Lang Policy (2010) 9:97–114
DOI 10.1007/s10993-009-9159-2

ORIGINAL PAPER

'Burdens' and 'handicaps' in Singapore's language policy: on the limits of language management

Lionel Wee

Received: 22 August 2009 / Accepted: 4 December 2009 / Published online: 30 December 2009
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2009

Abstract Singapore's language policy has no place for either the various dialects of Chinese (the exception is Mandarin), or Singlish (a colloquial variety of English). These have been the targets of government campaigns that aim, as far as possible, to ensure that Singaporeans stop using them. However, it is interesting to observe that government officials themselves have been known to use these ostensibly denigrated varieties, as has happened in the course of political campaigns, public health messages or other public events. This paper therefore addresses the question of why the Singapore government would engage in the very same linguistic practices that it attempts to proscribe. In addressing this question, the paper argues that it is important to appreciate that the dialects and Singlish are sociolinguistically distinct. Unlike the dialects, Singlish is not as extensive a social language. This distinction is not usually appreciated in official discourses, which employ essentially the same metadiscursive regimes towards both Singlish and the dialects. As a consequence, the government is unable to sufficiently recognize the different practical challenges posed by the dialects and Singlish. The paper closes by suggesting that the problems encountered by the government in dealing with the dialects and Singlish can provide useful insights into the limits of language management, which refers to the explicit attempts by relevant authorities to control the language choices available to a targeted group of speakers.

Keywords Language management · Language policy · Rap · Singlish · Speak Good English Movement · Speak Mandarin Campaign

L. Wee (✉)
Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, Block AS 5, 7 Arts Link, Singapore 117570, Singapore
e-mail: ellweeha@nus.edu.sg

Introduction

Singapore is a linguistically and ethnically diverse country with a population of about 3.2 million (2000 Census of Population). Officially, its ethnic composition is roughly 76.8% Chinese, 13.9% Malay, 7.9% Indian, while the remaining 1.4% are mainly Others, a miscellaneous category. Given this diversity, the language policy in Singapore aims at cultivating amongst its citizens bilingual proficiency in the English language and a mother tongue that has been officially assigned to specific ethnic communities (Rappa and Wee 2006). Mandarin is the official mother tongue assigned to the Chinese community, Malay to the Malay community, and Tamil to the Indian community. There is no official mother tongue for the Others category. Thus, while all Singaporeans are expected to be competent in English, Chinese Singaporeans are expected to also be competent in Mandarin, Malay Singaporeans in Malay and Indian Singaporeans in Tamil.

By assigning a single mother tongue to each ethnic community, this policy ignores the linguistic heterogeneity internal to the various ethnic communities (Rappa and Wee 2006), and raises questions about whether members of the Others category (such as the Eurasians) ought to be given their own official mother tongues (Wee 2002). And because bilingual proficiency is recognized as 'English plus the official ethnic mother tongue,' the policy does not take into consideration the linguistic cross-fertilization that sometimes occurs between ethnic groups, that is, Malays speaking Mandarin, or Indians proficient in Malay (Stroud and Wee 2007).

Observe that English is excluded from the list of official mother tongues, even though it is recognized as an official language. There are various reasons for this. One, English is supposed to serve as an inter-ethnic lingua franca. As a language of communication across ethnic groups, it should not be affiliated with any particular ethnicity. Two, as the major language of socio-economic mobility, the ethnically neutral status of English helps to ensure that the distribution of economic advantages is not seen as unduly privileging or benefiting a specific ethnic group, which would otherwise raise the danger of inter-ethnic tension. And three, the Singapore government insists on re-presenting Singapore as a fundamentally Asian society. English is therefore inappropriate as a mother tongue because it is considered a language that marks an essentially Western identity.

Singapore's language policy thus aims to treat English as a purely 'practical' language, one that 'should be taught … without cultural nuance or reference' (Wee 2007: 253). It is the official mother tongues that are expected to provide Singaporeans with their cultural identities, linking 'ethnicity, tradition and moral codes' while English supposedly represents the idea of 'modernity' and its association with progress, science, technology and capitalism (Wee 2007: 254). The policy consequently has no place for either the various dialects of Chinese such as Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien or Teochew (the exception is Mandarin, of course), or Singlish[1] (the colloquial variety of English). Both the non-Mandarin Chinese dialects (henceforth, 'the dialects') and Singlish have been denigrated in official discourses. The reasons for these have been discussed extensively in a number of

[1] For descriptions of the structural features of Singlish, see the papers in Lim (2004).

studies (Bokhorst-Heng 1999; Chng 2003; Fong et al. 2002; also see below), and I summarize the main points here.

Essentially, the Chinese dialects are considered to be adding to the learning load of Chinese Singaporeans, who must already contend with learning the languages officially prescribed to them, English and Mandarin. Thus, in 1979, the government initiated the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), which has been re-launched annually ever since. Now in its 30th year, the SMC still aims simultaneously to encourage the use of Mandarin and to discourage the use of dialects,[2] characterizing the latter as 'burdens', as seen in Goh Chok Tong's (then First Deputy Prime Minister and currently Senior Minister) speech marking the 1986 Speak Mandarin Campaign (1)

(1)
Parents know that our bilingual education system is here to stay … When they drop dialects in conversation with their children they are recognising that the continued use of dialects will add to the learning burden of their children.

In a similar vein, Singlish has been labeled a 'handicap' (2) by Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister and currently Minister Mentor (*The Sunday Times* 15 August 1999) (2).

(2)
Those Singaporeans who can speak good English should to help create a good environment for speaking English, rather than advocate, as some do, the use of Singlish. … Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans.

