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Language choice and religious identities in three Singaporean madrasahs

Abstract: This article is a comparative study of language choice and religious identities of three Singapore weekend madrasahs. The article reveals how language choice or the medium of instruction, be it Arabic, Malay or English, may directly influence or is intricately connected to religious identities as manifested in an array of classroom semiotics and pedagogical practices. The methodology used includes ethnographic research methods ranging from field notes, participant observations and audio and video tapes to interviews with pupils, teachers and parents.

Keywords: religion, identity, Singapore, language choice, English

1 Language choice and religious identities

The intimate relationship of language and identity has intrigued scholars for almost half a century. Correlations between linguistic variability and social categories such as ethnicity, class and gender has been documented in both monolingual and multilingual communities, for example, Labov (1966, 1972). There are also the well-known volumes charting the variable relationships between language and social identities by Gumperz (1982) and another later, classic volume by Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985). However, language is not a monolithic entity and hence choice between languages becomes important, not least because each and every language carries the particularities of its socio-cultural and historical contexts. Each language cuts markers on the landscapes, maps out the cognitive terrain and provides the thought pathways whereby one may habitually traverse. Hence, the impact and implications of language choice has been examined in various domains such as in the market place (Connell 2009), in nation building (Chua 2010), in the classroom (MacRuairc 2011), in the workplace (Nair-Venugopal 2000) as well as in the online community (Warschauer et al.

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2006). Indeed, scholars such as Joseph (2004) view language and identity as inseparable.

Where identity is concerned, there are many contributory factors to its formation, such as ethnicity, gender, social class and language. Of these, language is perhaps the most salient because using a language which is not comprehensible to others will immediately emphasize the concept of difference of "us" and "the other", in brief, keeping people either "in" or "out". So too, to project identities such as ethnicity, sexuality, occupation, political allegiance, education and religion, it is invariably language which is called upon to do the task. Hence language is the key factor which defines, erects and maintains (or eradicates) social boundaries that exclude those who believe and behave differently. Language choice thus becomes a veritable means of distinguishing the "we" from the "them".

As a great number of people in the world are bilingual or multilingual, they have in their daily lives to choose which language to use, with whom and in which situation. Choice often depends on perceived advantages; for example, a speaker, institution or country may choose a particular language because it believes that that language serves its goals best or would put them in an advantageous position either within a group or a wider social context. Content also influences language choice as multilinguals often feel that one language is likely to be better suited to the expression of certain emotions, even if that language may not be their dominant language. In my data, certain languages are perceived as "soft" or better able to express emotions and feelings, such as Malay; while others are perceived as "hard" or better able to express concepts and ideas, such as English. Issues of practicality are also involved in language choice because effective communication is only possible if participants share the same language. There is, for instance, a common taboo against the choice of a language which might exclude one or more members of a group from discussion, even if the topic is of relevance to the person concerned (Myers-Scotton, 1993). Of course, there are occasions when this norm is flouted as when the speaker might perceive a strategic purpose, for example, to feign ignorance or to cut short an unwelcomed dialogue, in the use of a language with which he is less than familiar.

Language choice is often not as "clean" as is commonly supposed as bilinguals and multilinguals are able to switch from one language to another with ease, and often in mid-sentences. For example, Bruneian youths may choose Malay in one context, English in another and mix the two languages with or without slang or code-mixing as a means of projecting diverse parameters such as race, culture, gender and language (Saxena 2007). So too, influenced by Rampton's (1995) study on language crossings, Vaish and Roslan (2011) found that

Malay and Chinese pre-teens are able to "cross-over" racial boundaries using different languages to perform and display identity.

