Three generations under one roof: a study of the influence of the presence of grandparents on language shift, identity and attitudes

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La communauté chinoise de Singapour vit un changement linguistique majeur depuis quelques dizaines d'années. L'utilisation des vernaculaires chinois pour la communication intra-ethnique est en régression face à l'anglais ou au mandarin dans la plupart des domaines. Cette situation est principalement due à la politique linguistique du gouvernement ainsi qu'à la domination toujours plus forte des langues ''globales''. Cet article se penche sur l'influence de la structure familiale sur les pratiques, les attitudes et l'identité langagière des jeunes singapouriens vis-à-vis des chinois vernaculaires. L'étude rassemble les données de 19 entretiens individuels de jeunes vivant soit dans des familles nucélaires, soit dans des familles élargies. Les résultats montrent que les informateurs qui ont grandi dans des familles élargies sont plus enclins à parler les vernaculaires et manifestent des attitudes plus positives au sujet de leur usage. Cependant, vivre dans une famille élargie ne suffit pas à rendre compte de cette tendance. Une analyse plus fine montre que c'est la nature et la fréquence des interactions avec les grands-parents vivant dans les familles élargies qui explique le mieux les attitudes vis-à-vis des vernaculaires.

1.   Introduction

In the study of language maintenance and shift (LMLS), the displacement of minority languages by national or majority languages is not uncommon throughout most modern societies. Fishman (2001) largely credited this phenomenon to the specific benefits (economic, social and political) which speaking the mainstream language provides for bilingual individuals. One of the most important theoretical perspectives informing our research in is that of Fishman *et al.* (1985) work on language shift which argues that when a community of speakers use the mainstream language in domains, situations and for certain functions, previously associated with the minority language, language shift can and will occur. In his extensive work on immigrant groups in the USA, Fishman (1966, 1991) documented a specific diachronic pattern of language shift – that of a loss of the mother tongue observed across three generations of speakers. Typically, the first generation of immigrants was monolingual speakers of their mother tongue, the second generation was bilingual speakers of the mother tongue and the national language, but the third generation was increasingly monolingual in the mainstream language only. Clearly, majority languages

can have an eroding effect on minority languages across a period of time, especially if the conditions are adverse for the maintenance of minority languages. These circumstances bringing about language shift have been addressed by numerous studies worldwide and from these studies, a number of important theoretical frameworks have emerged, a point we will return to in the discussion of ethnolinguistic vitality.

As this paper focuses on language maintenance across three generations in Singapore, we will first briefly describe the sociolinguistic and demographic detail of Singapore. Singapore is possibly one of the most cited case studies when it comes to issues to do with language planning and policy and the engineering of language use. This is because, the changes in patterns of language use have been both significant and profound in the last 50 years. As this has been widely discussed in the literature (cf. Kuo, 1980; Platt, 1980; Riney, 1998; Wee, 2003; Wee & Bokhorst-Heng, 2005; Stroud & Wee, 2007), we will only provide a brief summary here.

2.   Singapore – a changing linguistics landscape

Singapore is usually represented by three main ethnic groups – the Chinese, Malays and Indians (in descending proportion). In reality, the situation is significantly more heterogeneous as within each of these groups that are sub-groups separated by both language and cultural affiliations. Since its independence from British occupation in 1965, Singapore's demography has been relatively stable. According to the last census in 2009, Singapore's population is 4.9 million and excluding the 1 million foreign workers who are non residents, 74% are of Chinese ethnic origin, 13% are Malays and 9.2% are of Indian ethnic origin[1]. The official languages are English, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil and Malay. Though all four languages are official languages, in practice, English is use widely and is the default working language. Due to the sheer demographic dominance of the ethnic Chinese group, Mandarin Chinese is also more visible and prevalent in all domains though it is essentially, secondary to English.