The Singapore government sees Singlish as a variety whose increasing popularity might threaten the ability of Singaporeans to acquire competence in 'good' English. The latter is prized as a linguistic resource in a world of global economic competition, and the government fears that the presence of Singlish might actually undermine English language proficiency. This led the government, in 2000, to initiate the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM). Now in its 9th year, the SGEM, rather unfortunately, continues to equate the promotion of good English with the elimination of Singlish, even though these two goals are, in principal, distinct.

As we have just seen, the government's stance against Singlish is somewhat stronger than its stance against the dialects. As a 'burden', use of the latter is discouraged; but as a 'handicap', use of the former should preferably be stopped altogether. But despite these differences, the government has adopted largely the same strategy vis-a-vis the dialects and Singlish, that is, targeting both via particular campaigns and various supplementary initiatives.

In this paper, I argue that the dialects and Singlish are sociolinguistically distinct in that they play different roles in Singaporean society. Unlike the dialects, Singlish

[2] A reviewer points out that the SMC is no longer focusing much on discouraging the use of dialects. This is true, but only because the dialects are perceived to be less of a threat to the government's goal of cultivating proficiency in Mandarin. Where it appears that the dialects might still be a threat to Mandarin, the government is quick to react. See the discussion below.

is not as extensive a social language (Gee 2001; see below).[3] For Singlish to constitute as extensive a social language as the dialects, it will require further elaboration of its lexicogrammatical resources, or what Spolsky (2009: 103) describes as cultivation. However, this distinction is not usually appreciated in official discourses, which employ essentially the same metadiscursive regimes (Makoni and Pennycook 2007) for both Singlish and the dialects.

In the course of the discussion, we will have occasion to note that both the dialects and Singlish are still present in various public domains, despite the efforts of the government. Of course, privatization and the widespread use of modern technology make any such control over language use difficult to maintain, especially when—as in the case of the media—it is possible to produce websites and publications that are intended for increasingly specialized audiences, a phenomenon that Anderson (2004) refers to as the 'Long Tail'. However, in addition to linguistic 'transgressions' emanating from non-government sources, it is interesting to observe that government officials themselves have been known to engage in the use of these ostensibly denigrated varieties, as has happened in the course of political campaigns, public health messages or other public events (see examples below). I therefore also address the question of why the Singapore government itself would make use of the very same linguistic 'burdens' and 'handicaps' that it attempts to discourage Singaporeans from using. I argue that the government's move of using the very linguistic resources it is trying to discourage is particularly problematic in the case of Singlish, because one of the official arguments against Singlish has been that it has no value in a global context. Yet, the government's use of Singlish includes just such a global context, where it aims to create a bond of solidarity amidst a Singaporean diaspora. Where the language campaigns are concerned, this means that Singlish poses a greater problem for the SGEM than do the dialects for the SMC.

Towards the close of this paper, I suggest that understanding the different challenges posed by the dialects and Singlish can provide us with useful insights into the limits of language management, which refers to the 'conscious and explicit efforts' by relevant authorities to control the language choices available to a targeted group of speakers (Spolsky 2009: 1). In particular, I focus on the question of what kinds of conditions might lead a language manager (such as the government) to breach its own linguistic proscriptions. I suggest that it is important to distinguish between two types of situations, that of a crisis and a linguistic market.

Governing Singapore's linguistic landscape

Siegel (1999) points out that in language education, two common justifications given for banning stigmatized or denigrated varieties are 'time on task' and

[3] Singlish has been described by the government as both 'broken English' and 'a Singapore dialect' (Wee 2005). These added descriptions are usually intended to serve the rhetorical purpose of denigrating Singlish; they do not detract from the fact that the government's stance has served to obscure important distinctions between Singlish and the dialects.

'interference' arguments. The 'time on task' argument is that the time spent using a stigmatized variety takes away from the time that could have been more productively spent on the improving competence in a more desired variety. This argument therefore 'explains' a learner's lack of proficiency in the desired variety by pointing to the fact that the learner is still using the stigmatized variety. This leads to the conclusion that the most reasonable remedy is to eliminate the stigmatized variety from the learner's repertoire. The 'interference' argument is that the learner experiences confusion between the grammar of the desired variety and that of the stigmatized variety. This inability to distinguish the two leads the learner to mix features of the stigmatized variety with those of the desired variety, thus contaminating the grammar of the desired variety. Again, as with the 'time on task' argument, the 'interference' argument has been used to justify the conclusion that the stigmatized variety ought to be eliminated, because of the confusion and contamination it causes.

Both these arguments have also been employed by the Singapore government. The 'time on task' argument tends to be largely applied to the dialects while the 'interference' argument tends to be applied to Singlish. We begin by considering the dialects.

The SMC and the dialects

As mentioned above, Singapore's language policy encourages bilingual proficiency in English and an official mother tongue, which, in the case of the Chinese community is Mandarin. The reason why Mandarin has been chosen among the various Chinese dialects is that it is supposedly able to unite the different dialect groups, and it is also supposedly the variety associated with ancient Chinese culture and its values. This is not to say that the government considers the dialects to be totally without cultural value. The government does at times acknowledge that the dialects are also capable of conveying traditional Chinese values, as seen in (3) (from Goh Chok Tong's speech launching the 1991 Speak Mandarin Campaign).

> (3)
> Although Chinese literature, idioms and proverb can be translated into English, their full meaning may be lost in the process. A Chinese Singaporean who does not know Chinese – either Mandarin or dialect – runs the risk of losing the collective wisdom of the Chinese civilization.

But it is also clear that the government does not consider the dialects capable of performing the unifying function that it attributes to Mandarin. Goh's intention in (3) is to emphasize the importance of being bilingual in English and Chinese: to suggest that without knowledge of some Chinese language, Chinese Singaporeans are 'incomplete'. While the government prefers that this Chinese language be Mandarin rather than a dialect, even the latter is preferable than no Chinese at all. Thus, consider (4), which is from a speech delivered by Lee Kuan Yew to the Chinese community at the 1984 launch of the annual SMC (cited in Bokhorst-Heng 1998: 252).