Similarly, identity is not as clear-cut as it is often made out to be. In the social sciences, identity is used as an umbrella term to describe a person's expression of their individuality or affiliation to a group. Some identities are individual while others are more expressive of social or group membership. They are not mutually exclusive and different identities may, at times be more salient (Fishman 1989). Poststructuralist approaches to identity frames it as socially constructed, a self-conscious ongoing narrative which is projected in dress, bodily movements, actions and languages. This is supported by the fact that mass culture and mass migration in the global age has highlighted the ability of individuals to move in and out of identity categories by varying their acts in response to demands and needs within particular moments of identification (Omoniyi and White 2006). Indeed, people and organizations possess multiple identities on the basis of the multiple roles they are capable of fulfilling or representing in the multifarious socio-cultural relationships in which they participate (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985).

What is important to note is that all these identities are facilitated by language choice and that of all these various identities, religious identity may be said to be the most salient as it has a firm grip on the human psyche, death being the "master emotion" (Chew 2011). In the course of my research, I had the opportunity to visit many different weekend madrasahs in Singapore, all consciously or unconsciously using language to help project their varying religious identities. My objective was to observe how the diverse ideoscapes in the three madrasahs interacted and sometimes clashed in local understandings of the types of knowledge and identities that are deemed suitable (or "authentic") for the younger generation to appropriate. As each ideoscape is discussed, the "other" is inevitably invoked.

2 The social-cultural context

Singapore has a resident population of five million cohabiting on just 680 square kilometers of land. Part of newly-independent Malaya from 1957 (which became Malaysia in 1963 upon the incorporation of the states of Sabah and Sarawak), it became an independent republic in 1965. The main ethnic groups are Chinese (74.1%), Malay (13.4%) and Indian (9.2%) (Singapore Census of Population 2010) and the official languages are English, which is also the medium of education, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, with many other languages, especially Chinese and Indian ones, being spoken in the home. Freedom of religion is guaranteed in the

constitution and there is no state religion. Chinese tend to practise Buddhism and/or Confucianism and other traditional Chinese religions and/or Christianity, and the various Indian groups Hinduism or Islam or Christianity or Sikhism, but the Malays, while not legally barred from following other religions, are overwhelmingly Muslim.

Just over a quarter of century ago, most social scientists and many theologians had predicted the secularization of society and pronounced the death of God (Soutar 2010). However, religion appears to have "re-emerged" as a potent force world-wide in the past decade, and this is also noticeable in Singapore (cf. Lai 2009). One is likely to assume that in the competitive, lean, city state of Singapore with a relatively high per capita gross domestic product, that the religious aspiration would be secondary to the material one. But such a presupposition is unwarranted because religion is an essential ingredient in the lives of many Singaporeans. For example, the well-known Inter-religious Council (IRO) is an officially recognized and supported non-governmental organization (NGO) as well as an active one which promotes activities such as the annual celebration of World Religion Day whereby representatives from the ten religions of Singapore come together to commemorate a day of diversity and tolerance in religious beliefs. In addition, for the Sikhs, Malays and Parsis of Singapore, religion is not just a source of spiritual, social and cultural nourishment but also a definition of their identity. For the Chinese, Indians and Malays, it is also a major part of their cultural life, as seen in their commemoration of various religious festivals, which are also public holidays.

In addition, there is intra-religious diversity. Chinese traditional religion, for one, is extremely difficult to characterize not least because of its eclecticism. Under its wide umbrella, one may discern the Confucianists (and their various orders), the Shenists and the Taoists, each with sects having their own canonical traditions, such as the *Tuapekong* and the Tien Fei (Tong 2002). The diversity of Buddhist rituals and canonical beliefs are also evidenced in denominational categories such as Mahayana, Theravada and Zen. Where Hinduism is concerned, its diversity may be seen in the many temples which vary not just in architectural design but also in separate priesthoods and segregated patronage. As for Christians, they are divided among the Catholic Church and a great variety of other Christian denominations including for example, Baptists, Brethrens, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans and Methodists.

