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

Martin Schweinberger
martin.schweinberger@uni-hamburg.de
www.martinschweinberger.de
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.

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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
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’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’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)

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Mandarin</th>
<th>Chinese dialects</th>
<th>Tamil</th>
<th>Malay</th>
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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)
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?
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“
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Results

![Languages spoken by Singaporean students.](image)

Figure 2: Languages spoken by Singaporean students.
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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

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

![Bar chart showing the number of languages spoken by Singaporean students by university affiliation.]

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


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