> (4)
> Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. It also unites the different dialect groups. It reminds us that we are part of an ancient civilisation with an unbroken history of over 5,000 years. This is a deep and strong psychic force, one that gives confidence to a people to face up to and overcome great changes and challenges.
> Therefore I can state that its psychological value cannot be overemphasised. Parents want their children to be successful. They also want their children to retain traditional Chinese values in filial piety, loyalty, benevolence, and love. Through Mandarin their children can emotionally identify themselves as part of an ancient civilisation whose continuity was because it was founded on a tried and tested value system.

With the selection of Mandarin as the officially approved mother tongue, the dialects then are discouraged on the grounds that they utilize the mental resources that might otherwise be better spent on learning Mandarin and English (5) (Lee Kuan Yew 1984 SMC speech).

> (5)
> If we want our bilingual policy to succeed, we must lighten our children's learning load by using Mandarin as the mother tongue in place of dialect. Studies show that students from Mandarin-speaking families consistently do better in their examinations than those from dialect-speaking homes. It could be that the parents of such students are better educated. It must also be because they have no extra load of dialect words and phrases to carry.

There is little doubt that the SMC has been largely successful in discouraging the use of the dialects. Many Chinese families have accepted the line of reasoning outlined in (4), which capitalizes on their desire to ensure that their children do as well as possible in school (Stroud and Wee 2007). According to figures from the Education Ministry, far fewer Chinese families speak dialects at home nowadays. While more than 60% of such families spoke dialects in the early days of the SMC, this figure dropped to below 10% in 1988 and less than 2% in 2001 (*The Straits Times* 18 March 2009 'Learning dialects "adds to burden"').

The SGEM and Singlish

As stressed by Goh Chok Tong (then the second Prime Minister) in his 1999 National Day Rally Speech, the existence of Singlish is considered a threat to the nation's economic wellbeing (6).

> (6)
> We cannot be a first-world economy or go global with Singlish. …The fact that we use English gives us a big advantage over our competitors.
> If we carry on using Singlish, the logical final outcome is that we, too, will develop our own type of pidgin English, spoken only by 3m Singaporeans, which the rest of the world will find quaint but incomprehensible. We are already half way there. Do we want to go all the way?

Goh thus expressed the hope that in time to come, Singaporeans will no longer speak Singlish (*The Straits Times* 29 August 1999):

> (7)
> Singlish is broken, ungrammatical English sprinkled with words and phrases from local dialects and Malay which English speakers outside Singapore have difficulties in understanding… Let me emphasise that my message that we must speak Standard English is targeted primarily at the younger generation… we should ensure that the next generation does not speak Singlish.

Notice that unlike the dialects, which were recognized as 'proper' languages even though they weren't considered as suitable as Mandarin for mother tongue status, Singlish is by contrast described as a 'pidgin'; it is 'broken' and 'ungrammatical' (though it has also been described as a 'Singapore dialect'; see note 2). This is why the government tends to adopt the 'interference' argument with regards to Singlish. The fear is that such interference will affect Singaporeans' use of Standard English.

The SGEM has had a much shorter history than the SMC, and unlike the dialects, there are no available nation-wide census data on the use of Singlish in the home. It might therefore be unfair to make projections about likely success of the SGEM, especially since its goal of trying to eliminate Singlish is a more ambitious one than the SMC's attempt to discourage dialect use. Nonetheless, even allowing for this difference, we will see that there are good reasons why Singlish poses a greater challenge for language management.

The dialects and Singlish: a comparison

A number of specific initiatives have been adopted in conjunction with the SMC that contributed to the government's general success in discouraging the use of the dialects (see Bokhorst-Heng 1999 for details). Within the domain of education, passing Mandarin examinations became necessary for Chinese children to move up the education ladder. On a wider scale, perhaps the most drastic measure taken was the banning of the dialects from the media. Television programs and radio broadcasting officially eliminated the use of dialects, and the Media Development Authority (MDA) stopped authorizing dialect films and videos unless they were dubbed in Mandarin. With the ban in place, dialect-speaking Singaporeans—mainly the elderly Chinese—who used to enjoy Cantonese drama serials from Hong Kong had to get used to having these programs dubbed in Mandarin.

But despite the ban, there have been at least two occasions on which the government itself has engaged in the use of the dialects. The first was prompted by the loss of votes during the 1991 elections. At the time, a number of older Singaporeans still clung to dialects, perhaps because they found great difficulty in learning Mandarin. Members of the opposition who continued using dialects in the election campaigns had an easier time reaching the older voters. And when a member of one of the opposition parties, Low Thia Khiang, was elected into parliament partly on the basis of his use of the Teochew dialect to communicate with the grassroots, the ruling party (i.e., the government) had to react by

occasionally using dialects itself during elections. As a consequence, during the 1997 elections, the government fielded candidates with dialect proficiency and even government ministers were observed to be using dialects.

