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The Linguistic Practices of Bilingual Singapore Malay Students: A Tale of Language Maintenance*

Norhaida Aman

Khairi is a 10-year old boy who comes from a bilingual English-Malay home. On one occasion, while he was interacting with a researcher who was looking at the language patterns of Singaporean students, this exchange took place:

Researcher : Speaking in Malay make you feel more Malay. Is that true?

Khairi : I'm already Malay...Doesn't mean that you speak Malay you feel Malay...I got the colour of Malay so I feel like Malay.

Researcher : So...So that means you...If that is the case, you don't depend on your language to make you feel like a Malay *lah*.

Khairi : Yup.

Why should it matter what language(s) one speaks? According to Edward Sapir, "language is a great force of socialization...and the mere fact of a common speech serves as a peculiar potent symbol of the social solidarity of those who speak the language."¹ Language has always played an important role in the formation and expression of identity. Language expresses the "way individuals situate themselves in relationship to others, the way they group themselves, the powers they claim for themselves and the powers they stipulate to others."² People use language to indicate social identity and social allegiances, that is, which groups they are members of and which groups they are not. Tajfel noted that social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached

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¹ Edward Sapir, "The Nature of Language," in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (University of California Press: California, 1985), p.15.

² Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.31

to that membership.”³ In addition, they use language to create and maintain role relationships between individuals and between groups.

If a person’s language choice is a reflection of his/her social identity and allegiances, the conversation between Khairil, the 10-year old Singapore boy and the Malay researcher seems to run contrary to this relationship between language and identity. What is the significance of language and identity? The answer is language maintenance. According to Holmes, one of the factors in ensuring language maintenance of an ethnic or minority language is when it is highly regarded in its community, i.e. when the language is seen as an important symbol of ethnic identity.⁴ I will share in this paper how Khairi is an exception rather than the norm. Findings of the Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore 2006 on language use, some of which is reported here, show that even though children in Singapore schools are reportedly increasingly using more English in-and-out of home, there is language maintenance in the Malay community. This paper will explore data on language use in four domains: home, friends, religion, and media and it will be demonstrated how language maintenance is strong among bilingual Malay students who also see Malay, their mother tongue, as a means of connecting with their cultural heritage. They seem to embody an old Malay adage—*bahasa menunjukkan bangsa* [one’s language is a reflection of one’s ethnic heritage].

The Linguistic Landscape in Singapore

A comparison between the 2000 and 2005 census reports show a rise in the use of English in the homes across all ethnic groups. Language shift occurs despite the bilingual educational policy of the small city-state, introduced in 1966, in which every child learns two languages in school—English, the official working language, and the child’s mother tongue (MT), which is usually based on the father’s ethnicity. In the words of the then minister for education, Tony Tan:

“Our policy of bilingualism that each child should learn English and his mother tongue, I regard as a fundamental feature of our education system. Children must learn English so that they will have a window to the knowledge, technology and expertise of the modern world. They must know their mother tongues to enable them to know what makes us what we are.”⁵

The 2005 census report shows an increase in the number of households that indicated they spoke English at home across all ethnic groups—an approximately 5 percent increase among the Chinese, Malays and Indians. Interestingly, in the Chinese homes, even though more are speaking English, the number of respondents who indicated they speak Mandarin has also increased by 2 percent in 2005; at the expense of dialects. The Malays continue to speak in their mother tongue—92 percent in 2000 and 87 percent in 2005. In Indian homes, English is the language used most frequently in 39 percent of homes (a three percent increase), while Tamil is the main

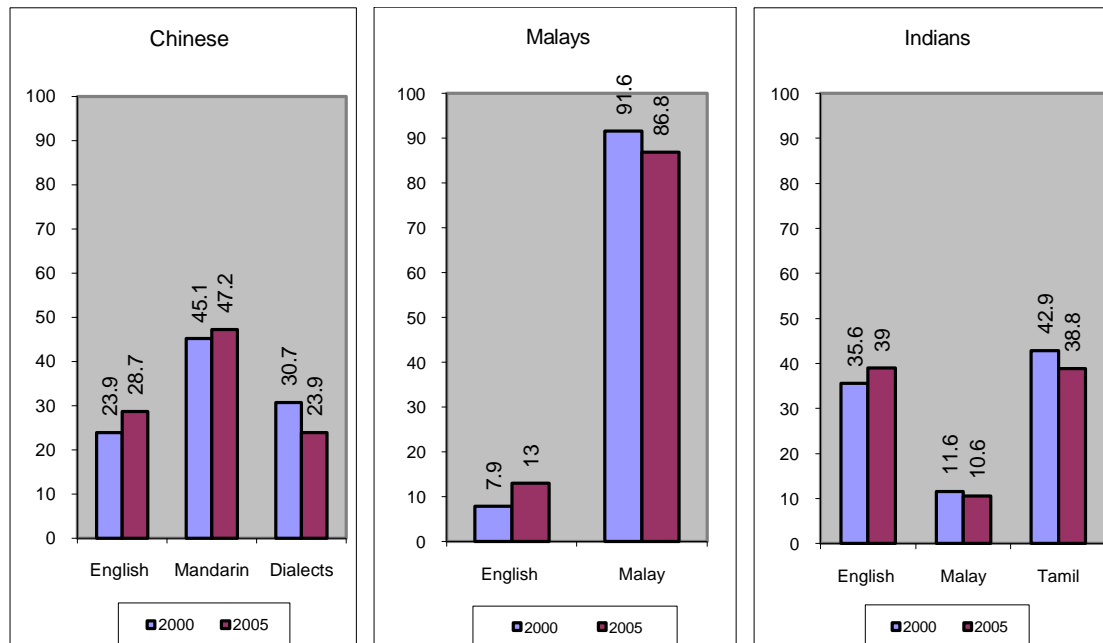
³ H. Tajfel, *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (London: Academic Press, 1978), p.63

⁴ J. Holmes, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics, 3rd Edition* (Longman, 2008), p.63.

