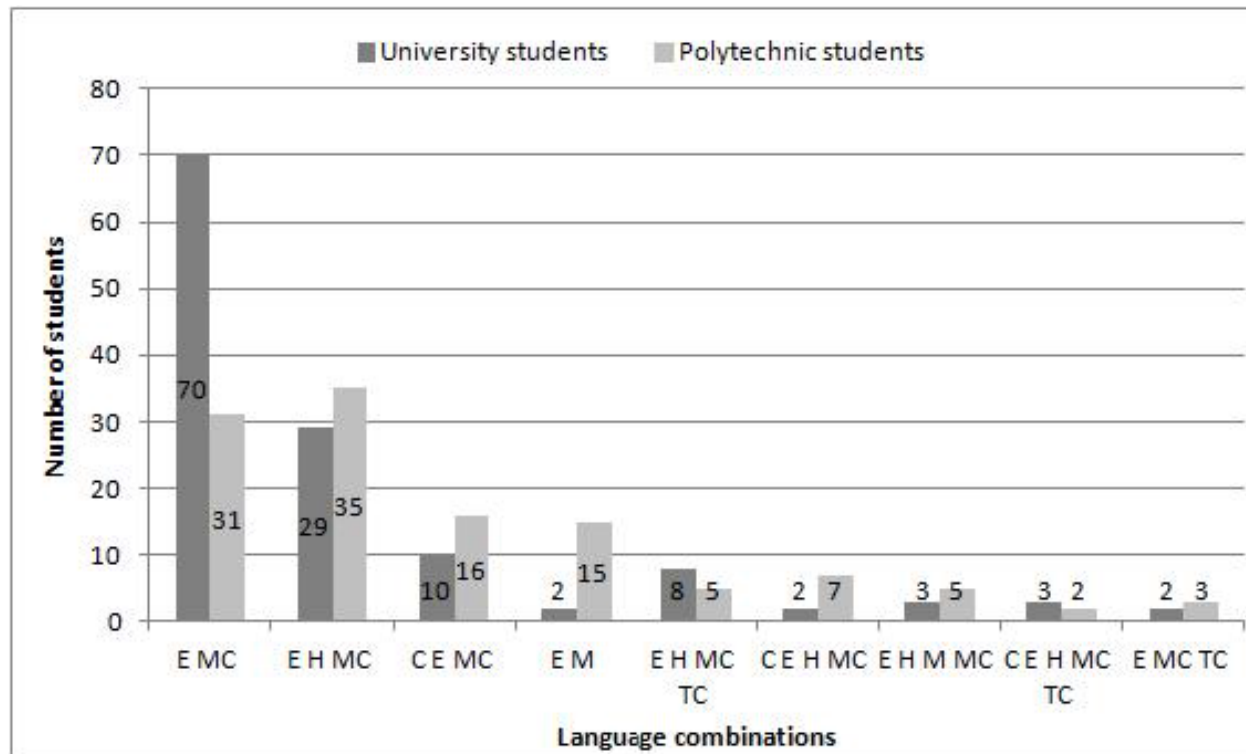


Figure 4: Language combinations amongst Singaporean students.
E = English, MC = Mandarin Chinese, H = Hokkien, C = Cantonese, M = Malay, TC = Teochew.

