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# Reconsidering language shift within Singapore's Chinese community: A Bourdieusian analysis

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**Abstract:** The official narrative told by national census data in Singapore is that of massive language shift within one generation from a myriad of Chinese dialects towards Mandarin and English as dominant home languages. This story of shift is often told in ways that suggest the community completely and pragmatically transformed its practices and allegiances (Jaffe 2007) in alignment with government policy. However, such notions are premised on narrow ideological assumptions of language with fixed attendant linguistic practices. The choices that people make about their language practices and how they identify with language is much more complex than the term “language shift” captures. We employ Bourdieu’s conceptual tools of field, capital and habitus – especially field – to understand the “messier” realities of historical language shift in Singapore alongside a persistence, even a renaissance, in the use of dialects despite government policies and quadrilingual discourses. We anchor our discussion on the Speak Mandarin Campaign, the keystone of continuing government efforts to influence the habitus within the linguistic field. We provide two specific examples: the continued agitation for the use of dialects in the mass media, and the government’s failed attempt to influence a change in family surnames. Singapore’s story problematizes the notion of language shift in multilingual communities. It also raises interesting questions about the nature and impetus of language shift, the socio-political discourses surrounding these shifts, and the complex interplay of government policy and community and personal choices.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, speak mandarin campaign, Singapore, multilingualism, language policy, language shift

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## 1 Introduction

With the concurrent rise of post-colonial nationhood and globalisation, scholars have given increasing attention to the phenomenon of language contact and language shift (Fishman 2001; Garrett 2014; Makiharn and Schieffelin 2007). As Jaffe (2007) points out, the term “language shift” is often used in the literature on language change in multilingual contexts as a “shorthand to describe changes in practices of language socialization and use that occur as a result of language domination that lead to progressively fewer children acquiring the minority language as their first language, in the home” (2007: 51). He identifies a number of ideologies linked to this notion of “shift”. The first is an ideology of language being a bounded, autonomous code, with a de-emphasis on language practice and human agency. The second is a modernist, nationalist ideology which harnesses individual and community (and national) identity to a single language through a “one language, one nation, one state” principle. But in fact, Jaffe argues, while the concept of “shift” evokes “an image of a community transferring its allegiances and completely transforming its practices, [...] it is clear that language domination, contact and change give rise to linguistic practices, attitudes and forms of identification that are far more mixed and complex than the term ‘language shift’ indicates” (Jaffe 2007: 52). The story of language shift in multilingual Singapore, with a focus on one of its ethnic groups, the Chinese, offers a rich example of these complexities.

Singapore’s nation state of 3.9 million residents (citizens and permanent residents) is comprised of 74.3% Chinese, 13.3% Malays, 9.1% Indian, and 3.2% “Others” (Singstat 2015). The official narrative of language shift within this multiracial context entails two unique components. First, rather than a result of language contact, language shift has been staged by top-down language policy. Since Independence Singapore has used its bilingual language policy as a key means to manage the ethnic diversity of its population. Former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) made this clear when he stated: “And I say without the slightest remorse, that we wouldn’t be here, we would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters – who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit, or *what language you use*. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think” (“Government’s hard-nosed approach” 1987, emphasis added). And so, instead of the nation’s 1957 linguistic profile of 33 mother tongue groups, 20 of which were spoken by more than 1,000 people (Chua 1962), a tightly packaged “quadrilingual language policy” (Silver and Bokhorst-Heng 2016) defines the nation’s multilingual character:

- A single ‘national language’, Malay – initially selected in anticipation of merger with Malaya (1963–1965), but since full Independence and its departure from the Federation used mostly at the ceremonial level,
- societal multilingualism with four official languages: English plus Malay, Tamil and Mandarin (the three ethnically ascribed “mother tongues”),
- and individual bilingualism, defined as English plus one’s “mother tongue”.

Within the Chinese community, Hokkien had been the most prevalent lingua franca, the language used by Chinese business leaders, by the 300 + Chinese clan associations, and even by non-Chinese Singaporeans, the language used in offices, market places and army camps (Lim 2010). Mandarin was spoken primarily by the few better-educated immigrants who were members of the Chinese intelligentsia (LKY 2012; Leong 2015). Yet, with Independence in 1965, Mandarin was declared an official language based on justifications that it was the exonormative standard (Putonghua, in China), and not charged with any local and divisive politics associated with dialects (Soh 2013). This was further rationalized by an ideal of “one community-one language”, which considered multilingualism an obstacle to national unity and identity (cf. May 2011; Ruiz 1984). This too is an exonormative position, resonating in important ways with the discourse of Confucian “harmony” in which the hierarchical ordering of language is implicated in processes of social harmony (Wang et al. 2015).<sup>1</sup> Not only was Mandarin declared an official language, it was also declared the official “mother tongue” for all ethnic Chinese – even though Mandarin was neither a first-learned nor dominant language for many. Wodak (2014) refers to this narrowing of linguistic diversity as *hegemonic multilingualism*: a process through which a set of “traditional working languages” (2014: 135) replaces the nation’s true linguistic plurality.