⁵ Cited in A. Pakir, “Singapore,” in *Language Policies and Language Education: The Impact in East Asian Countries in the Next Decade*, eds. W.K. Ho and R.Y.L. Wong (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2000), p.261.

household language for 39 percent and Malay for 11 percent, with the remaining 11 percent speaking other Indian languages.

Table 1: Language Most Frequently Spoken At Home
(Resident Population Aged 5 Years and Over)



Source: 2005 Census of population

Singapore, like many other countries, is experiencing a language shift towards English and it is occurring rapidly across all ethnic groups. The Chinese and Indian communities are experiencing the shift most while the extent of the shift is lesser within the Malay group.⁶ Previous research has brought to light generational shifts in language patterns. Gupta & Siew,⁷ and Hvitfeldt & Poedjosoedarmo⁸ found that Mandarin is the preferred language among the older generation, a shift from dialects, and among the younger generation, English is becoming more dominant. Gupta and Siew noted that “in Singapore the shift has been very fast. This has resulted in there being no common language between grandparents and their grandchildren.”⁹ This shift is attributed to the effectiveness of the Speak Mandarin campaign in 1979 which discourages the use of dialects. According to Saravanan, the Malays are a more homo-

⁶ W. Li, V. Saravanan and L. H. J. Ng, “Language Shift in the Teochew Community in Singapore: A Family Domain Analysis,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 18 (1997): 364–384.

⁷ A. F. Gupta and P. Y. Siew, “Language Shift in a Singapore Family,” *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development* 16,4 (1995): 301–314.

⁸ C. Hvitfeldt and G. Poedjosoedarmo, “Language Use and Identity across Generations in Singapore,” in *Papers from the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society*, eds. S. L. Chellian and W. J. D. Reuse (Arizona State University, Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), pp. 183–200.

⁹ A. F. Gupta and P. Y. Siew, “Language Shift in a Singapore Family,” p.301–314.

geneous group and tend to continue maintaining the use of their MT in the home although there is some increased use of English during family activities.¹⁰ If English is the preferred language of the younger generation, Hvitfeldt and Poedjosoedarno argue that it may displace the mother tongues in more and more domains. Although the justification for the policy of mother tongue education within an English-based bilingual educational policy was for the MTs to serve as a 'cultural ballast', and that each ethnic community should maintain its MT in order to retain its cultural values, it is not surprising to find these young digital natives increasingly speaking to family members in English. Local newspapers also report that children in Singapore are increasingly coming from English-speaking homes.¹¹

Scholars like Saravanan¹² maintains that Tamil is increasingly only a classroom language while Bibi Jan Mohd Ayyub¹³ contends that the use of Malay is declining in frequency and quality as a result of the increasing use of English. At a seminar organised by the University of Malaysia, Terengganu in 1998, Bibi Jan was quoted as saying that "the absence of efforts to reinforce systematic use of the language has resulted in Malay families not using their mother tongue. This situation has posed a problem in the teaching and learning of the language." According to her, it is a worrying state with most Malay parents encouraging their children to speak English, resulting in almost 25 percent of Malay families in Singapore who are more at ease speaking in English than in their mother tongue. In his opening speech to a group of Malay language teachers at the Temasek lectures organised by the Singapore Malay Teachers Union (KGMS) on 18th November 2004, Hawazi Daipi, a Member of Parliament, shared that he understands the challenges faced by MT teachers in maintaining students' interest as more Malays speaking in English or code-switching in both Malay and English at home.

Even though the census data and these reports paint an unsettling picture of language shift, it is important to remember that census data is only able to tell us the language that is most frequently spoken at home. It does not provide a comprehensive picture of the linguistic choices speakers make in-and-out of homes, with different family members and friends, their varying degrees of bilingualism and their proficiency in the different languages they speak. Yet this information is extremely useful for educators, especially in designing appropriate language lessons for their students.

The Survey

The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore was designed and carried out to fill this gap—to investigate the complex linguistic choices made by bilingual speakers. The project involves two stages. The first is a quantitative survey administered face-to-face to 668 ten year old students in their homes—370 Chinese, 206 Malays and 92

¹⁰ V. Saravanan, "Bilingual Chinese, Malay, and Tamil Children's Language Choices in a Multi-lingual Society," in *Early Child Development and Care*, 152 (1999): 43–54.

¹¹ See "Change needed as more speak English at home," *The Straits Times*, October 12 2004; and "More Malays now speak English at home," *The Straits Times*, November 18 2005.

¹² V. Saravanan, "Language and Social Identity amongst Tamil-English Bilinguals in Singapore," in *Languages in Contact in a Multilingual Society: Implications for Language Learning and Teaching*, eds. Khoo, Kreher and Wong (Singapore: SAMEO, 1993), pp.135–154.