Muslims too are divided into various schools such as the Sufi, the Sunni and the Sh'iah and each in turn also has its own various distinctive schools. For example, the four schools of *fiqh* 'religious law' within the Sunni branch are the Shāfiʿī, the Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali. Such intra-religious diversity is often unacknowledged. A common perception is that the Malay Muslim community is a "homoge-

nous" one, an observation promoted by the fact the Malays in Singapore, unlike those in Malaysia and Indonesia, are a cultural minority. The Islamic notion of *ummah* 'church' as a universal community who voluntarily profess the faith also contributes to this perception. In reality, however, the *ummah* has been fragmented over many centuries into denominations, parties, and movements, some of which deny the status of true believer to their competitors. While 90% of Muslims in Singapore belong to the Shāfiʿī School of Law of the Sunni Islamic sect, no single voice prevail, as will be evident in our study of the weekend madrasahs (Saeed 2009). Their members are at best a mosaic and their religious practices are as wide as the many sub-ethnicities in the Malay community. There are, for example, the traditionalists vs. the reformists, the fundamentalist vs. the moderates and the English-educated vs. the Malay educated. This mosaic includes Muslims who are practicing and devout, as well as a large number whose relationship with the Muslim Faith is largely nominal.

Diversity within each religious group goes even further than suggested above, for religious adherents of most faiths also display evidence of infusion of beliefs and practices of local traditions, e.g., animistic beliefs, or are influenced by religious practices of other world religions.

This article takes as its focal site the educational activities of weekend madrasahs in Singapore. Where Muslim education in general is concerned, researchers in these areas have produced rich accounts of elementary Islamic education using a wide range of methods such as interviews, questionnaires, participant observations, archival research, as well as fine-grained analysis of videos (Boyle 2004; Moore 2008). In Singapore itself, there has also been a recent spate of publications on madrasah education in Singapore, for example Noor and Lai (2006), Alatas (2006), Saeed (2009) and Saeda (2010). However, very little has been written about part-time or weekend madrasahs even though they are attended by at least 40% of young people aged 5 to 24 (MUIS 2007: 51). Again, while religion is a well-studied field, the interaction between language choice and religious identity is an area relatively little explored to date.

Every madrasah has its own history, objectives and orientations. Each weekend madrasah organizes its curriculum differently, chooses its own textbooks and is said to be fiercely independent. They have their own guidelines as to what it means to be a member of good standing (Muklis 2006). These weekend schools take place outside school hours, usually on a Saturday or Sunday for a few hours each week. A Muslim child would attend such a school for an average of two to four hours per week, and for an average of six years (Chee 2006). These weekend madrasahs are popular with parents keen to equip their children with religious values. Most of the parents interviewed in my study cited madrasah culture as offering a "safe" environment in which their children may be

insulated from the influence of negative social values associated with drug abuse, sexual permissiveness, youth gangsterism and consumerism, in the face of rapid globalization.

This study outlines the relationship between language choice and religious identity of three weekend madrasahs which may be said to range from "traditional" to "moderate" to "liberal" as popularly perceived, referred to as WM1, WM2 and WM3, respectively in this article. The term "language choice" is used here to refer to language policy or usage, in brief the social-cultural politics associated with the language of instruction. In our study, WM1 is distinguished by the use of Arabic as a medium of instruction, WM2 by Malay and WM3 by English. This article also seeks to discover the relationship between language choice and religious identity as manifested in classroom semiotics and pedagogical practice. Here, "classroom semiotics" is defined broadly as an approach that seeks to interpret messages in terms of their signs of patterns of symbolism; and the relationship among these signs. It includes guidelines for gender roles and teacher hiring. As for "pedagogical practices", they are "patterned social acts" (Street 2005) performed by the teacher and child and often inspired by instructional materials (Pike 2006).

The methodology used in this research includes field notes, participant observation, instructional materials, audio and video tapes and interviews with teachers, parents and pupils. This article is part of a wider three-year ethnographic, discourse-analytic research project which includes tape-recorded and/or videoed classroom observations, individual and focused-interviews, and participant observation at home and school. Fieldwork for this study took place between December 2008 and January 2010. Throughout the research period, I consciously strove not to be seen as a researcher-outsider but someone well-plugged into their culture. Thus, I sat, ate and went on excursions with many in the Malay-Muslim community – and we achieved a certain intimacy which felt like friendship. I found the Islamic community engaging, imaginative, informative and refreshingly uninhibited.