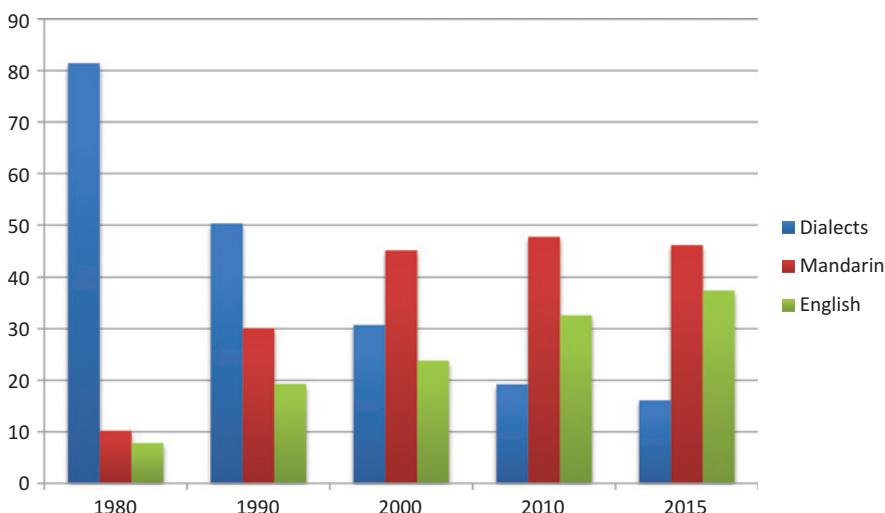
Second, unlike the more common shift of a minority linguistic community towards a majority, the official narrative of language shift within Singapore’s Chinese community indicates a shift by a majority (Hokkien Chinese – 39.8%) and myriad other Chinese language communities (58.8%) towards two “minority” languages: Mandarin and English (Figure 1). While both these languages were big on the global scale, in 1957 when Singapore achieved self-governance (its first step towards full Independence in 1965), Mandarin was declared mother tongue by only 1.2% of the Chinese population, and English only 2.1% (Chua 1962). Today (Singstat 2015), only 16.1% of Chinese homes use a dialect<sup>2</sup> as the dominant home language, while 46.1% use Mandarin,

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for noting this interesting comparison.

<sup>2</sup> In Singapore, all Chinese varieties other than Mandarin are referred to as “dialects”. In this article, we preserve local usage, especially when referring to local perspectives.

and 37.4% English. School data suggest children's use of English at home is even higher: In 2010, 59% of Chinese P1 students used English as their dominant home language (MOE 2010). The shift has been so dramatic that a common family scenario is grandparents and grandchildren in the same household having no common language (Aman et al. 2006).<sup>3</sup> These shifts are especially evident among those with higher education levels: almost half (47.0%) of Chinese with below secondary education use Chinese dialects as their primary home language, 46.3% use Mandarin and 6.4% use English. In contrast, 8.8% of those with university education use Chinese dialects, 40.1% use Mandarin, and 49.4% use English (Singstat 2010).



**Figure 1:** Language most frequently spoken at home by Chinese Singaporeans.  
Sources: Khoo (1980), Singstat (2000, 2010, 2015)<sup>4</sup>

Scholars have discussed these shifts with reference to top-down policies (Gopinathan 1998; Leimgruber 2013; Myers-Scotten 2006) or bottom-up (family) language policies (Curdt-Christiansen 2015) that operate within hegemonic

<sup>3</sup> The 2010 census documents the steady increase in the use of dialects as a dominant home language by age: by age 60, 30% of respondents indicate a dialect is their dominant home language; by age 75, this increases to over 60%. The use of Mandarin remains steady: from ages 10 to 60, there was only a 2% difference in the percentage of individuals declaring Mandarin as their dominant home language: 34% to 32% (Singstat 2010).

<sup>4</sup> This data does not capture the more prevalent translanguaging home practices (Aman et al. 2006).

ideologies. For example, Myers-Scotton (2006: 97–100) highlights Singaporeans' uncontested pragmatism in accounting for their language shift: “[...] the use of English in the schools and the shift to English in other domains is obviously motivated by socio-economic considerations” (2006: 98). She identifies four factors that made the shift to Mandarin successful: the government's Speak Mandarin campaign; the low status of the other Chinese dialect; the belief that speaking Mandarin best defines one's ethnicity as Chinese; and increasing commerce with the China. She claims that “most speakers of the Chinese dialects perceive all varieties of Chinese as one and the same language (even though they are not all mutually intelligible), it was relatively easy to promote Mandarin for everyone as a unifying ethnic symbol, no matter how diverse the community is” (2006: 99). And, she continues, “to ‘speak Mandarin’ became a very attractive alternative to home dialects, given that it is more or less the same as the standard dialect of the People’s Republic of China” (2006: 99).