The second occasion was in 2003, during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak. In order to reach out to elderly Singaporeans, the government permitted the use of dialects on radio and television to explain the nature of the crisis. The government was at pains to emphasize that this should not be read as a change in its policy regarding the dialects (www.mda.gov.sg bulletin dated 30 April 2003; accessed 4 June 2009):

(8)

… the Media Development Authority (MDA) would like to clarify that it has not changed its policy on the use of dialect in the broadcast media. But in these exceptional circumstances, in order to reach out to every Singaporean in a language that he or she understands, it is necessary to make adjustments to programme guidelines so that everyone will be aware of the SARS problem. There is a need to reach out to a group of elderly people who are dialect speakers and do not read the newspapers, and who may not be watching or listening to News programmes. MDA has therefore allowed the broadcasters to air public service announcements in dialect, and to use dialect in certain entertainment and information programmes, in order to convey critical information and advice about coping with SARS. This is in support of the national effort to educate every Singaporean about SARS.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the government has on the whole been largely successful in discouraging Singaporeans from using the dialects. Even though the dialects continue to be present in Singapore's linguistic landscape, instances of their use are relatively contained. For example, one consequence of the replacement of the other dialects with Mandarin was the creation of a communication gap between the older and younger generation so that, in effect, grandparents, in particular, had difficulty communicating with their grandchildren (Pakir 1993: 83). And this has on occasion led to concerns among younger Singaporeans that 'this cultural loss is potentially irreversible' as 'the opportunity for the young Singaporeans to learn and practice dialects will die out with the "dying breed" of older Singaporeans' (Goh 2009: 7). Relatedly, but demonstrating a more pragmatic orientation, some younger Singaporeans value the dialects because their work brings them into contact with the elderly and knowledge of the dialects facilitates workplace communication (Stroud and Wee 2007). Yet others, such as Singaporean males who are performing the obligatory military service known as National Service, find the dialects, particularly Hokkien, useful for bridging social class divisions (Hing 2004).

These instances of dialect use are tolerable to the government because the acquisition of dialects in these cases is relatively ad hoc. The dialects are picked up in the context of interactions at work or in the army, and these are not generally seen to be at the expense of learning Mandarin or English. But where a stronger attempt to champion the use of the dialects is (rightly or wrongly) being perceived, the government can be quick to reiterate its stance against the dialects in no uncertain terms. For example, when a local academic was quoted in a local newspaper as

making the observation that Singapore is not as multilingual as it used to be, this prompted a government official to respond by asserting that 'it would be stupid … to advocate the learning of dialects, which must be at the expense of English and Mandarin' (*The Straits Times* 18 March 2009 'Learning dialects "adds to burden"'). It is therefore worth noting that the SMC cannot be described as an unqualified success, since one consequence of Singapore's policy of emphasizing the value of English is that more and more Chinese Singaporeans are starting to come from homes where English is the spoken language. In fact, the number of Chinese students from English-speaking homes has risen from about 17% in 1985 to almost 50% in 2004 so that English has now overtaken Mandarin as 'the primary language used in homes of Primary 1 Chinese pupils' (Ministry of Education, press release 9 January 2004). The main competitor to Mandarin in present-day Singapore is therefore English rather than the dialects.

However, it is largely true that the government has been successful in promoting Mandarin over the dialects. And to understand the bases for this success, it is necessary to appreciate a number of things. One, in the context of Singaporean politics, there is a central status given to the ideology of 'pragmatism', which refers to the commitment to rationality with the aim of achieving practical results, particularly in order to ensure continuous economic growth (Chua 1995: 68; Mauzy and Milne 2002: 54). This pragmatism formed the basis of the government's appeal to parents to switch from dialects to Mandarin in the home, by suggesting that parents who did not support the switch would be making it more difficult for their child to succeed in school. As Bokhorst-Heng and Wee (2007: 332–333) point out:

> This appeal to pragmatism has worked quite well, since many parents would quite naturally want their child to be as advantaged as possible when it comes to education … Dialects were dropped in favour of Mandarin because between the two, the social and educational environments made it clear that it was more useful to be proficient in Mandarin than in dialect.

Bokhorst-Heng and Wee (2007: 332) also provide the following 1979 statement from Lee Kuan Yew, which brings out quite clearly this pragmatic line of argument:

> (9)
> All Chinese parents face this choice for their children – English-Mandarin, or English-dialect … Let us face the problem and make our decision to use Mandarin, not dialect… This is the stark choice – English-Mandarin, or English-dialect. Logically, the decision is obvious. Emotionally, the choice is painful.

Two, from the viewpoint of language management and its concerns with regulating the language choices available to a targeted group of speakers, the government has found it relatively easy to implement its ban on the dialects. This is because there were television serials, movies and news programs that were presented entirely in dialects, that is entirely in Cantonese, entirely in Hokkien, entirely in Teochew, and so on. The feasibility of the ban therefore involved disallowing these serials, movies and news programs, or allowing them to be aired only after they were dubbed in Mandarin. For some Singaporeans today, this has meant going outside of

government-regulated media if they wish to enjoy media content in the original dialects (10):

(10)
… the mandatory Mandarin dubbing of Hong Kong films in Singapore theatres has put off audiences. They prefer to watch the movies on DVDs or Internet downloads so that they can appreciate the Cantonese dialogue.
(Low Yuen Ping, Festive Films, letter to *The Straits Times*, 16 May 2009)

Three, while the government has occasionally used the dialects itself, these have been in the restricted contexts of a public health crisis or political campaigning. In both cases, the aim was to communicate with a relatively specific segment of the population, namely, the elderly Chinese who were primarily conversant in dialects. As the population changes and a younger generation of Chinese Singaporeans emerges who have grown up with Mandarin (or English) as the home language, there will probably be less need for the government to engage in dialect use.

Comparing the dialect situation with that of Singlish, we note that while Singaporeans are also prepared to accept a pragmatic reasoning that espouses the economic value of Standard English, they see no reason why Singlish and Standard English cannot co-exist (Stroud and Wee, forthcoming). That is, the pragmatic reasoning that helped convince Chinese Singaporeans—in particular, parents—to switch from dialects to Mandarin—carries far less weight when applied to Singlish. This is because many Singaporeans feel that they already have a good command of English, which contributes to their confidence that Singlish is unlikely to pose a threat. For example, in a 2008 survey conducted by the SGEM, it was found that about 41% of Singaporeans 'felt their English was already up to scratch, and that there was no need for improvement' (SG Forums 28 Aug 2008, 'Speak good English? 4 in 10 S'poreans say "no need lah"' by Tessa Wong). Furthermore, Singaporeans also seem generally confident in their ability to code-switch between a more standard variety and Singlish (Wee 2005), thus undermining the government's argument that the latter interferes with the former.