Historically, members of these three main ethnic groups come from diverse language and cultural background. However, in reality, the exact situation is far more heterogenous than what is officially presented. An early study by Kuo (1980) reported at least 25 identifiable languages or language communities in Singapore. For example, the Chinese community is made up

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[1]   Population trends (2009). Online at http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/population2009. Time series on population: Mid-year estimates (2009).
Online at http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/people/hist/popn.html.

of at least 4 main languages; Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese. This excludes other languages that have smaller numerical force such as Hokchia, Hokchew, HengHua, Shanghainese, etc. All these are diasporic languages with origins in mainland China. Though these languages are often described as "dialects", they are as different as French and Spanish and are mostly not mutually intelligible.

Similarly, instead of a homogenous Indian community, we see that it is characterized by a diverse group from all over India, Tamil, Malayalam and Singhalese speakers from the South; Telugu speakers from the South East; Punjabi, Bengali as well as Hindi speakers from the North. As well, contrary to popular belief, the Malays are also linguistically diversified with Malay from the Malayan peninsula, the Bugis, the Bataks, the Minangkabaus as well as the Javanese. Overlaying this is Baba Malay or Bahasa Peranakan, a Malay-Hokkien creole spoken by a substantial group of local Singaporeans. Platt (1980) observes that the verbal repertoire of a typical Chinese Singaporean is usually multilingual including 4-5 languages depending on whether they can also speak English. So, what happened to this teeming diversity?

In the intervening years, a series of carefully managed language planning program have altered this landscape in a drastic manner. The key language related policies which are enforced nationally are:

- Official Languages & National Language (1965)

- Bilingualism Policy (1966)

- The Speak Mandarin Campaign (1979)

- The Speak Good English Movement (2000 – current)

Essentially, each of the campaigns brought about further erosion to all minority languages ensuring the influence of official languages, especially English and Mandarin Chinese. For example, Hokkien, which used to be the lingua franca amongst the various Chinese group and the dominant language in trade and commerce has now been totally replaced by Mandarin Chinese and in the last census in 2000 as only 14.79% reported using Hokkien as a mother tongue.

It is conceivable that the erosion of vernaculars would have happened anyway due to the decreasing relevance of vernaculars in the context of increasing importance of English. However, there is no doubt that the systematic and sustained process of status planning (see Riney, 1998; Wee, 2003; Ng, 2008; Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010) which involves both proscription and denigration of non-official languages accelerated the shift significantly. This dramatic change in language use is captured in the census survey over the last few decades. Table 1 shows a dramatic increase of Mandarin Chinese as a mother tongue from 0.1% in 1960 to 35%

in 2000 and current indication shows that this figure is likely to double in the 2010 census. Conversely, we observe a sharp decline in the use of other Chinese languages as mother tongue in the same period (from approximately 81% to 24%). There is also an increase in the use of English as a mother tongue in the same period. This has not only affected the Chinese ethnic group but all other ethnic groups as well.

Language	1960	1980	1990	2000
English	1.8	11.6	18.8	23.0
Mandarin	0.1	10.2	23.7	35.0
Other Chinese Languages	81.4	59.5	39.6	23.8
Malay	11.5	13.9	14.3	14.1
Tamil	5.2	3.9	2.9	3.2

Table 1: Census record of languages Singaporeans most frequently spoken at home
(Data extracted from "Census of population (2000). Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home")

This figure is expected to continue sharply in the same trajectory for the 2010 census. Riney (1998) presented a Singapore which is moving towards homogeneity and identified six ongoing patterns of language shift which have significant consequence for the current sociolinguistics situation in Singapore. They are:

1)   From Indian languages to English and Malay

2)   From Malay as a lingua franca to minority language

3)   From Chinese varieties to Mandarin Chinese

4)   From English as a 'working language' to lingua franca and mother tongue

5)   From non-standard bilingualism to an 'English-knowing' bilingualism

6)   From illiteracy and semi-literacy to literacy and biliteracy

It is in this backdrop of rapid language shift that the current study was conducted. In many ways, the trends observed in Singapore, though dramatic, is not substantially different from what is observed elsewhere in the world.

3.   The role of grandparents and family in language maintenance and shift

A number of studies have examined the relationship between family relationships and language shift. More specifically, the role of grandparents has been given much attention in the recent literature.