However, as Ricento (2009) argues, “It would be wrong to conclude the management of language occurs only, or even primarily, as the result of deliberate governmental intervention” (2009: 212). While the role of the state is undoubtedly important, its role in language policy and planning is limited to specific domains, activities and relationships (Blommaert 2006). And these accounts do not take into account the complex and often-conflicting plurality of language ideology within which individuals navigate their language choices. For example, while some scholars note the impact of top-down policies on family aspirations for socio-economic gain, accepting the government's so-called “pragmatic” argument, there is little discussion concerning the extent to which or to whom the shift might be “pragmatic”. There is also little attention given to how the government's discourse positions the role of Mandarin, how the government responds to linguistic resistance, or to the role of community organizations. And there is a tendency to ignore the on-going role that dialects play in home, school, political, and social communities of practice.

As a way to explore the complexities involved in language shift, we employ Bourdieu's notion of field, along with capital and habitus (cf Bokhorst-Heng and Silver 2016; Silver 2005). A Bourdieusian analysis focuses on the socio-historical contexts of language shift. It also emphasizes the role of language ideology in everyday language practices and language choice. Wodak (2014) makes the compelling argument that language ideologies exist both at the cognitive and emotional levels – and hence are often partial, contestable, instable and mutable (Blackledge 2000: 26). We examine how top-down policies interact with various forms of capital within the field of language policy (May 2011) in ways that are also “ground up” and shaped by other fields. The state wields substantial economic and political resources within the “field of power”, thus

agents (individuals, families, institutions) attempt to change the value of capital (such as the capital accrued to particular languages) to re-position themselves in relation to power (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 99–100). This is evident in the shifts towards English and Mandarin as dominant home languages. But, as we argue, individual and community influences are also evident in a Chinese dialect renaissance in popular culture, media and community circles. There are increased calls to reintroduce dialects based on principles of inclusion for dialect-speaking senior citizens (e.g. “Please give it” 1979; Phneah 2013). Thus changes over time push in more than one direction. Specifically examining the shift from dialects to Mandarin and the discourses within the government’s annual Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), our analysis helps explain why the lack of space for Chinese dialects at the national policy level continues to be contested, and helps explain the limits the community itself places on that contestation. Singapore’s story problematizes the notion of language shift in multilingual communities. It also raises interesting questions about the nature and impetus of language shift, about the socio-political discourses surrounding these shifts, and about the complex interplay of government policy and community and personal choices.

We begin our discussion with a brief overview of Bourdieu’s core, “homologically intertwined” (Savage and Silva 2013: 112) thinking instruments: *habitus*, *capital* and *field*. We then focus on the role of the state’s *Speak Mandarin Campaign* in establishing linguistic capital Singapore’s linguistic field. We continue with a focused analysis of the implications of language policy within the field of mass media and the socio-cultural field of personal names.

## 2 Bourdieu’s thinking tools: Habitus, capital and field

*Habitus* is comprised of mostly unconscious dispositions that are shaped by our past cultural and social experiences, and that incline us to behave in particular ways; it produces the socialised norms that generate and guide behaviour. *Habitus* is generally resistant to change, especially when associated with national cultures and promoted by governments through mass media and education systems. This is not to discount individual response; however, such response is still informed by the *habitus*. “We can always say that individuals make choices, as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principals [sic] of these choices” (Bourdieu, in Jenkins 2002: 77). In that sense, power and its legitimization are central to the functioning and structure of *habitus*.

*Capital* is a broad, multidimensional concept that includes any “set of actually usable resources and powers” (Bourdieu 1984: 114), most commonly social, cultural, or symbolic capital. One form of capital can be converted into other forms. For example, the symbolic capital associated with higher education can be translated into greater amounts of economic capital. Lo Bianco (2010: 37) alludes to this convertible capital when he notes that “Languages are closely connected with symbolic power and have material consequences for their users.”

*Field* is Bourdieu’s “key spatial metaphor” (Swartz 1997: 11) comprising of institutions, individual and collective agents, discourses, practices and, more importantly, the interactions between them. Fields are the social, political and institutional arenas in which people express their dispositions. Each field follows its own “logic of practice” (*doxa*); it is hierarchically ordered and structured according to the distribution of capital and the associated relationships formed around that distribution. These spaces are open to competition and struggle, evidenced in two ways. First, a field is made up of the conflict involved when groups or individuals struggle over access to different kinds of capital, how that capital is to be distributed and positioned within a field. Second, there is struggle over what constitutes capital (the most valued resources within a field) (Webb et al. 2002: 22). Also, “entry into the field requires the tacit acceptance of the rules of the game, meaning that specific forms of struggle are legitimated whereas others are excluded” (Swartz 1997: 125). Bourdieu describes this acceptance as *illusio* – the “more or less unthinking commitment to the logic, values and capital of a field” (Webb et al. 2002: 26).

Not only is there a hierarchical arrangement *within* fields, but also *between* fields. Fields are “tightly coupled” (Swartz 1997: 124) in that a change in one position alters the boundaries among other positions; change in one field influences change in another. Bourdieu conceptualised social space as comprising various social fields ordered according to varying degrees of autonomy from an overarching field of power. Autonomous poles tend to be aspects within a field that are quite distinct and removed from other aspects of the field, resistant to influences from other fields. In contrast, heteronomous poles within that same field are aspects that are linked quite closely to other aspects which influence and are influenced by other coupled fields. Thus, realigned heteronomous poles can shift field boundaries and relationships. Language policy is a unique kind of field since it (and language) is “imbricated in all facets of social life” (Ricento 2009: 213) and thus transverses many social fields such as education, economic and political fields.