Two, from the perspective of language management, banning Singlish proves to be a more intractable problem than banning the dialects, thus creating a linguistic dilemma for the government when it comes to regulating language use in the media. Consider the following excerpts from the MDA's Free-To-Air Television Programme Code (11–12):

(11)
News, current affairs, and info-educational programmes where dialect interviews are given by older people who are unable to speak Mandarin. Voice-overs should be provided for these interviews.
(12)
Singlish, which is ungrammatical local English, and includes dialect terms and sentence structures based on dialect, should not be encouraged and can only be permitted in interviews, where the interviewee speaks only Singlish. The interviewer himself, however, should not use Singlish.

The notion of social languages (Gee 2001) is relevant here to understanding the nature of the language management dilemma. Social languages (Gee 2001: 652) are sets of 'lexical and grammatical resources (whether in speech or writing) that a recognizable group of people uses to carry out its characteristic social practices'. A social language is firmly grounded in the kind of social interaction that it serves to mediate. Such a view of language is useful because it avoids treating 'an abstract "language"' as the unit of analysis, and focuses instead on '*the actual and densely contextualized forms in which language occurs in society*' (Blommaert 2005: 15, italics in original). And when compared to Singlish, dialects are more extensive social languages in the sense that they have had a much longer sociolinguistic history, and because of this, have developed the relevant lexicogrammatical resources to sustain a broader range of linguistic interactions.[4] In contrast, Singlish is, relatively speaking, less extensively developed as a social language. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that most Singlish usage involves code-switching between Singlish and more standard English; there are few movies or television serials that are *totally* in Singlish. In fact, Alsagoff (2007: 26) suggests that 'fluidity and movement between Standard English and Singlish is not the exception but the rule in modern Singapore'. Returning to (11–12) above, what this means is that while it may be relatively easy to identify movies, serials or news interviews that are presented entirely in dialects (and thus either ban them or demand voice-overs), it is in contrast far more difficult to apply the same regulatory practices to Singlish. This is because Singlish is usually interspersed with other lexicogrammatical constructions that are, to varying degrees, more or less standard. And in fact, if an exchange involves a lot of Singlish, it typically becomes perceived as having a humorous or parodic intent. The government itself confirmed this when, also in the course of dealing with the SARS crisis, it commissioned a SARS Rap song (sometimes known as the 'SAR-VIVOR Rap'), to emphasize the importance of proper hygiene. The government presented the same rational for resorting to Singlish as it did with its use of dialects. That is, in the same way that dialects were considered necessary to communicate the nature of the SARS crisis to the elderly, Singlish was considered necessary in order to communicate with less-educated Singaporeans. The song was performed using a number of Singlish constructions, including the particles 'leh' and 'lah'; the passive marker 'kena' and the lexical item 'tahan' ('to endure'), both derived from Malay; and the use of 'got' as a copular. Excerpted lyrics are shown below.

(13)
Some say 'leh', some say 'lah'
Spread kaya, but don't spread SARS!
Everybody, we have a part to play
To help fight SARS at the end of the day!

[4] By treating the dialects as more extensive social languages than Singlish, I do not mean to imply that the grammar of the dialects is complete or hermetically sealed. Nor do I mean to suggest that the grammar of Singlish cannot further develop so that it can be used in sustained social interactions. These developments are contingent on the social activities of language users, which is precisely what Gee (2001) is trying to remind us of. We therefore need to rethink commonly held assumptions about the ontology of language (Hopper 1998; Makoni and Pennycook 2007).

If you're sick, don't go to work
Even if your boss is a jerk
Don't be a hero and continue working
Wait the whole company 'kena' quarantine!
…
…
Hey if you 'kena' home quarantine,
Don't go out, except in your dreams.
'Tahan' a while, and co-operate
Don't give everybody a big headache ah!

Notice that even here, it is almost impossible to have the song entirely in Singlish. There are constructions that are relatively standard in nature ('If you're sick, don't go to work', 'Where they know about SARS', and 'Don't go out, except in your dreams').

Consider also another instance of the government's use of Singlish, Singapore Day. Singapore Day is an annual event held in different parts of the world. It is aimed at getting Singaporeans who are living or working overseas to get together, and the goal is to help them maintain a sense of connection with their home country. The most recent Singapore Day was in London in April 2009. The event made occasional use of Singlish, such as the lexical item 'chope', which is used to indicate the reservation of a seat (The Sunday Times 26 April 2009 'Singapore Day in London draws the crowds'). Here, as with the SARS rap, the use of Singlish is not only light-hearted, it is also interspersed with more Standard English constructions. But crucially, the intended audience here is not the 'less-educated', since most of the overseas Singaporeans are working professionals or university students pursuing a degree abroad. This use of Singlish can be usefully interpreted in relation to Alsagoff's (2007) cultural orientation model (COM). Alsagoff (2007: 38) suggests that the variation in Singapore English (between Singlish and more standard English constructions) reflects an ongoing negotiation between different cultural orientations:[5]

> … at one end are practices and orientations representing a globalist perspective, and at the other those associated with the local(list) perspective. COM posits that speakers of Singapore English vary their style of speaking by negotiating fluidly within a multi-dimensional space framed by these two

[5] A reviewer expressed the possibility that the assertion that Singlish is a less extensive social language than the dialects is at odds with the COM. This is not the case, for three reasons. One, extensiveness is a relative matter, and the assertion is concerned with comparing Singlish and the dialects, whereas the COM is concerned with comparing Singlish and Standard English, or to use Alsagoff's terms, Local Singapore English and International Singapore English. Two, even in her own discussion, Alsagoff refers to the inclusion of Singlish features 'in what would otherwise be recognized as Standard English' (2007: 40), rather than the other way round. This description is clearly consistent with the assertion that Singlish is a less extensive social language than, in this case, Standard English. Three, the COM is specifically concerned with Singlish as variety used by educated speakers and not as a 'uneducated variety' (2007: 42). This is certainly an important distinction, and my discussion of the extensiveness of Singlish pertains specifically to the former rather than the latter. The point I am making, which Alsagoff (2007: 42) also emphasizes, is that the label 'Singlish' has been used in ways that obscure this distinction.