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Results

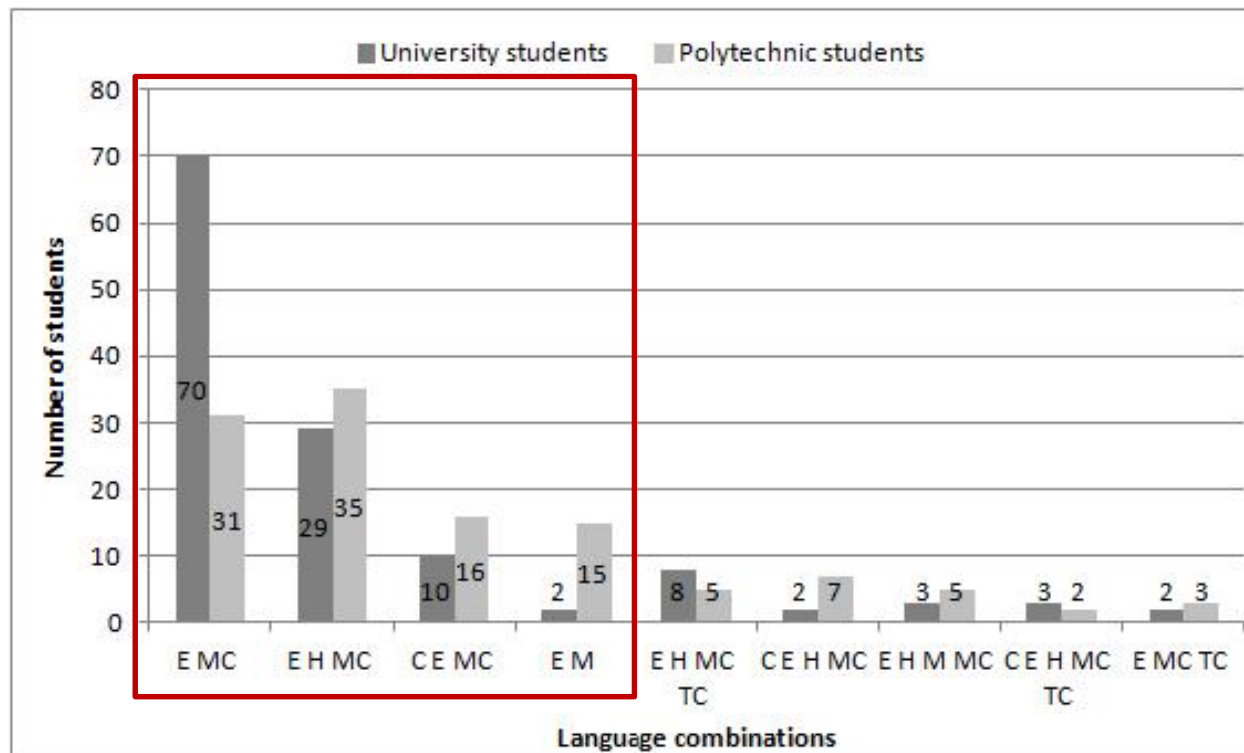


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Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