### 3 Defining the field: language policy in Singapore

In addition to instituting its official quadrilingual policy, the Singapore government also developed specific ideological parameters to interpret the policy and guide linguistic choices. Bourdieu's (1977) notion of "symbolic violence" is crucial for understanding the impact this ideological framing has had on solidifying the position of Mandarin within the Chinese community. Jenkins (2002) explains symbolic violence as "the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate" (2002: 104). In the excerpt below – one that is representative of government linguistic discourse (Bokhorst-Heng 1999) – symbolic violence occurs in two ways. First, in sharp contrast to Bourdieu's convertible view of capital, LKY presents an immutable, siloed view: the capital associated with the ethnic "mother tongues" for cultural rootedness, identity, and values; and the capital associated with English for access to science, technology, economic development, and meritocracy.

Please note that when I speak of bilingualism, I do not mean just the facility of speaking two languages. It is more basic than that, first [through our mother tongue languages], we understand ourselves, what we are, where we came from, what life is or should be about, and what we want to do. Then the facility of the English language gives us access to the science and technology of the West. It also provides a convenient common ground on which the Chinese, Indians, Ceylonese, Malays, Eurasians, everybody competes in a neutral medium. (LKY 1972: n.p.)

Second, through a process of erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000), LKY's dichotomy between the capital for mother tongues and English completely sidesteps issues of Chinese dialects, thereby establishing Mandarin as the defacto language of Chineseness in Singapore.

Fast forward to 2012; Minister for Education Heng Swee Keat provides a summary of the government's longstanding rationale for its quadrilingual education policy:

There are many important reasons why we want to support Singaporeans in becoming effectively bilingual. Learning English allows us to access the perspectives and heritage of the English-speaking world, and connects us with the world of science, technology and global commerce. In our multi-racial society, English is the common language that binds us as one people. Learning Mandarin and our other mother tongue languages anchors us to our Asian culture and values, gives us a complementary perspective and increasingly, connects us to the economic powerhouses of Asia. (Heng 2012: para. 2)

Like LKY thirty years earlier, Heng talks about the social field (culture/heritage), the economic field (science, technology and global commerce), the

education field, the human resource field, and the socio-political field (multi-racial and national unity). However, there is distinct recalibration within the fields. LKY presented a distant, utilitarian view of English – a tool to access the economic capital of “the West” but without ownership of English. Heng similarly refers to the economic capital associated with English, but notably talks about the “English speaking world” (no longer the language of “the West”), which “connects us”, suggesting Singapore as player in this world but, not necessarily “of this world”, a change that occurred over time as English rose in importance. We also see recalibration of capital associated with the mother tongue languages. They are still languages of Asian culture and values, but they are now also associated with economic capital. With both English and Mandarin linked to economic capital, bilingualism becomes less about cultural heritage and more about socio-economic opportunity. It is within this broader context of capital realignments and shifting fields that the story of the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), Chinese dialects, and continuing contestation unfolds.

## 4 The speak mandarin campaign

Medium-of-instruction policy was the government’s primary tool for implementing language policy after Independence. Outlined initially in a 1959 All Party Report on Education, the post-independence bilingual education policy provided for mother-tongue L2 instruction in all English-medium schools and English L2 instruction in Chinese-medium schools. Children thus had to learn two languages at school – English and Mandarin – while speaking a third, their dialect, at home. A 1979 education review committee assessing the post-independence education policy reported dismal results, identifying this continued use of dialects in the home as the primary cause (Goh 1979: 1–1). What was also evident, and for reasons too complex to develop here (e.g., increasing capital afforded by English with respect to higher education and employment, and the perceived communist infiltration of Chinese school [see Lim 2010]), there was also a very rapid trend towards increasing enrolment in English-medium schools and decline in Chinese-medium schools (see Silver 2002). While the reasons for parents’ decisions were far more complex, implicated in the broader socio-political and economic dynamics of the position of English in post-colonial Singapore (Bokhorst-Heng 1999; Silver 2005; Leimgruber 2013), the government developed a discourse of “pragmatism” to account for the choices parents made and to rationalize subsequent language policy.