> bipolar cultural perspectives. Thus, speaking in degrees of Singlish … indicates a symbolic shift towards a local(ist) orientation, while adopting the varietal feature of StdE … indicates a move towards a global(ist) orientation; where the degree or extent of use of the features uniquely associated with the respective varieties can be seen as a measure of the strength of the orientation.

This leads to our third point. Unlike the government's use of dialects, which did not contradict its own anti-dialect stance, its use of Singlish is more problematic, for two reasons. The first reason comes from the government's insistence on equating Singlish with 'bad' or 'broken' English. By using the label 'Singlish' in this manner, the government is either unable or unwilling to distinguish speakers who have little or no competence in Standard English (and thus speak a largely ungrammatical variety as their only variety of English) from speakers who are competent in Standard English (and who code-switch into a colloquial variety for strategic interactional purposes). The first group was officially the intended audience, thus rationalizing the SARS rap. The second group was undeniably the intended audience at Singapore Day. Both groups, however, are clearly distinct as regards their use of English as a resource for interaction and identity construction.

The government's reason for conflating the language usage of both groups under the label 'Singlish' is as follows: As monolingual Singlish speakers, members of the first group have no choice but to use Singlish, and they pay the price in being unable to access better jobs and educational opportunities. Members of the second group face no such occupational or educational restrictions, but their insistence on using Singlish then penalizes their less well-off fellow Singaporeans by creating a linguistic environment that does not facilitate the learning of a more standard variety. Thus, in his 2000 SGEM speech (The Straits Times, 29 April 2000), Goh Chok Tong made the following comments:

> (14)
> They [members of the second group] should not take the attitude that Singlish is cool or feel that speaking Singlish makes them more 'Singaporean'. They have a responsibility to create a conducive environment for the speaking of good English. If they speak good English, others will follow suit. If they speak Singlish when they can speak good English, they are doing a disservice to Singapore!

For expository convenience, I will continue to use the label 'Singlish', since this has now become deeply entrenched in popular discourse. But to distinguish between the language practices of the two groups, I add the subscripts 'm' (for 'monolingual') and 'c' (for 'code-switching'). This is because there are significant differences between Singlish$_m$ and Singlish$_c$, which the government is unable to recognize due to the fact that it insists on employing the same metadiscursive regime with regard to both groups of speakers. First of all, there is the issue of medium. Singlish$_m$ is less likely to appear on websites, blogs, or even in newspaper columns, and because of this, really has no orthographic conventions (however nascent) to speak of. In contrast, Singlish$_c$ does appear quite widely in various internet forums and Singapore Anglophone literature, whose contributors tend to have been educated at

elite English-medium schools and universities (Goh 2009). Second, there is often a high degree of playful humor involved in the usage of Singlish$_c$. As an example, consider the following posting to TalkingCock.com, a satirical website on things Singaporean (from Goh 2009). This posting comes from Ter Koh (which is Hokkien for 'lecherous'), which Goh (2009: 9) describes it as a 'humorous take on Singapore self-loathing'. Here, Ter Koh is expressing the opinion that the level of Chinese proficiency among Chinese Singaporeans is not as high as the level of English.

(15)
It's si beh condemn that as Chinese peepur, our standard of Chinese am not as powderful as our Engrand.

Ter Koh's use of *si beh*, a Hokkien intensifier meaning 'very/extremely', to premodify *condemn* is clearly intended to be humorous, since *condemn* is not even an adjective but a verb. Even in Hokkien, *si beh* would typically be used to premodify adjectives (e.g., *si beh juak* 'very hot', *sib eh sien* 'very tiresome'). Collocating *si beh* with an English verb is therefore simply Ter Koh's attempt to index this posting as intentionally and playfully non-standard English. The phonetic representations of *powerful* as *powderful* and *English* as *Engrand* are likewise intended to achieve the same effect, especially since very few Singaporeans, whether speakers of Singlish$_m$ or Singlish$_c$, are likely to actually use terms such as *powderful* or *Engrand* outside a non-humorous context.[6] These are creatively constructed terms that invoke the stereotype of Singlish speakers (both Singlish$_m$ and Singlish$_c$) as speakers of non-standard English. The closest that (14) comes to approximating naturalistic speech is with *peepur* 'people', since it is acknowledged that Singaporeans do tend to delete the final consonant (Bao 1998).