3 The Arabic language and religious identity – traditional mosque (WM 1)

WM1 is affiliated to a Muslim Association founded in the early 20th century, which views child education as an activity of supreme importance. Their children's classes are held in the main prayer hall of their affiliated mosques on Saturday and Sunday mornings. As such, children are educated in a sacred and religious

place traditionally used for adult worship. One observes pupils approaching the mosque with a fair amount of reverence. The pupil enters the hall for his lesson with a respectful bow and recitation of a short prayer which he or she has memorized, before proceeding to join groups of other pupils seated in pre-designated sections, arranged according to age and ability, on the floor of the main hall of the mosque.

Arabic is the language of choice for the inculcation of an Islamic religious identity as it is the "authentic" language of the Prophet. The Quran is therefore "untranslatable" and should be best passed down in its pure essence. In keeping with the tradition of *tahfiz ul-Quran* from the days of the Prophet, the pedagogical emphasis in WM1 is liturgical literacy. Hence, 90% of curriculum time is dedicated to the goal of helping children recite the Quran in Arabic with a fair degree of accuracy. The best pupils are those who are able to take more Arabic-inflected pronunciation, stylized and restricted intonational contours, and marked voice quality to index the religious character of their faith. In brief, accuracy is prized over meaning and understanding, and loudness and clear articulation treasured as a mirror of sincere intentions (Hashim 1999).

As Arabic is not an official language of Singapore and neither is it of popular usage in the streets or in the home of pupils, the use of Quranic Arabic in the weekend class is an added cognitive load on the Muslim child since the average school-going pupil has already to learn two languages in his day school – English and one of the other official languages of Singapore designated as "mother tongues" but in practice often not the home language. Nevertheless, the possession of a sacred language is deemed likely to give the child the best spiritual foundation for later in life.

The groups of between 5 to 10 children are seated cross-legged on the floor, each attended to by their teacher who is engaging them in an activity of sorts. Several groups are practicing reading the Quran, all with varying proficiencies. Some children are seated by themselves individually memorizing prayers by themselves. In one group, a teacher reads a prayer line-by-line and the pupils recite after him. The children speak very softly when talking to the teacher and often the teacher has to ask them to "speak up". In another group, a lesson on "proper prostration posture" is going on with a group of boys. The teacher is seated with folded legs on the floor and holds a short stick which he uses to direct the boys under him to do what he wants them to do. Occasionally he would use the stick to gently reprimand or remind the child for not doing the exercise well. I also saw two long queues of pupils waiting to recite the verses which they had memorized in the previous week to their teacher. As each pupil recites face-to-face to the teacher, the teacher will correct the parts that have been wrong recited or pronounced. Finally there was a more "advanced" group of boys who were

listening to the teacher on his exposition of some pre-selected Quranic and/or Hadith verses.

It should be noted here that the teachers of this madrasah are imported from India and Indonesia as the Association is unable to find suitable male Singaporeans who are sufficiently proficient in Arabic and able to guide children and youth in their religious studies. As the imported (Indonesian) textbook was mainly in Arabic, the teacher had to spend a lot of time explaining the words, phrases and passage in Malay. Indeed despite the Arabic environment of WM1 there is often a resort to the use of Malay or Tamil, the mother tongue of the majority of the pupils, in order to aid comprehension. Pupils were passive and generally tongue-tied, Arabic being a foreign language.