The government responded with swift and sustained action. Central to this response was an aggressively ubiquitous, annual Speak Mandarin Campaign implemented through the Chinese Singaporeans Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI). Although targeting only the Chinese community, the familiar genre of a national campaign escalated the language “crisis” to a national level.<sup>5</sup> In addition, by co-opting the SCCCI, a dominant player in the business world where Hokkien had been the lingua franca, the government secured a formidable “grassroots” advocate. SCCCI support was critical for establishing the symbolic capital and legitimacy of Mandarin as a practice of community leaders, not just governmental policy. As Johnson notes, “language policies are developed across multiple ‘levels’ of policy creation and even a policy typically considered as bottom-up [...] can still be top-down for somebody” (2013: 10). At the campaign’s launch, members voted to hold SCCCI and all clan meetings in Mandarin. The newspaper reported: “Almost a thousand hands shot into the air at once, in the glare of TV lights. The silent ayes were decisive. Not a limb wavered [...]. It was a historic moment, for the representatives – from Chinese clan, trade and civic organisation – unanimously voted to adopt Mandarin as the lingua franca of Singapore’s multi-dialect Chinese community” (Philip Lee: 1979). For Bourdieu, the processes used to bring members of the clan associations to this unanimous vote – to induce dialect speakers “to collaborate in the destruction of their instruments of expression” in favour of linguistic unification – is actually a process of disempowerment, where their traditional competence became “subordinate and devalued” (Soh 2013: n.p.). The ideological processes involved in this disempowerment are the focus of the next section.

## 5 Recalibrating capital, transforming habitus

For a complete recalibration of linguistic capital, where Mandarin became the mother tongue of Chinese Singaporeans, it was essential that Mandarin become the language of the home. However, LKY (1979) argued it was not possible to legislate language practices in private spaces as “administrative action cannot reach the home” (1979: n.p.). He relied on the coupled nature of fields and on the heteronomous poles of the language field to infiltrate the home. In his language memoirs, he reflects: “I could influence the environment – by making

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<sup>5</sup> There have been no similar nation-wide campaigns for Tamil or Malay. The SMC is also the longest running, continuing today with its own website and Facebook page.

sure that at prime time over the radio and on TV, in schools, in army camps and at government counters, people hear and speak Mandarin. Through social pressure, I hoped to get Mandarin spoken in the shops, in the buses, in the cinemas and the hawker centres” (Lee 2012: 150–151). Front desk staff at government departments, hospitals and clinics were required to use Mandarin only. Government-sponsored language lessons appeared on radio and television, in the daily newspapers, and through a toll-free telephone hotline; the SCCC also established a Mandarin language centre. The government placed a ban on all dialect programs, movies, and commercials on radio, television and in cinemas. A “pass” in Mandarin oral proficiency became a requirement for employment and promotion in many government sectors and taxi companies. LKY himself learned Mandarin and switched from using dialects to Mandarin in his political campaigning.<sup>6</sup> As we will discuss, the government even attempted to legislate how parents named their children.

The government also used the SMC to shape the habitus of the linguistic community of practice in ways that would encourage the use of Mandarin, drawing on ideologies valued within the Chinese community (educational attainment, filial piety, sacrifice, etc.). For example, the education argument presented a child’s academic success as being contingent on the use of Mandarin at home, suggesting that dialects impeded the acquisition of educational capital: “Dialect will hinder the learning of the child” warned LKY; and, “To speak dialect with your child is to ruin his future” (LKY 1980, cited in Tan, 1980, p. 9). The argument for community integration focused on one-ethnic/one-language discourse: “Strictly speaking, there is no common mother tongue as such among the Chinese in Singapore [...] Therein lies the importance and justification of the SMC” (Fong 1983). Using the capital of the wider political/national field, the government’s discourse presented language shift as a pragmatic choice (Bokhorst-Heng 1999) between two dichotic and contrasting options, Mandarin and dialect:

- Mandarin is inherently holistic and embodies capital associated with literacy; dialects are fractured languages: “The spoken and written form of Mandarin are in unison and do not create problems, unlike dialects” (Goh Chok Tong, quoted in “Speaking more Mandarin” [1981]).
- Dialects have low economic, cultural and social capital: “Dialects have no economic value in Singapore. Their culture value is also very low” (LKY 1980, cited in Bokhorst-Heng 1999: 251). “In Mandarin, the swear words are

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<sup>6</sup> Early in his political career, LKY had learned Hokkien to reach the electorate; his last speech in Hokkien was in 1979 (Lee 2012: 149).

less common as the language is supposed to be for the refined people” (Rahim Ishak 1980, cited in Bokhorst-Heng 1999: 250).

- Dialects have no capital regarding national or personal identity: “Those who persisted in believing that dialects were of value, argued that giving up dialects was to “forget one’s origins”. I felt this was a very serious charge and not founded on reason. As citizens born in Singapore, their “origin” was Singapore. To me, to “forget one’s origin” is not to know one’s own heritage and language, something entirely different from not knowing dialects.” (Lee 2012: 159).

May (2011: 148–149) makes the point that language shift is most often the result of a complex array of wider social forces that “valorize majority languages and actively stigmatize minority languages” to the point where speakers “internalize the associated negative attitudes towards these languages” – *misrecognition* in Bourdieusian terms (Bourdieu 1991). By saturating the sociolinguistic and socio-political environments with pro-Mandarin (and anti-dialect) discourse, the government provided the discursive framework within which to shape language ideology and debate language choices, thus rationalizing and normalizing the shift away from dialects and towards Mandarin.