In this regard, if we briefly return to the SARS rap, we can note that even a message aimed at a group speaking Singlish$_m$ cannot but help using Singlish$_c$. The reason is clear enough: The Singapore government itself is made up of highly educated speakers of English and because of this, the government itself belongs to that group of speakers who use Singlish$_c$. So, whether the government intends it or not, its own use of Singlish is necessarily Singlish$_c$. That is, the government ends up belonging to the same group as the those individuals—generally well-educated and relatively affluent Singaporeans—who have countered the government's anti-Singlish stance by arguing that it is a valuable national identity marker that can unite Singaporeans (Wee 2005). An event like Singapore Day in fact only helps to proves their point, since Singlish$_c$ is being used in a context of building national cohesion. Ironically, because Singapore Day is a government-organized event, this officially-sanctioned use of Singlish$_c$ further serves to undermine the government's argument that it is not possible to 'go global' with Singlish$_c$ (see (5) above). It is precisely in such a global context that occasional switches into Singlish$_c$ can help establish a sense of shared 'Singaporean-ness'. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the same article reporting on Singapore Day begins with a tongue-in-cheek observation

[6] These observations raise important questions about exactly what kind of identity is being implicated by these invocations of Singlish. In particular, there appear to be close connections with sociolinguistics notions such as style, authentication and even mock Spanish (Bucholtz 2003; Coupland 2007; Hill 1995). For a discussion of these matters, see Wee (in preparation).

that the Singlish$_c$ discourse particles 'lah' and 'lor' were being bandied about as Singaporeans prepared to gather for the event (*The Sunday Times* 26 April 2009 'Singapore Day in London draws the crowds'):

(16)
Britain's busiest train station reverberated with lots of 'lahs' and 'lors' yesterday morning.

To summarize, the Singapore government adopts essentially the same strategies in dealing with the dialects and Singlish, making use of pragmatically grounded arguments and trying to ban these varieties from the media. And in both cases, the government has had to occasionally engage in using the very linguistic resources it is trying to rid Singapore of. Despite these similarities, Singlish poses a relatively greater challenge than the dialects, for a number of reasons. These include the government's failure to appreciate that Singlish is used differently than dialects; that unlike the early days of the SMC when Chinese Singaporeans were less secure in their command of Mandarin, the SGEM is being initiated at a time when Singaporeans are more confident in their use of English; and finally, that unlike its use of the dialects, the government's own use of Singlish contradicts its anti-Singlish stance.

Implications for language management

We know that no domain of language policy,[7] however, influential the language manager might be, is completely insulated from the problems posed by internal forces and external influences (Spolsky 2004). These internal and external factors are also observable in our discussion of the dialects and Singlish, where the nation-state can be construed as the relevant domain of language policy and planning. Thus, internal forces might include domestic political campaigns and the SARS crisis whereas external influences might include the migration of Singaporeans overseas. While the challenges posed by such internal and external factors have been widely discussed (see Spolsky 2009 and the references therein), less attention has been given to questions such as the following: What factors would compel a language manager to contravene its own linguistic proscriptions? What might be the consequences of such a contravention? And relatedly, what are the implications of adopting particular metadiscourses of language? Accordingly, in this section, I focus my attention on these three questions.

There are at least two kinds of situations where having proscribed language X, a language manager might itself have to make use of X. The first kind of situation is when there is a need to respond to a crisis (perhaps involving a natural disaster, national security, or public health) and X is necessary in order to communicate with

[7] Not all choices in language policy are the result of conscious and explicit efforts by language managers. In informal adolescent interaction, for example, what constitutes language policy may be the result of unspoken assumptions or ideologies about what kind of language is considered appropriate for a particular group of friends. But where deliberate attempts are made to influence language choices, it then becomes relevant to speak of language management (Spolsky 2009).

a relevant audience. The use of the dialects and Singlish in containing the SARS epidemic is an illustration of this. The second kind of situation is when the linguistic market (Bourdieu 1990, 1991) is such that if the language manager is intent on cultivating an ongoing engagement with a relevant audience, it has to use X. An example might be a commercial enterprise, where a proprietor uses X because that happens to be the language of her customers. The use of Singlish for Singapore Day illustrates this.

These two kinds of situations need to be distinguished in principle because they lead to rather different consequences. The first situation typically involves a short-term measure, warranted by exigent circumstances that are expected to hold only temporarily. The second situation, in contrast, involves circumstances that may be expected to prevail indefinitely. Because of this, the second situation is potentially far more consequential for the language manager's attempts at proscribing X: over time, it could lead to undermining the manager's rationale for the proscription.

However, whether or not these two kinds of situations can be successfully and consistently distinguished depends to a large extent on the metadiscursive regime adopted by the language manager. Makoni and Pennycook (2007: 2) define metadiscursive regimes as representations of language that constitute forms of 'social action, social facts and can function as agents in the exercise of social and political power'. That is, metadiscursive regimes are ways of construing language that, depending on the specific details involved, can obscure or bring out relationships between various language practices. Moreover, such regimes are not simply descriptive but contain normative implications about how individuals and/or groups ought to be acting with respect to language. And because of their normative nature, they can be highly influential in delimiting the relevant range of language choices, as well as determining the lines of reasoning that could be considered valid in justifying the selection of a particular choice.

With this in mind, it becomes clear that too blunt a metadiscursive regime leads to the loss of important distinctions, and concomitantly, the narrowing of the range of language choices. We saw this in the Singapore government's treatment of the dialects and Singlish. The official assumption here seems to be that any linguistic variety that has been stigmatized by the government can be approached via the adoption of similar strategies, such as an appeal to pragmatism and the enforcement of language bans. By painting both the dialects and Singlish with the same brush stroke, this metadiscursive regime makes it difficult to respond appropriately to the two kinds of situations outlined above, especially since, as we have seen, these are very different social languages. This suggests that it is critical to be sensitive to the social functions that various linguistic varieties are performing and to have that reflected in the metadiscourse adopted by the language manager.

It is also critical not to conflate 'colloquial' language practices with 'ungrammatical' ones, as has happened in the Singapore's government use of the label 'Singlish'. By failing to distinguish between relatively playful and linguistically self-assured uses of Singlish (Singlish_c) from those that indicate a genuine lack of competence in the standard variety (Singlish_m), the government unwittingly ends up becoming part of the very group of Singlish users whose behavior it is attempting to regulate.