Male and female pupils are strictly segregated. In WM1, a quarter section of the main hall is partitioned off by a high screen. Behind this screen sat a collection of female children intent on their own educational syllabus. While the boy's groups may number 5 to 10, the girls' groups were double the size – 10 to 20. This was because of the difficulty of finding volunteer female teachers. The part of the hall allotted to them was also much smaller than that of the boys. Hence, fewer girls attend such schools. The curriculum for the girls is also different from that of the boys. Their teachers are female and usually parent-volunteers, rather than the imported male religious professionals. The girls are totally covered in a loose white gown except for their face and hands. The *tudong* 'head covering' which they wear are also white, in line with their long gowns. Their teachers are also dressed in the same manner. Where the boys are concerned, they are crowned with a Muslim cap, attired in a flowing white upper shirt which falls over black trousers. The parent-volunteer teachers are also dressed in a similar fashion.

4 The Malay language and religious identity – HDB void deck (WM2)

WM2 was established two decades ago by an individual with a firm belief in child education. Together with a group of like-minded Muslim professionals, he raised funds to build a more "generic" madrasah in one of the new satellite towns of Singapore. The fees charged are half that of WM1, probably because the classes are twice as large and there are also no imported specialist Arabic teachers. Like WM1, it is opened on Saturdays and Sundays. Unlike WM1, the management of WM2 committee believes that the mother tongue of the children, in this case Malay, would do just as well in the inculcation of both an authentic Muslim iden-

tity as well as an "indigenous" Malay one simultaneously. WM2 is very comfortable with the use of Malay as medium of instruction not least because Malay has for centuries been used for the teaching of Islam. If Arabic is used, it is facilitated by the Jawi script, which consists of all the 29 letters of the Arabic alphabet together with five newly invented non-Arabic letters to suit its tongue. Unlike WM1, which is held in the main hall of the mosque, WM2 is held in the "void deck" (ground floor of a block of flats) of one of the ubiquitous HDB (Housing and Development Board) blocks, where 90% of Singaporeans live. Like WM1, its pupils come from the nearby surrounding areas – indeed some of them are neighbors, play in the same playground and go to the same school. Most of them will walk with their backpacks to the madrasah from their HDB apartments.

Unlike the imported Arabic-speaking teachers in WM1 who are men, the teachers of WM2 are women graduates from the full-time local madrasahs in Singapore. Although they do not have any teaching qualifications, they have the madrasah equivalent of the "O" levels, some knowledge of Arabic, and have gained much practical experience from the practical concerns of being with children. The use of Malay helps promote a generally relaxed atmosphere in the school, enabling most children to identify the madrasah as their "second home" and their teachers more as "substitute mothers" rather than as "stern" religious teachers. As a medium of instruction, Malay appears more able to generate a "familiar" and "informal" atmosphere in relation to the more "foreign" Arabic. English and Arabic too are heard at moments when appropriate. Arabic, for example, is used to indicate a switch to the strictly religious and Singlish is used for humor. The atmosphere here is informal relative to that of WM1, not least because Malay is the national language of Singapore as well as the mother tongue of the children. The less stringent discipline and more relaxed identities inculcated has also encouraged some of the more boisterous children, especially the boys, to talk among themselves while the teacher is conducting the lesson, something unheard of in the more formal identity generated by WM1.

The memorization of key verses and prayers of the Quran remain important but this takes up only 25% of curriculum time, compared to 90% in WM1. While compulsory prayers have to be learnt in Arabic, other *doas* 'prayers' are allowed to be learnt in Malay – a strategy which lightens the cognitive load. Nevertheless, in interactions, formulaic interjections in Arabic such as "*As-Salamu Alaykum*" [Peace be upon you], "*Alhamdulillah*" [Thanks be to God], "*Subhan Allah*" [Glory to God] and "*Astagh-firullah*" [May God forgive us] are often heard. A wider curricula range is possible here since less time is spent on the mastery of Arabic or *Iqra* 'Quranic reading'. Other subjects which the school is able to introduce include *aqidah* 'faith' and *fiqh* 'practice', *akhlaq* 'character and life skills' and *sirah* 'social' Islam and *tarikh* 'civilizational' Islam.