¹³ Bibi Jan M.A. "Language Issues in the Malay Community," in *Language, Society and Education in Singapore*, eds. S. Gopinathan, A. Pakir, W.K. Ho, and V. Saravanan (Singapore: Time Academic Press, 1994), pp. 205–230.

Indians. The second component, which is administered to a sub-sample of 12 students, is more qualitative and ethnographic, aimed to develop a nuanced picture of the patterns of language use, ideology and proficiency of the students. Over a period of about two weeks, data was collected through video-taped observations, participant observation, informal discussions, artefact collection, and through involving the student as researcher through journaling, activity logs, and audio-taping.

The random sample is stratified by ethnicity and socio-economic status (SES). Using factor analysis, the following four variables were used to determine each respondent's SES:

- Household income
- Housing type
- Parent's educational level
- Father's occupation

The rationale for this sampling is the well-documented link between socio-economic status and language use in Singapore, and the relationship between language and ethnicity.¹⁴ Participants were contacted with the assistance of the schools. The hour-long surveys were conducted in either English or the mother-tongue of the student, according to his/her preference.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on Malay students to look at the linguistic choices made by this particular group when they interact with individuals of similar ethnicity, across different age groups, their engagement with popular culture as well, the language with which they associate religion, and their level of proficiency in the languages they speak. The discussion will be framed around Fishman's domain analysis which underlies much of the research on bilingualism and language choice.¹⁵ Domains, according to Fishman, refer to a clustering of characteristic situations around a typical theme which structures the speakers' perception of the situation and their language choices. The following domains will be considered in this paper: home, friends, religion, and media/popular culture.

Dominant Home Language

To summarise some of the main patterns of language use in the lives of our 10-year-old Malay respondents, they were first grouped according to dominant home language/s (English only; both English and Malay; Malay only and Others) based on the information they provided.

¹⁴ See for example, W.D. Bokhorst-Heng, "Language and Imagining the Nation in Singapore" (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1998); B. H. Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995); J. Foley, et al., *English in New Cultural Contexts* (Singapore: Oxford University Press and SIM, 1998); W. Li, V. Saravanan, and L. H. J. Ng, "Language Shift in the Teochew Community in Singapore: A Family Domain Analysis," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 18 (1997): 364–384; and L. Wee, "Linguistic Instrumentalism in Singapore," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 24,3, (2003): 211–224.

¹⁵ J. A. Fishman, "Who Speaks What to Whom and When?" *Linguistique* 2 (1965): 67–88; and *The Sociology of Language: An Interdisciplinary Social Science Approach to Language in Society* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1972).

Table 2: Dominant Home Language

Dominant Home Language Use in Family (N=206)	%
English Only	0.5
English + Malay	81.0
Malay Only	16.1
Others	2.4

The table shows interesting data not captured by census data—bilingualism is prevalent in Singapore homes. Overall, 81 percent of the respondents indicated they speak both English and Malay at home. It is interesting to note that only 0.5 percent (equivalent to only 1 out of the 206 Malay respondents) said s/he spoke only English at home. Table 1 also reveals another interesting difference between our data and the census data. The proportion of respondents who indicated they come from English dominant homes in this study is significantly lower than that reported in the census.

A Pattern of Generational Shift in Families

To elicit information on the language use in the homes with different members of the family, the questions posed to respondents were built around either an emotive circumstance or a functional circumstance.

An example of an emotive question is:

- (a) *When you are angry about something and want to tell your mother about it, what language(s) would you use?*

And an example of a non-emotive question is:

- (b) *If you want to borrow something from your siblings, what language(s) would you use?*

The data reveals variations in patterns of language use in the home across different generations. In their interactions with their siblings at home, a total of 65 percent speak to siblings in English only and both English and MT and over 36 percent indicated they speak to their parents with some English. Of these, around 21.5 percent of the respondents indicated they would speak primarily in English with siblings and their parents, while only a mere 2.7 percent would have a conversation exclusively in English with their grandparents. The preponderance of speaking to siblings in (some) English breaks down when they speak with parents and especially grandparents.

Table 3: Language Use with Family Members

Language Use with Family Members	Siblings	Parents	Grandparents
English Only	22.1	21.2	2.7
English + ML	43.2	14.6	3.2
ML Only	42.2	71.3	91.8

About 92 percent of the respondents speak primarily in Malay with their grandparents, compared to 71 percent who would do so with their parents. In comparison, only 42 percent would engage in a conversation entirely in Malay with their siblings. Clearly the data shows some kind of generational shift - these respondents use more English (English only and English +Malay) with siblings than parents and their grandparents, and the mother tongue seems to be the language of choice with grandparents.

When the data on language use with family was analysed by SES (see table 4), it is found that there is a tendency to speak in Malay at home. Even those in the high SES group are equally likely to use English only & Malay only (compare 43 percent with 40 percent, respectively). For those in the mid/low SES groups, between 54–66 percent speak to family members in Malay only.

Table 4: Language Use with Parents and Siblings by SES

Language use with family	High SES	Mid SES	Low SES
English only	43	20	12
Malay only	40	54	66
English-Malay	15	24	18

Language Use with Friends

With regard to questions pertaining to talk with friends, the students were asked questions on language use with friends of the same (or different race), and this is what they told us. With friends of a different race, as per expectation, the respondents generally speak in English only. When speaking to friends of the same ethnicity, there is a tendency to use Malay:

Table 5: Language Use with Friends

Language use with friends	High SES	Mid SES	Low SES
English only	39.9	18.9	17.8
Malay only	40.6	52.5	52.2
English-Malay	19.5	28.6	30

The data in table 5 mirrors that of language use with family members. Around 52 percent of those from the middle and low SES speak to friends in Malay only, and around 80 percent of the Malay respondents speak (some) Malay with friends. Malay, it seems is the language of identity, the language of the home, the language with peers—it is consistently the language these Malay respondents indicated they would use when talking to friends in informal situations.