Alba *et al.* (2002), in a study of Chinese, Cuban and Mexican immigrant households in the USA, concluded that the presence of a non-parental adult speaking a non-English language in the household often increased the likelihood of children also speaking a non-English language. Another highly relevant study is Ishizawa's (2004) study on minority language use within multigenerational households in the United States. She points out that when three or more generations of family members live together, there may be language transmission taking place among multiple generations (for ex., grandparents having an influence on their grandchildren).

Other scholars, too, have indicated that there are compounding variables affecting the grandparent-grandchild language transmission process. Tollefson (1991), in particular, has suggested that the older generation's decision to pass down languages to subsequent generations depends on the socio-political status of the language, as well as government policy and community support. This suggests that the study of intergenerational language shift should not proceed without understanding the distinctiveness of each family context, and carefully situating the study within its socio-political parameters.

Some studies, however, only support to a limited extent, that the presence of grandparents positively influence language maintenance in the home domain. Sandel *et al.* (2006), in comparing mother tongue maintenance between extended and nuclear family households in Taiwan, found that the process of language shift from Tai-gi, the local language spoken in Taiwan to Mandarin was slower in the extended families, than in the nuclear families. However, although children in extended families were more likely to speak to their grandparents in Tai-gi than in Mandarin, this pattern of language use did not extend to interactions with their parents. It was concluded that children still followed their parents' lead more than their grandparents when making decisions on language choice with their parents, siblings and peers. This was explained much earlier on by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) who argued that grandparents had neither the right nor obligation to interfere in the socialization process of their grandchildren and it is the middle generation of parents who act as mediators between the two generations. They suggest that the grandparents' influence in the social and linguistic development of their grandchildren may be constrained.

In addition, it is not the mere presence of grandparents in the household alone, but also the nature of their relationships with their grandchildren, which determine language maintenance in the home domain. In their study of immigrant Chinese families in the United States, Luo and Wiseman (2000) found that the cohesion, liking, and respect that children felt towards their grandparents was positively correlated with language maintenance in their mother tongue, as well as positive attitudes towards

preserving their ethnic language. These findings are in agreement with Garner's (1988) study on Swedish and Russian households in Melbourne, and also with Sridhar's (1988) research on language shift among Asian Indians in New York. Both of these studies expressed the view that cohesiveness among grandparents and grandchildren was a key determinant of language maintenance among the younger generation.

4.   Studies on Language maintenance and shift in Singapore

Language shift in Singapore appears to conform to the worldwide trend of inter-generational language shift. Various studies on the Teochew, Cantonese, Tamil and Malay communities have identified rapid language shift in less then three generations (Li, Saravanan & Ng, 1997; Gupta & Siew, 1995; Vaish, 2007; Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010). Language policy has been singled out as a key cause for language shift, through the successful implementation of initiatives to promote English and Mandarin as languages of wider communication. Cavallaro and Serwe (2010) identified economic forces such as the perception that English is the key to success in international business endeavors as a driving force in language shift. Though intergenerational relationship dynamics have not been extensively explored in LMLS studies, there is enough evidence to suggest that three factors may play a key role in influencing the direction of shift. These are:

1)   institutional support

2)   attitudes and identity

3)   nature of interaction between generations

Current studies on LMLS in Singapore mainly focused on patterns of use and not the motivations and attitudes of the participants to LMLS. In this study, we aim to examine in depth, the interaction between prevailing ideology and construction of individual identity and attitude using an ethnographic approach. At the same time, our study seeks to examine the role of family structure on the language attitudes and corresponding maintenance of these heritage languages, specifically among the younger generation (19-25 years of age).

5.   Methodology

5.1   Participants for our study

A total of 19 participants (19-25 years old) were recruited for this study. Eleven of the participants lived with their grandparents in an extended family, while 8 of them lived in a nuclear family.

The participants were recruited from the social network of one of the researcher. All of them were Chinese Singaporean, and were pursuing an

undergraduate degree at a University in Singapore. All the participants are English-Mandarin bilinguals who can speak and understand at least either some simple words or phrases in the Chinese vernaculars associated with the families of either one or both of their parents. The medium of instruction in schools and universities is English and Mandarin Chinese is a compulsory subject for those who are ethnically Chinese all through the primary and secondary years. It occupies nearly 30% of the curriculum in the primary years and is sustained as a language subject in the secondary years. Since the implementation of the bilingual policy in 1966, most Singaporeans who grew up after that period are functionally bilingual[2]. In this group of participants interviewed, the most common language spoken by their parents were Hokkien, followed by Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka. Interestingly, most Chinese Singaporeans are keenly aware of their "language roots" regardless of whether they have competency in it or not.