Unlike the ubiquitous disciplinary "stick" which accompanied the Arabic male teachers of WM1, WM2 female teachers identify themselves in our interviews as "substitute mothers", always nurturing, consoling and advisory. There have been efforts to hire male teachers but the salaries were deemed too low to be attractive to them. Unlike WM1 where boys and girls are separated by a wall and curtains, boys and girls are put into the same classrooms – but on either side of the wall. Hence, both sexes are able to follow the same curriculum and the same teacher. The uniform which the children wear is a brown loose tunic from neck to foot with a matching head covering for the girls. Boys are dressed in short brown top and brown long trousers and must come to school with a *songkok* 'hat'. The female teachers are attired in the traditional loose Muslim garment and *tudong*. Their clothes identify them with a more "colorful" disposition in contrast to the "all white" garments of WM1. Teachers here are allowed to dress in the color of their choice as long as it is not overtly patterned, distracting or "showy".

Pedagogical practice consisted mainly of teacher talk and work by the pupils in their seats. Mostly, pupils seem to be passively listening to the teacher, taking notes or attempting prescribed written exercises in their textbooks. Although advocated as an ideal, group work or genuine teacher-pupil discussion/interaction and for few between, probably because there was a lot to cover in the syllabus. The teacher acted as the knowledge-giver as well as the manager of all activities. She ran the religious class much like the Singapore day-school teacher replete with continuous assessments, tests and end-of-year examination. For example, there are report cards for parents to sign and prizes for top students as well as graduation certificates for those who have completed their education. Attendance records and other information on the child's background are kept. Like a typical Singapore classroom, the children sit on chairs in front of a desk facing the teacher unlike WM1, where the children are seated on the floor. Before the beginning of each lesson, there is a roll call (as to who is present or absent in class). Children who were absent the previous week would have to bring along a medical certificate or letter of explanation from a parent.

5 The English language religious identity – the mosque-madrasah (WM3)

WM3 is a weekend madrasah which runs the "Kids aL.I.V.E." and "Tweens aL.I.V.E." (Learning Islamic Values Everyday) programs for 5 to 8 years-olds and 9 to 12 year-olds respectively, under the management of the Islamic Religious

Council of Singapore (MUIS), which is funded by the Government of Singapore. The program began in 2004 and was designed by the Boston, MA-based Iqra International Education Foundation. Unlike WM1 where students are seated on the floor with their recitation manuals or in WM2 where copious seat work is evident, WM3 makes use of movable chairs and table which may be re-arranged in a variety of ways. Like WM2 the classrooms are also equipped with technologies such as the internet, video projector and a sound system which could be used by the teacher during the lesson, and indeed teachers are encouraged to use them. Unlike the more traditional mosque setting of WM1, children's classes are held mainly in what is known as mosque complexes – multi-functional buildings which are more than just places of worship. These are also educational institutions, spiritual centers, council chambers for the deliberation of community affairs, community service centers, secretariat offices, etc. While serving as a focal point for prayers, these buildings are also equipped with libraries, computer rooms, multipurpose hall and underground car parks. These complexes also conduct regular activities such as marriage counseling and exhibitions on drug abuse and of course, also house the weekend madrasahs.

Here, pupils may opt to attend the lesson in either English or Malay but in a survey conducted by MUIS, about two-thirds of their attendees preferred to learn Islamic tenets in English, as they find it "easier" to comprehend (MUIS 2007). Thus and paradoxically with the onslaught of globalization, the English language in Singapore has found itself in a situation where it has become a tool to teach key concepts and prayers found in Arabic. The use of English also enables the increasing numbers of English-speaking foreign and transnational children, such as Middle Easterners, Eastern Europeans and Pakistanis in the republic to be included in religious classes. Yet the use of English is not without its attendant difficulties. For one it is not merely the tongue of the colonial masters but one associated with Christianity (Goh 2009). Just as the historical replacement of Arabic by Malay required a mental shift initially, the English language also poses a challenge to delivering Islamic concepts "effectively", since language is never acultural or apolitical. In view of this, some parents continue to choose madrasahs, such as WM2, which teach in Malay; or madrasahs such as WM1, where Arabic is used. Hence, MUIS is only able to attract slightly less than half of the WM population (MUIS 2007). It should also be noted that the teacher was heard to use Malay at times to engender solidarity and signal a departure to the domestic domain (see Chew, forthcoming).