Norhaida et al. found that the physical context of the school environment seems to affect the linguistic choices the participants make.¹⁶ When speaking with their friends of the same race at school (with the exception of talk at the school canteen), over 80 percent of all the respondents involved in the study (including Chinese, Malay and Indian students) claim to speak to their friends in English only or combination of both English and MT. When they are on-task (even if they are out of school) talking about school work with their friends on the phone, the students also show a tendency towards using more English (75 percent). Even though a trend towards speaking with friends in English only or in English and MT outside of school was observed, the percentages are somewhat lower (between 60 percent when hanging out at void deck to 67 percent when they are joking/ kidding around with friends). This means that outside of school, the respondents use more MT when speaking with friends of the same race than they do when they are in the school compounds. The pattern of language use at the school canteen however seems to pattern with language with friends outside of school.

Consider the data for the Malay students given in Table 6 (overleaf):

¹⁶ Norhaida Aman, et al., "The Sociolinguistic Survey of Singapore 2006: Final Technical Report," (National Institute of Education, Singapore: Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice, 2009).

Table 6: Language Use with Friends of Same Race

Location / Event	Same Race		
	Eng Only	Eng+ML	ML Only
Group Work in Classroom	54 %	23%	23%
Write Notes in Classroom	31%	24%	45%
Talk about Homework	24%	41%	35%
Joking / Kidding	27%	30%	43%
Feeling Sad	21%	25%	54%
Hanging out at Void Deck	10%	26%	64%
Canteen	15%	16%	69%

When they are posed the question “*What language(s) do you usually use when you are writing a note to your classmates of the same race in the classroom?*”, respondents in the mid and low SES said they preferred to write in Malay. Even for those in the high SES, only slightly more than half indicated they would write notes for their friends in “English only”. It seems, unlike their spoken language choice, their choice of written language is less affected by the physical environment. This language pattern differs greatly from their Chinese and Indian peers who show a very strong preference towards writing in English only. It is possible that this dichotomy between the Malays and their Chinese and Indian counterparts lies in the orthography (writing systems). Malay shares the same writing system as English, while Mandarin and Tamil have logographic writing systems. There is also a rather consistent grapheme-phonemic relation in Malay, i.e. there is a strong relationship between the way a word is pronounced and spelled. Hence, Malay is ‘easier’ to write than English. However, this is something that cannot be verified from the existing data. Perhaps future studies need to be carried out to understand this phenomenon.

To summarize the data in this section, there are some in-and-out of school variations. When in school, they are more likely to use English, except when engaging informal conversations with friends in the school canteen. When the students are on-task, for instance, when they talk about homework, they are also more likely to use more English than Malay. However, in out-of-school situations, Malay students, across all SES groups, show a preference towards using more Malay with their friends.

The Spiritual Language

Ashik is a 10-year-old Malay boy. He has been conversing with the researcher in English about his school. When he starts talking about his weekend religious class, he shifts to Malay with a smattering of English words. He says he can read the Arabic verses but need some help every now and then, and he claims he can also give the meanings of some simple Arabic phrases.

Ashik is pragmatic—he does not think that it is important for him to know Arabic well. After all, “we don’t use it in our daily lives here in Singapore”, he says. But he still thinks knowing the language may come in handy in other circumstances, when one goes on a pilgrimage, for instance. Ashik’s mom feels that as Malay Muslims, they should know some Arabic. She learned Arabic and its writing system in religious class before but does not remember much now because she does not use it in daily life. These days, Ashik is only expected to write in Malay in his religious class.

The 10-year olds were also queried on their language use in the religious domain. Religion plays a significant role in a person’s life and so understanding the language/s associated with this particular domain is essential in exploring the notion of language and identity. Some of the questions posed to the respondents include:

- a. What language(s) do you usually use to pray in the church/temple/mosque/others?
- b. What language(s) do you usually use to learn about religion?
- c. Do you read/write about religion? If yes, what language(s) do you read/write in?

The findings are given below:

Table 7: Language Use in the Religious Domain

Language use in the religious domain	High SES	Mid SES	Low SES
English only	7.5	5	3.5
Malay only	63.8	67.6	68.2
English-Malay	5	1.7	2.8
Arabic	20.3	22.5	16.2

Engagement with religion is predominantly in Malay. Around 20 percent of respondents across the three SES groups indicated use of some Arabic. The young Muslim’s knowledge of Quranic Arabic is important as a measure of his religious piety and religious identity. While engagement with religion is predominantly in Malay, the young Muslim’s knowledge of Quranic Arabic is important as a measure of his religious piety and religious identity. However, the use of Arabic is very much

limited to prayers/repetitions of Quranic verses, some rudimentary Arabic vocabulary. This ties very closely with the perception that being Malay is synonymous with being Muslim, and if 'to be Malay' requires proficiency in Malay, as it is construed as the language one has an emotional affinity to, thus the community believes that learning the religion ought to be in the mother tongue. Very little English is present in the religious domain.