At one level, through misrecognition, Singaporeans endorsed the need to shift from dialects to Mandarin. The validity of the game – played out through the quadrilingual education policy – was not questioned, and citizens enacted the individual ‘sacrifice’ (see below) required for their children’s and the national good; it made sense within the broader Confucian ethos that characterises Asian governance. Nevertheless, the role of dialects in society continues to be a contentious issue; many persist in believing that dialects are of value and dialect learning should be promoted.

## 6 Contestations and further recalibration

In spite of the media and public ban, there have been occasions when government leaders used dialects. The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis, changes in policy regarding the national savings program, details concerning the government’s “Pioneer Generation Package” (“Call for dialect-speaking volunteers” 2014) and even political campaigning have given cause for the use of dialects. However, such instances are explained as temporary and expediency-oriented, intended to overcome perceived communication barriers rather than a shift in stance.

Yet, scholars, some government officials speaking in private capacities, and individuals have continued to agitate for a space for dialects. For example, Dr. Eddie Kuo from the Nanyang Technological University argued that, because of Mandarin's secure position within Singaporean society and homes, the government should reintroduce dialects on television for the sake of senior citizens (Lee 2003). Such suggestions by academics were sharply rejected by LKY in his language memoirs: "It would be stupid for any Singapore agency or NTU to advocate the learning of dialects, which must be at the expense of English and Mandarin" (2012: 167). Yet, Ngiam Tong Dow (2004), a key figure in Singapore's early government, recognized the conflicts in a speech at the National University of Singapore:

There may be compelling reasons for stopping Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese programmes over the airwaves. One reason given was that we wanted our children of Chinese descent to concentrate only on learning Mandarin, and not have their young minds confused with the various dialects spoken at home. Whether this hypothesis is true or not, we do not know for sure. But we do know that those grandparents who spoke only dialects and not Mandarin were deprived of one of their few sources of news and entertainment. As less and less Chinese dialect was spoken at home, the communication gap between the young and old has widened. The transmission of cultural values from generation to generation has diminished (Ngiam Tong Dow 2004: 5–6).

In his comments, Ngiam draws on the very same arguments used to promote Mandarin, noting the capital associated with communication, cultural identity, ethnic unity, and cultural values. Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng was more direct in advocating for dialects: "I just think it's a waste if we don't make some effort to preserve dialects. They are a big part of Chinese culture, so to understand our own culture and roots and to promote it to other racial groups, you have to bring in dialects" (Lin 2008). Others have argued dialects may even facilitate the learning of Mandarin and thus support, rather than challenge, the bilingual policy (Lin 2008; Zhou 2013). Some dialect proponents point to the language-as-resource (Ruiz 1984) argument, citing the economic benefits of dialects when doing business in China.

The promotion of dialects within the cultural field has also been active. An anthology of Singaporean Chinese dialect nursery rhymes has been compiled featuring five different dialects (Ting 2014). Beyond nostalgia, this anthology is important in that nursery rhymes comprise an integral part of early child education and formation of cultural identity (Kline 1998). Some public schools have introduced aspects of Chinese culture through dialects in their elective and enrichment modules, such as a "Pop song culture" module at Dunman High School that included dialect pop songs of the 1970s and 1980s and dialect-based culinary modules (Lin 2008). Clan associations and community centres are

offering dialect classes where once they offered Mandarin (Lim 2016; Oon 2009). Students at the National University of Singapore have uploaded Teochew tutorial videos on YouTube as part of their volunteer training in working with seniors (Lai 2013). A community centre and primary school have partnered to provide “learn-a-dialect” sessions in which seniors teach Hokkien and Cantonese to students to “bridge the communication gap and strengthen inter-generation bonding” (Yeo 2007). A recent local production by Thomas Lim, *Grandmother Tongue*, featuring a Teochew-speaking grandmother and her Western-education grandson who is more fluent in English and Mandarin than Teochew, resonated with many Singaporeans (Ong 2016). Common discourses surrounding these activities express a desire to curb local language endangerment (“we don’t want this language to be lost”) and to develop a sense of culture rootedness through language (“continue the legacy”; dialects are “an important part of our heritage”; dialects help us “understand our culture and roots”).

Significantly these efforts have not sought to challenge the value and structure of the nation’s language policy. Instead they operate within the broader quadrilingual policy and the relative positioning of dialects within the habitus and capital of the language policy field. For example, while Dunman High School introduced dialect-based modules, the vice-principal was also “cautious about departing from the long-time emphasis on bilingualism” (Lin 2008: 1). And clan chairman Goh Nam Siang made clear that “Dialect classes offered by the clans can never be a substitute for Mandarin as it is taught in schools, but are meant to complement that foundation” (cited in Oon 2009: 25). Such statements signal critical awareness of how “language interacts with and reflects the field’s wider social arrangements” and “what can be realistically expected to achieve” (Lo Bianco 2010: 38). There is a tacit understanding of the rules of the game. Ironically, these arguments are possible in part *because* of the success of the SMC; with Mandarin hegemony firmly established, the destabilizing threat of dialects is diminished, and space emerges for the development of ground-up polycentricity.