Perhaps in a deliberate contrast to WM1, which generally uses rote and recitation and is perceived to be at odds with current emphasis on creativity and critical learning, or WM2, which is generally perceived to be too structured and school-based, WM3 strives to be "holistic" and "critical", encouraging pupils to

understand whole passages of writing before learning key quotations for recita-
tion. Textbooks come in an attractive and colorful "magazine" format and con-
tain within them generous visuals unlike the more prosaic ones found in WM1
and WM2. They are literally page-turners, created to expose pupils to problem-
solving skills through role play, case studies, project work, quizzes and other
hands-on activities devised to enhance their learning and discovery. There are
also self-reflective, self-appraisal sections entitled "my training log book" and
"novel" features such as "Parents' observation pages".

Unlike WM2 where each religious subject is taught discretely, the subjects
are now seen as supplementing and complementing other subjects. The Islamic
worldview of *iman* 'faith', *ilmu* 'knowledge' and *amal* 'action' is integrated and
stressed. So too, one observes the combination of *aquidah*, *fiqh* and a*khlaq* stud-
ies; and the combination of *sirah* and *hadith* studies to achieve more applied and
"unifying" results.

Similar toWM2, both sexes attend the same lesson by the same teacher and
are exposed to the same curriculum. Like WM2, they are also seated on separate
sides of the classroom except for the kindergarten classes. Where the semiotics of
dressing is concerned, boys and girls are attired differently. The girls are typically
in the loose Malay *baju kurung* or in jeans with long sleeved blouses. They all
wear the *tudong* or a scarf, which is observed to be not only shorter but also of
more varied hues and shapes than the monotone ones in WM1 and WM2. Some of
the *tudong* may be considered "fashionable". The boys are in trousers and a long
sleeved shirt, topped with a *songkok*. The teacher may also be dressed in a rela-
tively "modern" and youthful style – typically trousers or jeans topped with a
half- or long-sleeved blouse, unless they are elderly, in which case they may dress
a little more traditionally, like the teachers of WM2. Generous funding from MUIS
ensures a smaller teacher-pupil ration of 1:20, rather than the 1:35 that we see in
WM2. Teachers here are part-timers, most of whom are "trained" teachers, with
some certification in Islamic studies.

6 Conclusion

It has been said that language determines the categories by which we experi-
ence the world. In particular, the language used in the teaching of religion,
may be said to speak to the heart and makes itself heard by the heart. Hence,
language appears to inform the soul by programming the brain through myste-
rious harmonies that bring words and ideas together for each linguistic group.
The saliency of religious language as well as the language used in the teaching
of religion may be evidenced in the fact that such language is often among the

last to succumb to the evolutionary phenomena constituting language shift (Chew 2009).

There are many factors underpinning religious identities such as rituals or daily practices, the semiotics of dressing, gender practices, language choice, hierarchical structures, etc. most of which have been discussed briefly under our generic umbrella of "pedagogical practices" and "classroom semiotics". Of these, language choice is particularly salient as language is a living thing with built-in resources enabling it to reflect various identities. Each language appears to gather around itself certain favored practices which generate distinctive identities.

It has been mentioned that when we speak of identities, we are also simultaneously speaking of differences and "otherness". We have seen in our study how each language is collocated with a set of distinctive religious and pedagogical approaches. Our three weekend madrasahs are distinguished by their language choices – Arabic, Malay and English – in their efforts to impart what they believe to be the essential characteristics of Islam. The language choice in these three madrasahs may also be said to simultaneously represent social-cultural choices for the Shāfiʿī Muslims in Singapore and are also reflective of parents' ideological inclinations. In other words, parents who send their children to such schools, each with their distinctive educational and linguistic cultures are also choosing the accompanying identities which they hope their children will adopt. They are also signaling other salient identities which are beyond the scope of this paper, such as class, age, religious affiliations or social networks.