The short snippet based on Ashik at the beginning of this section exemplifies the trend seen in table 7. When he is in his religious class or when he talks about religion, there is a strong preference towards Malay. Arabic enters into the religious domain, not as an active language used productively in communicating one's ideas, or in exchanges between speakers. Some knowledge of Arabic is expected as a religious obligation and in some sense, as a means of asserting one's identity as a Muslim.

Thus far, it has been shown that the use of Malay is prevalent in the following three domains—family, friends and religion across all SES groups. While those from the high SES group are equally likely to also choose 'English only' as they would 'Malay only' when speaking to family/friends (as shown in tables 4 and 5 earlier), the language of choice in the religious domain is almost exclusively Malay, and some Arabic.

Language and the Media

Khairi comes from a family that speaks both English and Malay. He is part of a growing group of youngsters who are exposed to a variety of languages through their engagement with popular culture—television, music, print etc.

On one of the visits to his home, the researcher sees some newspapers on and beneath the table in the living room, both English and Malay newspaper. They start talking about reading the newspapers and the sections that Khairi might possibly read. During the conversation, which is done mostly in English, Khairi begins to articulate French-sounding words. He tells the researcher that he is speaking French. He then goes on to say that he watched this French channel on cable even though the program was in French and there were no English subtitles whatsoever. Khairi then tells the researcher that he also watches a lot of cartoons, the MTV channel and Korean drama serials. He gets his dose of Korean drama on a local Chinese channel. The drama has been dubbed in Mandarin and he would read the English subtitles.

In this section, we will present data on the participants' interaction with media/popular culture which shows a strong dominance of English. However, the data gestures as well towards two important distinctions. One is the different 'consumption' patterns between the high and low SES. Secondly is a distinction between engagement with language through audio/visual media and that through print.

In our survey instrument, we asked the students to rate the frequency of

- watching television programmes in English/MT
- listening to English/ML songs
- reading English/ML books

- reading English/ML magazines/comics.

For the purposes of this paper, only the data on TV viewing and reading will be shared.

Table 8: Language Use in Popular Culture

SES	TV (%)			PRINT (%)		
	High	Mid	Low	High	Mid	Low
Lang						
<i>English</i>	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Malay</i>	96.9	100	100	82.6	97.5	98.9
<i>Mandarin</i>	53.1	59.3	78.5	6.2	3.7	4.3
<i>Tamil</i>	25	37	48.4	-	-	1.1
<i>Hindi</i>	34.4	45.7	66.7			
<i>Others*</i>	56.3	63	59.1	6.2	1.2	2.2

* *Others: TV—Cantonese, Hokkien, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, French, Tagalog, Arabic, Thai; Print—Japanese, Indonesian*

When it comes to popular culture, the respondents engage much more outside their choice of speech codes at home and with friends. English is overwhelmingly dominant: all indicated they watch English TV and read English books. With regard to Malay, the findings show some correlation between SES and the frequency in viewing Malay TV programmes—those from low and mid SES households watch Malay programmes more frequently than their counterparts from the high SES homes. These students are much more engaged with popular culture in languages other than English and their mother tongue, Malay, in comparison with the other domains. The number of respondents who indicated they watch programmes in Mandarin and Hindi is rather high, especially among those from low SES homes. The short excerpt on Khairil supports this interesting observation—the respondents are exposed to a variety of languages available in the domain of media, some of which they have little or no proficiency in.

In their engagement with print, on the whole, this group of students indicated that they generally read English books more frequently than they do books in Malay. Variations across SES groups were also found, most notably, 17 percent of our respondents from the high SES group said they have never read Malay books.

Overall, the data reveal a distinction between engagement with various languages through audio-visual media (TV viewing) and that through print (reading books). The respondents are more likely to engage in Malay more frequently through audio-visual media than they would through print. Compared to their counterparts from the lower SES groups, students from the higher SES homes show a lower engagement with books in their mother tongue. This data has significant implications for

educators, Malay teachers especially, who will need to find ways in which this group of Malay students can be motivated to read more frequently in their mother tongue.

Language Proficiency and Fluency

Ashik comes from a family whose dominant household language is Malay. He feels that his "English is not very good". He said that he doesn't know very much about English and his vocabulary is not good since he does not have much interest in it. Ashik claims that his Malay paper was difficult too but he managed to get 73/100. The researcher asked him if he thought that his English is better in "real life", not measured by test papers but he doesn't think his English in real life is any better.

He doesn't use any 'big English words', hence he sees himself as just an average speaker of English. Ashik mentions that his current form teacher is an Indian lady and that sometimes he would find it hard to ask her questions about things that he might not understand in class because his English is not so good. This was not the case for him last year when his form teacher was Malay because they shared another common language. Although this Malay teacher taught the class in English, Ashik felt that the existence of another common language between them helped him understand his school work better when she helped to explain things in simple, colloquial Malay - a shared language and a shared identity.

We asked the students to rate their fluency and proficiency in the languages they speak. The questions are framed as 'social proficiency' scales, set in particular occasions/ circumstances of language use.