To examine the complex recalibration of capital within the language policy field more closely, we focus on two stories: attempts to eliminate dialects in the field of mass media and the government’s policy with respect to dialects and personal names in the socio-cultural field.

## 6.1 Dialects and mass media

As part of the 1979 SMC campaign, the government eliminated, or dubbed in Mandarin, all dialect television programs, movies and radio. While there had

been general support for the promotion of Mandarin, public response to the media policy came “thick and fast – and is overwhelmingly against the exercise”, ranging from “dismay and sadness to anger and outrage” (Leong 1979: 8). When the last remaining dialect program, “The Brothers”, was dubbed in 1981, two out of three Chinese felt that dialect programming should not be dropped completely (“Two in Three” 1981). Amongst many Chinese Singaporeans – Mandarin and dialect-speaking alike – dialect programming held greater cultural authenticity and entertainment value. Others argued the policy disproportionately and wrongly deprived older dialect-speaking Singaporeans.

The government remained firm. Ow Chin Hock (then Parliamentary Secretary, Culture) said, “The government is determined to push ahead relentlessly its effort to dub more dialect films or television serials in Mandarin despite public opposition [...]. There is no way we will change the policy [...] we will definitely not compromise” (cited in Wong 1979: 1). The government clearly valued mass media for its direct access into the home, the ultimate SMC target: “He [Ow] explained that underlying the campaign to promote Mandarin and phase out dialects was the need to create the correct language home environment” (Wong 1979: 1). Given the public’s opposition to the government’s media policy, it is a great irony that the official narrative and habitus invoked notions of sacrifice, which implies something given up, rather than something taken away:

At first, many, especially older folks, were unhappy that SBC was phasing out dialect programmes on television. Now, Singaporeans have accepted it [...] I recognise what a sacrifice the older generation of dialect speaking Chinese have made, for us to achieve this transformation. I thank them for making this sacrifice, and co-operating in this effort to change the spoken language of the whole community. Their children will be grateful for what they have done. (Lee 1988: n.p.)

A few decades later, their children seem to have a different idea. An online petition developed by university students Jeraldine Phneah and Mah Poh Ee (2014) calling for the reintroduction of dialects on local television and radio programming gathered 1,700 signatures. There have been continued requests to relax Customs regulations to allow imports of dialect-language films and music (e.g. Heng 2006), and screenings of undubbed dialect films in cinemas. Locally produced films featuring dialect-speaking personalities have been overwhelmingly popular. 大世界 [It's a great, great world] (2011) took in over S\$2 million with over 250,000 viewers. (Ironically, when it was subsequently aired on TV, the dialect voices were dubbed.) A musical comedy film (2007) titled 881 took in over S\$3 million, and its soundtrack featuring Hokkien and Teochew songs was the first local film soundtrack to hit platinum in Singapore

(Foo 2008). With Singapore's recent foreign talent policy attracting immigrants from dialect-speaking regions, such demands will continue (Wee and Bokhorst-Heng 2005).<sup>7</sup>

In 1997, Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo announced that more dialect programs would be allowed on cable television channels, although not on local free channels ("More Cantonese" 1997). However, if we assume that those in Mandarin- and English-speaking middle and upper-class homes had greater access to cable television, then we can surmise that allowing dialect programming on cable television presented less of a threat to the bilingual policy than did programming on local television in low SES homes.<sup>8</sup> There is also irony in that Korean and Japanese programming have dual language options rather than dubbing— it thus seems "illogical and unfair not to offer the same option for views of Hong Kong and Taiwanese shows, to watch these shows in their original languages, which are still the true mother tongues for many Singaporeans" (Zhou 2013).

We thus see an on-going tension between the field of power and the cultural field – both defined by capital associated with communitarianism, cultural rootedness, identity and values, but with different understandings of how this capital plays out in the field of language policy and in the relationship between the fields. The habitus within the field of power requires a solid commitment to the one-ethnic/one-language discourse, and thus cannot create space for dialects. It presents the capital associated with language as immutable, and as inextricably linked to its power. However, those in the social field implicitly argue that the use of dialects in the cultural field can be contained within that field and does not threaten the habitus of the field of power.

## 6.2 Dialects and personal names

In 1980, the Ministry of Education (MOE) required all students to register in school by their Hanyu Pinyin names "in a MOE move to take the Speak Mandarin drive one step further" (Tan 1980: 1). By standardising Chinese names, it would be "impossible to tell which dialect group a pupil belongs to by simply looking at his name" (Tan 1980: 1). Chinese names had always been

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<sup>7</sup> The 2001 Census data (similar data was not included in the 2010 census) indicated 16.7% of new families resident in Singapore used dialect as their dominant home language. Almost one-quarter of the Cantonese population aged 25–39 was born outside Singapore; dialect was the predominant home language for 36% of the Cantonese community (Lee 2002).