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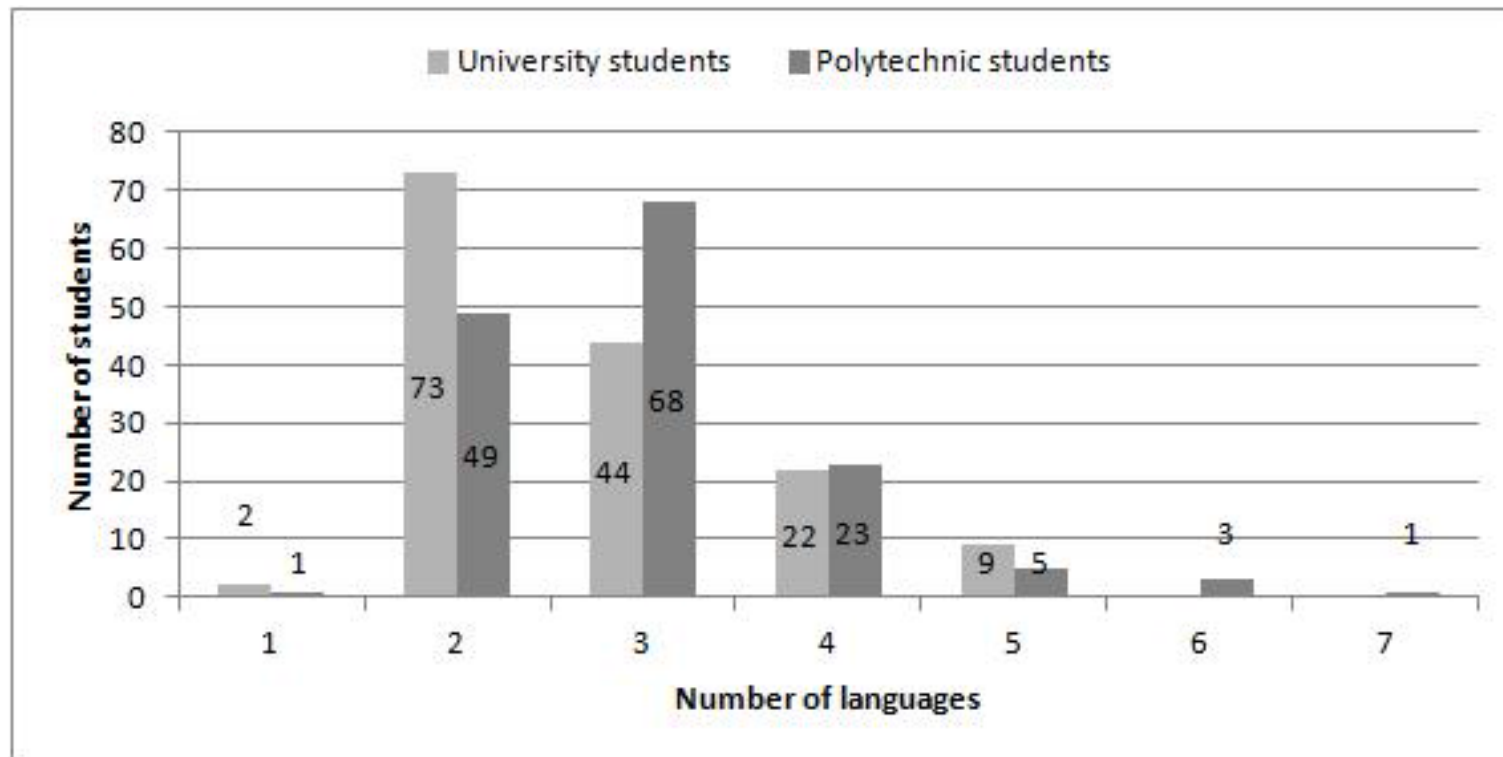


Figure 5: No of languages spoken by Singaporean students by university affiliation.

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Discussion

- Singapore is a multilingual society and has a linguistically diverse ecology.
- 6 different languages are spoken by at least 10% of Singaporean students.
- However, about 80% of speakers are bi- and trilingual whereas only approximately 5% of speakers are proficient in 5 or more languages.
- Multilingual society vs. bi- and trilingual speakers

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Discussion

- University students typically speak Mandarin and English while polytechnic students typically speak Mandarin, English and another Chinese dialect
- Stronger effect of the language policy campaigns on university students
- Social stratification
 - Tamil speakers substantially underrepresented in higher education
 - Malays substantially overrepresented at polytechnics

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Discussion

- Identification of coherent speaker groups
- The questionnaire design proved a useful means for identifying coherent and homogenous speaker groups
- App. 70% of speakers share one of four linguistic profiles
 1. English & Mandarin
 2. English & Malay
 3. English, Mandarin & Hokkien
 4. English, Mandarin & Cantonese

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Conclusion

- Multilingual society consists of bi- and trilingual individuals
- Language planning in Singapore ...
 - has promoted a substantial language shift
 - has caused a decline in linguistic diversity
 - shows stronger effects amongst higher educated speakers

Where to go from here? An Outlook

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Outlook

- Research on linguistic variation in Singapore English based on socially and linguistically heterogeneous speakers
- This way, it is not possible to control for (extra-linguistic) confounding factors.
- Lack of speaker information is a major impediment for analyses of Singaporean English
- Effects of source- and target-language activity cannot be established (cf. Winford 2005)

Multilingualism and Language Policy in Singapore

Outlook

- The study presented here identified rather homogenous cohorts within a diverse linguistic ecology
- These cohorts can be tapped into when creating corpora of Singapore English which include speaker information
- Speaker information can be used to analyze interference effects (how the grammar of one language affects the grammar of another language)

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