Fluency (aural and oral) is measured on a five-point scale ranging from

- (1) basic courtesy in the statement *I can greet someone or say thank you;*
- (2) minimum social proficiency in the statement *I can understand/give simple questions about my name, family, address etc.;*
- (3) basic social proficiency in the statement *I can understand if someone speaks slowly to me;*
- (4) social proficiency in the statement *I can understand people when they talk at a normal speed to each other;*
- (5) to native social proficiency as in the statement *I can talk about anything in this language.*

Literacy (reading and writing) is measured on a four-point scale ranging from

- (1) basic skills such as *I can read/write and understand a shopping list;*
- (2) *I can read/write and understand a short note;*
- (3) *I can read/write and understand a letter sent to me;*
- (4) to competence in understanding complex text types such as *I can read/write short stories and poems in this language.*

In each of these scales, respondents are sequentially asked if these statements apply to them, beginning with the lowest level and continuing until the students say 'no'.

As seen in Table 9, the majority of the respondents is confident of their linguistic abilities and indicated high levels of proficiency in speaking, reading and writing in English. Participants reported their writing proficiency to be of significantly lower level (between 71-74 percent) compared to their ability to read (ranging from 86-88 percent) in both languages. Their self-evaluation of their oral fluency was the lowest. Only 59 percent claim to have near native-like proficiency in English.

Table 9: Proficiency in English & Malay

	Oral		Reading		Writing	
	English	Malay	English	Malay	English	Malay
Level 1	0	1.0	0.5	0.0	2.9	0.5
Level 2	3.4	2.9	1.9	2.4	12.6	11.3
Level 3	15.1	11.7	9.7	11.7	13.6	14.3
Level 4	22.3	14.1	87.9	85.9	70.9	73.9
Level 5	59.2	70.4				

Our data also revealed differences in English and Malay proficiency across SES groups as seen in table 10 below. On the whole, more of those from the high SES indicated they have native-like literacy skills in both English and Malay compared to their peers.

Table 10: Native-like literacy in English and Malay

Native-like literacy level	English			Malay		
	High	Mid	Low	High	Mid	Low
	SES	SES	SES	SES	SES	SES
Reading	100	84.0	87.3	90.0	85.1	86.1
Writing	90.3	69.2	67.1	76.7	76.1	69.6

This group of Malay students seems to be very confident of their literacy skills. Over 80 percent rated themselves as having excellent reading skills in both English and MT. The data show some correlation between SES and written skills in both English and Malay, with more of those from the high SES group reporting native-like proficiency in both English and Malay. This is interesting as this is the group that is less likely to use Malay across all domains except religion—i.e. family, friends and popular culture.

Language Ideology

Khairi seems to think that speaking in English will make others think that he is someone "high class". He tells the researcher on one occasion that when he speaks in English, other people around him think that he is "from the outside" and by this he means that people think that he has a "European accent". He does not think that speaking in Malay gives him a sense of having a high status too. Khairi says that he is more confident speaking in English than in Malay, and also feels that his English is more powerful.

Interestingly, Khairi says that it is easier for him to talk about his feelings in Malay than in English. He says that if he is extremely happy he might even exclaim out loud in Malay even to his Chinese friends despite the fact that they might not understand. When asked why he would speak in Malay when he is happy, Khairi says that it is more natural and faster for him to do so because if he is to say it in English, he will need to think for a few moments to get at the right words to express his feelings.

Before I proceed to a discussion of the data, it is important to understand what is meant by 'language ideology'. The term 'language ideology' refers to a shared set of ideas about the nature of language which includes cultural assumptions about language, the nature and purpose of communication, and "patterns of communicative behaviour as an enactment of a collective order".¹⁷ For bilinguals, this means that the language/s they choose to speak in, the ways in which they communicate play an important role in shaping and reflecting their identity as members of different groups.

To nuance the patterns of language use, a set of questions was asked to find out what the respondents had to say about the languages they speak—how they regard their mother tongue (i.e. Malay) and English—using a 4-point Likert scale (1—strongly disagree to 4—strongly agree).

On these scales, no significant difference between social classes was found; all the respondents held fairly similar views about English: that it is the language of academic success, of status, and of global understanding, as seen in the scores in the table below. When asked if it was important to know English and Malay well in order to be successful in school, the students showed agreement with the statement (3.43 and 3.04 respectively, out of a total score of 4). However, they tended to agree more strongly with the statement that alludes to the importance of the English language in achieving academic success. The students are keenly aware of the economic capital associated with proficiency in English. This is clearly evident in their concurrence with the statement that it is important to know English in order to understand the world. Interestingly, they do not associate status very strongly with either language.

¹⁷ K. A. Woolard, "Language Ideology: Issues and Approaches," *Pragmatics*, 2,3 (1992): 235–250.

Table 11: Where English scored higher

	EL	ML
In order to do well in school, it is important to know EL/ML well.	3.43	3.04
When I use EL/ML, people will think I have high status.	2.55	2.28
In order to understand the world better, it is important to know EL/ML.	3.31	1.99

For the respondents, Malay language is associated with cultural and personal identity. These 10-year olds agreed that to know about their own culture, it is necessary for them to know Malay, as seen in table 12 below. The overall mean score for the following item 'Speaking in Malay makes me feel more Malay' is 3.03, indicating concurrence with the statement.