<sup>8</sup> The same would hold true today with access to broadband television and internet.

transliterated according to dialect pronunciation. But Hanyu Pinyin followed the Mandarin pronunciation, resulting in children having different surnames from their parents. The government even urged (but did not legislate) parents to register their new-born children in Hanyu Pinyin. Recall LKY's (2012) earlier comment that, "As citizens born in Singapore, their 'origin' was Singapore" in which dialects had no place. By attempting to change children's last names from dialect to Mandarin, the recommendation in essence erased and redefined their "origin" (Bokhorst-Heng and Wee 2007). Few parents fully complied: in 1987, only 12% of all Chinese babies born January to June were registered with full pinyinised names (Lee 2012). The explanation provided by the Straits Times editor suggests that personal and ancestral identity lies outside of the government's reach: "After all, most parents would want their surnames and their offspring's to be instantly recognisable as one and the same, as an outward mark of their blood bond [...]. There is also the desire to preserve symbolic links with their dialect groups and the provinces and villages of their forefathers in China" ("Pinyin and pragmatism" 1991). Unlike the arguments for using Mandarin at home to build up linguistic and educational capital, which parents accepted, there was no such basis for the policy on name change. In fact, as Wee (2011) argues, to not have dialect names was in effect cutting your ancestral ties, and thus going against the Confucian ideals of showing respect to elders and ancestors. There was no perceived capital advantage and the attempt to create one worked against existing habitus. The policy was discontinued in 1992.

## 7 Discussion and conclusion

A Bourdieusian perspective emphasizes a *relational* analysis, seeing all social phenomena in relation to their location in a given field and in relation to others in the field (Rawolle and Lingard 2013). While more could be said about the multiple languages of Singapore, including changes in national policies for Malay and the relationship of English and Mandarin, our analysis focuses on Chinese language shift in Singapore, the SMC, and continuing contestation over the place of dialects in society; it illustrates the way that habitus, capital and fields can be reproduced, recalibrated and shifted because of the legitimization entailed in symbolic violence. Further, the analysis shows that tension and conflict come at the points where different fields (e.g. media field, socio-cultural field) bump against each other with different dispositions (habitus) and different configurations of capital within them.

There are three essential components to Bourdieu's framework (Jenkins 2002; Swartz 1997): the relationship of the field of language policy in relation

to the field of power (and, following Savage and Silva (2013), its relationships with other fields); the specific forms of capital within the field and their distribution; and the habitus(es) of the agents within the field and their strategies. These three help us understand the shifts in language policy and practice in Singapore with respect to the Chinese community. This analysis allows us to see how the linguistic field is organised according to the forms of capital associated with the different positions within the field: the quadrilingual policy operating within the national agenda; structured with English (economic capital; pragmatism) vs the three mother tongue languages (cultural capital, social capital). At the same time, the policy positions other languages (including Chinese dialects) within the linguistic field as external to the national agenda, and attempts to exclude some from the field of play through deliberate efforts to redefine the habitus within which speakers of the various languages and dialects make their decisions about what languages to use and in what contexts. The government thus orchestrates capital of specific languages to valorize the official languages while stigmatizing others.

We see the relationship between “language” and “the national agenda” as the dominant feature of the autonomous pole within the linguistic field. The quadrilingual education policy, comprised of the four exonormative official languages, is the primary expression of that relationship. Its position within the field is firmly positioned by the national and global strategies of the government. Heteronomous poles are those areas most affected by the habitus and push from other fields. These might be differently influenced with a field, and differently influenced by different fields. Dialects – the only Chinese languages that could be considered indigenous to Chinese Singaporean society – operate near the heteronomous poles, closely intertwined with the fields of culture, identity, and the home. The government has tried to shape the habitus in these fields using pragmatic discourses that valorized the position of the quadrilingual languages. To some degree, they succeeded – Chinese Singaporeans largely accepted that the capital associated with their dialects would not translate into the educational, economic or political capital necessary for their children’s future success. However, where capital of social networks, of identity, and of Confucian filial piety had greater currency, there was greater resistance against the total elimination of dialects, as we saw in the instances of family names and of cultural media. The discourses of resistance, however, were integrative in intent. By drawing on the same principles embedded in the habitus of the quadrilingual policy, they demonstrated they are playing by the rules of the game – *illusio*.

But perhaps the greatest contribution of Bourdieu’s field analysis with respect to the position of dialects within Singapore’s language policy is the tension

between forces of competition and integration: “The most significant property of the field concept is that it simultaneously offers a theory of contestation and dispute – as various agents compete within the field – but at the same time it provides a theory of social integration as the contestants become embroiled in the shared game itself, and learn its stakes, twists and nuances” (Savage and Silva 2013: 119). In Singapore, various agents compete to structure the field: government leaders who have determined that the quadrilingual policy is most advantageous to their own political pursuits as well as to the overall development of the national agenda; dialect-speaking Singaporeans who have been marginalized in that national agenda; younger Chinese Singaporeans looking to connect with their past and redefine their ethnicity, to name just a few. Though contesting the outcome, all are operating with a “feel for the game”. There is a tacit acceptance of the rules, a shared passion for the nation, and an acceptance that language is a necessary, valued expression of the nation. Thus, the story of language shift is about resistance and about social integration – about how and where dialects can be part of the story within the primary narrative of nation building.

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