

Identity conceptions, linguistic repertoires, and language attitudes and use in multilingual Singapore: Developments and recent changes

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Singapore is one of the foremost examples of a multiethnic, multilingual metropolis. Over the years, English has developed a special status in Singapore, though it also coexists with a variety of languages (particularly Malay, Chinese, and Indian languages). Growing numbers of children and young people in Singapore now acquire English from birth, usually in combination with one or more other languages of the country's (and their families') linguistic repertoires.

The present paper investigates the effects of multilingualism on young people's linguistic repertoires and identities, as well as on the development of language attitudes and use. The participants are young Singaporeans of different ethnicities (Chinese, Malay, and Indian), all of whom can be categorized as L1 speakers of English. Participants were divided into three age groups: (1) preschool children (1;4 to 6;9, $n = 29$); (2) schoolchildren (7;0 to 12;1, $n = 8$) (Buschfeld *fc.*); (3) post-secondary students between the ages of 17 and 24 ($n = 450$) (Siemund et al. 2014; Leimgruber et al. 2018). Data on the participants' linguistic repertoires and language attitudes and use were collected by means of questionnaires.

The results suggest similarities between the groups when it comes to their linguistic repertoires and language attitudes and use (e.g., bilingualism from birth as the predominant acquisition pattern), but also some differences between ethnicities (e.g., differences in the frequency of English usage) and age groups. This is true even within the family and peer groups, where language use is highly correlated with age and shared repertoire, suggesting a gradual apparent-time shift towards English, with non-official varieties relegated largely to use with the older generation.

These results are complemented and largely confirmed by findings on the use of selected linguistic features by the preschool and schoolchildren: realization of subject pronouns, past-tense marking, and vowel quality and quantity (Buschfeld *fc.*). Alongside prominent quantitative differences between Chinese and Indians, the data also show some homogenization effects, especially at the qualitative level. For example, Indians tend to use the Chinese-derived past-tense marker (*verb + finish*) the same way their Chinese peers do, even though this structure, not being part of their linguistic repertoires, cannot be transfer-induced.

Overall, our findings suggest that in multilingual and multiethnic Singapore, we find tendencies of both divergence and convergence between the different ethnic groups that can be explained in light of both identity conceptions (ethnic dissociation and consociation due to spatial proximity) and the decades-long evolution and spread of English at the expense of other languages, evidenced in shifting repertoires.

References

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