Table 12: Where Malay scored higher

	EL	ML
In order to learn about my own culture, it is important to know EL/ML.	1.92	3.22
It is easier to talk about my feelings in EL/ML than in ML/EL.	2.60	2.80
Speaking in EL makes me feel less Malay/ Speaking in ML makes me feel more Malay.	2.38	3.03

Hence, the exchange between Khairi and the researcher which was shared at the start of this paper seems to be an antithesis to this statistic. However, Khairi could be part of an emergent group of speakers who come from English-dominant homes and feel more comfortable speaking in English, as identified by Bibi Jan¹⁸ and Hawazi Daipi.¹⁹ In a separate and more detailed discussion of the same data set, Aman noted that while there was no difference across SES on notions related to English, there were small differences by SES with regard to Malay, but that these differences are not statistically significant.²⁰ Respondents from the high SES group are somewhat less likely than the others to view Malay as a language of cultural and personal identity over English. It is interesting that this is the same group that was more inclined to write notes in English. Perhaps immediate plans and actions need to be deliberated by educators and the community at large so that necessary efforts can be undertaken to boost this group's sense of cultural and linguistic identity, which in turn will help curtail language shift. Even though the data in table 10 does not show this, the short excerpt on Khairil at the start of this section may reflect a growing

¹⁸ Bibi Jan M.A. "Language Issues in the Malay Community," pp. 205–230.

¹⁹ Speech by Mr Hawazi Daipi at the Temasik Lectures organised by the Singapore Malay Teachers Union (KGMS) dated 18 September 2004. Also online: <http://www.moe.sg/media/speeches/2004/sp20040918a.htm>

²⁰ Norhaida Aman, "The Linguistic Practices of Singapore Malay Children," paper presented at the International Symposium on Bilingualism 6, University of Hamburg, June 2007.

trend in Singapore. Anecdotally, speakers of English are associated with 'high class', even if their language of affect is their mother tongue.

Thus far, it can be seen that there is a complex and multilayered story of language use among these students. It is a story more nuanced than what the national census tells, and yet only tells a bit about what goes on in the linguistic lives of these 10-year olds. Let us re-capture some of the highlights of the research findings discussed thus far, followed by a discussion of the relationship between the students' language choices and their identity, as well as the implications this may have for education.

Discussion and Implications to Education

To recapitulate, here are some of the main findings that have been presented in this paper. Firstly, it has been shown that bilingualism is prevalent. In over 81 percent of the households, respondents in our sample said they spoke in both English and Malay at home. There is an inter-generational language shift in all homes, with our respondents using more English with their siblings than their parents and grandparents. There is a dominance of Malay in their interactions with grandparents—almost 92 percent of our respondents speak primarily in Malay with their grandparents.

The data also revealed some in- and out-of-school language shift. Even though English is used quite extensively with friends, there are some differences in their language choices depending on their physical location. When they are in school or talking about homework, these students show a tendency towards speaking in English more often than they would outside of the school compounds. In the religious domain, Malay dominates.

On the other hand, in the media domain, there are differences between engagement with language through audio/visual media and that through print. The respondents are more likely to engage in Malay more frequently through AV media than they would through print. Our respondents read English books more frequently than they do their Malay books. Different 'consumption' patterns between those from the high and low SES groups were also observed.

The majority of the respondents was also found to be confident of their linguistic abilities and indicated high levels of proficiency in speaking, reading and writing in English. However, they generally ranked their literacy (reading and writing) higher than their fluency in both English and Malay. There were also differences across SES in terms of language proficiency for both English and Malay - more of those from the high SES group admitted to having native-like proficiency in both English and Malay.

The data suggest that the Malay language is deeply entrenched in the Malay community, as seen from the data on dominant home language where only 0.5 percent of the sample claimed English as the main language. Malay pervades the lives of this sample of Singapore students—in the family, friends, religious as well as the popular culture domains so much so that they agree with the statement that they 'feel more Malay when they speak in Malay'. They also assented with the notion that the Malay language is closely tied with the Malay culture, as seen in table 12. These findings on language use and language ideology clearly shows that the students identify with the Malay language, actively use it with family and friends, as well as in religious domains for reasons of solidarity. Because of this strong positive associa-

tion with their mother tongue, we expect to see language maintenance, as reflected in the census data.

In contrast, patterns of language shift have been found in both the Indian and Chinese communities in Singapore.²¹ The Indians are becoming more English-speaking. The older generation in the Chinese community are more Mandarin speaking and use less dialects, while the younger Singapore Chinese are increasingly using more English and some Mandarin. This grave situation is a concern to the community because it has implications on communication across different generations.²²

According to Holmes, institutional support is important in maintaining an ethnic or a minority language. Law and administration, education, media as well as religion are crucial domains.²³ In terms of law and administration, even though English is the working language of the island state, Malay is accorded with the same status as English, Mandarin and Tamil as one of its four official languages.

In the education domain, the bilingual policy introduced in 1966 where English is regarded as the language of science and technology and the mother tongues serve as transmitters of cultural values and norms has always been regarded by the Singapore government as the cornerstone of its economic, political and national successes. By making the study of the ethnic language (Mandarin, Malay or Tamil) compulsory, this has surely helped keep the trend of language shift towards English in check.