In our study, language seems to mirror a cline between religious traditionalism and modernization in only one school of Islam – the Shāfiʿī of the Sunni sect. WM1 is characterized by a serene and pious reverence uncommon in the busy crossroads that is Singapore. Its teaching methodology is reminiscent of a tradition that is at once classical, traditional and conservative. The choice of Arabic reveals WM1's belief in the unchanging "essence" of language. The mastery of Arabic through recitation of the holy verses would give its bearer the "original", "pure" and "undiluted" essence which is Islam. As Fishman (2006: 21, viii) observes: "The power of sanctified languages exerts a major conservative influence on the speed and direction of corpus planning and frequently serves as a counterweight to modernization emphases in the language planning area." In brief, there appears to be a socialization of pan-Arabic and Islamic identities in relation to the teaching of Arabic to these pupils. On the other hand, with its boisterous pupils and women teachers set on nurturing good Islamic moral values to balance what seem to be the secular temptations in the cityscape of Singapore, WM2 is reminiscent of the Singapore day school. The choice of Malay, the *de jure* national language of Singapore and *de facto* home language of its largest ethnic minority, the

predominantly Muslim Malays, enables the easy coupling of the religious and home domains (Chew 2011). Malay is also linked to the "plurality" and "animistic experimentation" of the Southeast Asian diaspora since it has historically been the lingua franca used for the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia (Reid 2011: 1). Hence, WM2 appears to inculcate a more cultural-religious identity rather than a personal-religious one. Then there is WM3 whose use of the *de facto* working language of Singapore, English, places it in the forefront of a globalized Islam eager to engage actively with all that is new, modern, creative and critical. In this respect, WM3 practices what is closest to secular schools, and appears the most "neutral", in the eyes of its citizenry. Funded by MUIS, it comes closest to what Tan (2010) has termed "civil religion". It appears to forefront a "progressive" transnational identity.

While we may for ease of referencing refer to the Arabic-speaking WM1 as possessing identities such as "conservative", to Malay-speaking WM2 identities as "moderate", and to English-speaking WM3 identifies as "liberal", these are in reality very simplified and relative terms. They have been used in this paper only to postulate a theoretical cline whereby many religious identities are known to exist, and yet may appear deceptively similar at a casual glance. Like other nations, Singapore is no stranger to mutating religious diversity, which is not the focus of this article, and many weekend madrasahs do possess pedagogical and semiotic preferences taken from various sects of Islam and also from other religions.

Another caveat is that language choices are less than clear-cut. While weekend madrasahs may have a favorite language of choice, they are often unable to maintain an ideal monolingualism in class. There is a significant amount of code-switching and code-mixing that occurs in the religious class. This is because children (and teachers) are inevitably influenced by the sounds of Singapore at large, in brief, a mixture of various languages and varieties heard in the streets each day.

Finally, identities are in reality more fluid than what has been suggested not least because it has always been the case for religious adherents to be able to re-orient and rethink their identities by acquiring the special words, intonation and rhythm patterns from the languages of religious instruction be they Arabic, Malay or English. Theoretical frameworks such as presented by Omoniyi and White (2006) have recognized multiple positioning, multiple selves and challenged binary identity oppositions such as "conservative" vs. "liberal", "black" vs. "white", and "traditional" vs. "modern", etc. It has also encouraged us to think more of "alignments" in relation to a set of social images or characteristics so that we may ultimately understand how the same person from one moment to another is able to project various "selves" as they deemed appropriate. Our research has shown

that some parents and children may try a gamut of weekend schools within the short space of a year, depending on a variety of factors such as the proximity of the school, peer-group pressure and fluctuating religious preferences. Regardless of such possibilities, there is no denying that language choice as exercised by religious institutions is also inevitably a choice of religious identities; and that parents who place their children in certain linguistic environments are also indicating not just their own identities but also the identities they wish their children to possess.

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