This is not to deny that the categorization of particular linguistic constructions as 'colloquial' or 'ungrammatical' is open to contestation and negotiation. But be that as it may, members of the public are more likely to support the banning of 'ungrammatical' language practices. In contrast, attempts to ban 'colloquial' practices are more likely to be met with resistance, given the covert prestige (Trudgill 1972) they usually enjoy and because the speakers are more confident in their ability to switch between the colloquial and the standard.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the Singapore government's attempts to rid Singapore of the dialects and Singlish. We noted that Singlish poses a bigger challenge than do the dialects for a number of reasons. These included the government's failure to recognize that the two are rather different social languages, which makes a ban on Singlish far less practical to implement than a ban on dialects. They also included the fact that the government's own use of Singlish undermines its anti-Singlish policy, unlike its own use of the dialects. Finally, we extrapolated from the Singapore situation to draw out some broader implications for the management of language.

References

Alsagoff, L. (2007). Singlish: Negotiating culture, capital and identity. In V. Vaish, S. Gopinathan, & Y.-B. Liu (Eds.), *Language, capital, culture: Critical studies of language and education in Singapore* (pp. 25–46). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Anderson, C. (2004). *The long tail*. October: Wired.

Bao, Z. (1998). The sounds of Singapore English. In J. A. Foley, T. Kandiah, Z. Bao, A. F. Gupta, L. Alsagoff, H. C. Lick, L. Wee, I. S. Talib, & W. Bokhorst-Heng (Eds.), *English in new cultural contexts* (pp. 41–72). Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bokhorst-Heng, W. (1998). *Language and imagining the nation in Singapore*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto.

Bokhorst-Heng, W. (1999). Singapore's Speak Mandarin Campaign: Language ideological debates and the imagining of the nation. In J. Blommaert (Ed.), *Language ideological debates* (pp. 235–265). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Bokhorst-Heng, W., & Wee, L. (2007). Language planning in Singapore: On pragmatism, communitarianism and personal names. *Current Issues in Language Planning, 8*(3), 324–343.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. R. Nice (Trans). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bucholtz, M. (2003). Sociolinguistic nostalgia and the authentication of experience. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 7*, 398–416.

Chng, H. H. (2003). 'You see me no up': Is Singlish a problem? *Language Problems & Language Planning, 27*, 45–62.

Chua, B. H. (1995). *Communitarian ideology and democracy in Singapore*. London: Routledge.

Coupland, N. (2007). *Style: Language variation and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fong, V., Lim, L., & Wee, L. (2002). "Singlish": Used and abused. *Asian Englishes, 5*(1), 18–39.

Gee, J. P. (2001). Educational linguistics. In M. Aronoff & J. Rees-Miller (Eds.), *The handbook of linguistics* (pp. 647–663). Oxford: Blackwell.

Goh, R. (2009). Uncertain locale: The dialectics of space and the cultural politics of English in Singapore. Paper presented at the workshop on *The Politics of English in Asia*. Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

Hill, J. (1995). Mock Spanish: The indexical reproduction of racism in American English. Power, Pride and Politics in American English. Available at http://www.uta.fi/FAST/US8/span.html.

Hing, K. (2004). *Chinese dialects in Singapore: Reversing language shift.* Honours thesis, National University of Singapore.

Hopper, P. J. (1998). Emergent grammar. In M. Tomasello (Ed.), *The new psychology of language* (pp. 155–175). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Lim, L. (Ed.). (2004). *Singapore English: A grammatical description*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Makoni, S., & Pennycook, A. (2007). Disinventing and reconstituting languages. In S. Makoni & A. Pennycook (Eds.), *Disinventing and reconstituting languages* (pp. 1–41). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Mauzy, D. K., & Milne, R. S. (2002). *Singapore politics under the people's action party*. London: Routledge.

Pakir, A. (1993). Two tongued tied: Bilingualism in Singapore. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 14*, 73–90.

Rappa, A., & Wee, L. (2006). *Language policy and modernity in Southeast Asia*. New York: Springer.

Siegel, J. (1999). Stigmatized and standardized varieties in the classroom: Interference or separation. *TESOL Quarterly, 33*(4), 701–728.

Spolsky, B. (2004). *Language policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spolsky, B. (2009). *Language management*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stroud, C., & Wee, L. (2007). Consuming identities: Language planning and policy in Singaporean late modernity. *Language Policy, 6*, 253–279.

Stroud, C., & Wee, L. (Forthcoming). Language policy and planning in Singaporean late modernity. In L. Lim, A. Pakir, & L. Wee (Eds.), *English in Singapore: Unity and utility*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Trudgill, P. (1972). Sex, covert prestige and linguistic change in the urban British English of Norwich. *Language in Society, 1*, 179–195.

Wee, L. (2002). When English is not a mother tongue: Linguistic ownership and the Eurasian community in Singapore. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 23*, 282–295.

Wee, L. (2005). Intra-language discrimination and linguistic human rights: The case of Singlish. *Applied Linguistics, 26*, 48–69.

Wee, L. *Self as other? Style, Singlish and Singaporean-ness* (in preparation).

Wee, C. J. W.-L. (2007). Afterword: Language, capitalist development, cultural change. In V. Vaish, S. Gopinathan, & Y.-B. Liu (Eds.), *Language, capital, culture: Critical studies of language and education in Singapore* (pp. 249–257). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Author Biography

Lionel Wee is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language & Literature at the National University of Singapore. His research interests include the global spread of English, language policy, and general issues in pragmatics and sociolinguistics. His publications have appeared in Applied Linguistics, Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development, Journal of Linguistics, Journal of Pragmatics, Language in Society, and World Englishes. He is currently completing a book on language rights.