The domain of media also shows signs of language maintenance. Students shared that they watch TV and read in Malay. Within this domain, they receive the greatest exposure to other languages, especially the ethnic language of the majority group in Singapore, i.e. Mandarin. Although Singapore's population is mostly bilingual, there is a popular tendency to equate particular religions with specific linguistic groups.²⁴ Vaish found that the mother tongues (Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil) dominate English in the domain of religion even though English dominates the mother tongues in the domains of school and public space and competes with them in the domains of family, friends and media.²⁵ According to her, the maintenance of the mother tongues within the religious domain differ across the three ethnic groups of Singapore—the Malay and Indian communities maintain their ethnic languages while language shift is taking place in the Chinese community. In my observation of the current situation, what is evident is that increasingly, church services are conducted in Mandarin and English. However, it is nearly impossible to participate in Islamic religious activities in Singapore without a good knowledge of Malay and to some extent, identification with the Malay culture, even though the future may be a little different as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore has begun introducing sermons and religious lessons in English at select mosques. We have seen from the

²¹ K. Ramiah, "The Pattern of Tamil Language Rise among Primary School Tamil Pupils in Singapore," *Singapore Journal of Education* 11,2 (1991): 45–53; Saravanan, "Language and Social Identity," pp. 135–154; Li et al., "Language Shift in the Teochew Community," pp. 364–384.

²² Gupta and Siew, "Language Shift in a Singapore family," pp. 301–314; Hvitfeldt and Poedjosoedarmo, "Language Use and Identity," pp. 183–200.

²³ Holmes, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, pp.64–66.

²⁴ John Clammer, "Religion and Language in Singapore," in *Language and Society in Singapore*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1980), pp.87–115.

²⁵ V. Vaish, "Mother Tongues, English, and Religion in Singapore," *World Englishes*, 27,15 (2008): 450–464.

data earlier how Malay pervades the religious domain. It is my belief that this could be one of the primary contributing factors in language maintenance.

Language shift tends to be slower among communities where the ethnic or minority language is highly regarded, i.e. when the language is seen as an important symbol of ethnic identity. The Malay language is deeply entrenched in the Malay community, as seen from the data on dominant home language where only 0.5 percent of the sample claimed English as the main language. Malay pervades the lives of this sample of Singapore students—in the family, friends, religious as well as the popular culture domains so much so that they agree with the statement that they ‘feel more Malay when they speak in Malay’. They also assented with the notion that the Malay language is closely tied with the Malay culture, as seen in table 12. These findings on language use and language ideology clearly show that the students identify with the Malay language, use it actively with family and friends, as well as in religious domain for reasons of solidarity. Because of this strong positive association with their mother tongue, we find language maintenance, as reflected in this set of data as well as in the census data.

What are the implications of this data to education? Many positive changes are now in the pipeline and some are currently being implemented. In his speech at the Ministry of Education Workplan Seminar on 17 September 2009, Education Minister Ng Eng Hen addressed the issue on mother tongue teaching and learning by urging teachers to shift their focus from teaching students to pass a test, to getting them to use and appreciate the language. This timely suggestion was made in light of the progressive trend where the growing number of households that use primarily English will impact greatly on the teaching and learning of mother tongue languages.

Following the review on the teaching and learning of the Malay language in 2005, the current emphasis is now on customization to suit the varying needs of learners with different competencies. Greater emphasis is also placed in developing confidence and fluency in oral communication, and in providing learning environments which are conducive for students to use the Malay language spontaneously and effectively in authentic settings, within and beyond the classroom. Bold moves have also been made to ensure that the emphasis on speaking and listening skills are carried into assessments and examinations. Using the concept of *TAHAP*, or level of achievement in terms of achievable learning outcomes, textbooks and other instructional materials are being made more interesting and engaging to students in line with their level of proficiency and ability.

Extensive reading programmes have also been implemented in many schools to encourage students to read in Malay. This move will surely help address the issue identified in table 8, where our respondents indicated that they read English books more frequently than they do Malay books, and about 17 percent of our respondents from the high SES group said they have never read a Malay book. However, more will need to be done in identifying the root cause of this problem—why students are less likely to read in Malay than they would in English. There may be a need to look at the availability of good reads that are able to reach out to and grab the attention of this group to get them to be avid readers of Malay books. Both parents and teachers will also have to play a bigger role in nurturing this love for reading.

Teachers could also look into ways in which they can tap into the students’ high level of engagement with Malay in the media domain. More interactions among students and between teachers and students will provide opportunities for students

to use Malay in more engaging ways like the use of dramatizations, IT and music during curriculum time.

The Malay Language Learning and Promotion Committee (MLLPC) was formed in response to the recommendations made at the end of the MOE Malay language review in 2005. In collaboration with local Malay/Muslim organisations, it has organised a host of language, literature and cultural activities to promote the learning and use of the Malay language, targeting school-going individuals. While the number of activities has been quite extensive, more may have to be done to connect with a wider audience, so that families can support the love for and use of the language. More funds can be set aside to create and develop teaching resources, especially in coming up with more relevant and engaging reading materials. More customised offerings which take into account students' varying levels of proficiency, home language background and interests will need to be planned, very much in line with schools' practice of differentiated instruction.

The Straits Times dated Nov 24 2009 quoted the Education Minister Ng Eng Hen as saying the a task force which was set up recently will be proposing ways in which children from English-speaking homes can be taught Chinese using English. Whether a similar move need to be considered for the Malays is something that educators and language policy planners will need to look into. However, in my opinion, since the current situation is not as dire as that faced by the Chinese community, perhaps it may not be necessary at the moment to implement a similar move.

In conclusion, the paper has clearly demonstrated that language maintenance is strong among the Malay respondents involved in this survey. However, further studies need to be carried out to determine if this is prevalent across all groups in the community. Any signs of language shift will have to be closely monitored and addressed so that this minority group in Singapore continues to retain its unique linguistic and cultural identity.

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