Nuclear		Extended	
Male	Female	Male	Female
6	2	6	5

Table 2: Distribution of participants in the study

5.2   Interview Procedures

A semi-structured interview was carried out individually with each of the participants. The interview was divided into three sections. Each interview lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hour. The topics covered were *Language proficiency and use of Chinese vernaculars* and *Language attitudes and identity toward Chinese vernaculars*. All interviews were conducted in the local variety of English (Singapore Colloquial English) as this is the natural lingua franca amongst the students.

6.   Results and findings of our study

Responses from the interviewees in the extended family will be discussed and compared to the responses from the interviewees in the nuclear family. P1-P8 are participants from the nuclear family and P9-P19 are participants from the extended family. The participants will be referred to by their number code to preserve their anonymity. P9-P19 (participants in the extended family) were regrouped into three further subgroups based on their language of interaction with their grandparents and the responses in these subgroups were also compared.

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[2]   It would be impossible to find monolingual Singaporeans in this age group.

6.1   Language proficiency

Participants in an extended family (P9-P19) rated themselves higher on listening abilities than participants in a nuclear family (P1-P8). However, there was little difference between the two groups of participants with regards to their self-rated speaking proficiency. Hence, the distinction here is mainly in their receptive use of the vernaculars.

6.2   Language use patterns

1)   Patterns of language use: Participants living in a nuclear family

Generally, participants living in a nuclear family (P1-P8) only used Chinese vernaculars predominantly with their grandparents. In addition, they expressed a very minimal and limited use of vernaculars with their siblings and friends, which only involved the use of taboo and/or swearwords.

2)   Patterns of language use: Participants living in an extended family

Participants living in an extended family (P9-P19) showed a similar trend to that of the participants living in a nuclear family. They used Chinese vernaculars predominantly with their grandparents, with the exception of C. (P13) who quite regularly spoke to his mother in Teochew. Other than that, there was a very limited usage with parents with the insertion of some vocabulary items from the vernacular while speaking either Mandarin or English. Similarly, there was limited use of vernacular with friends and siblings, except for the use of swearwords. Some participants emphasized the existence of parent-grandparent interactions as helpful for their dialect proficiency:

> **M.** (P9): ''…by listening to their conversations, I get to learn[3]''
>
> **Al.** (P12): ''Even if you cannot speak the language, you can still listen and understand.''

However, language use patterns with grandparents differed in many ways among the participants living in an extended family. The language choice and dominance of those languages in their interactions with grandparents show interesting variations.

Comparison of different interactional patterns in the extended family group

Three groups have been identified for discussion (see Table 3). *Group E1* consists of participants who speak to their grandparents only in Chinese

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[3]   As the interviews were conducted in a very informal setting, some of the participants responded in Colloquial Singapore English (SCE). SCE is different from Standard varieties of English in both structure and lexicon.

vernaculars. *Group E2* consists of participants who communicate with their grandparents mainly in English or Mandarin, hardly using any Chinese vernaculars at all. *Group E3* consists of participants who used English/Mandarin and Chinese vernaculars in relatively similar amounts in communication with their grandparents. These finer distinctions reveal how differing language use patterns, specifically with grandparents, can affect shift or maintenance of Chinese vernaculars.

Group	Interaction with Grandparents	Number
Group E1	Only in Chinese vernaculars	4
Group E2	Only in Mandarin Chinese or English	4
Group E3	In Mandarin Chinese, English and Chinese vernaculars	3

Table 3: Groupings according to language use in the Extended family group

Language attitudes and evaluations

In this section, the language attitudes of the participants (both nuclear and extended groups) are compared. Note that in this section, the participants in the extended group have now been regrouped into 3 groups (E1, E2, E3).

General feelings and appreciations toward Chinese vernaculars

Participants living in a nuclear family indicated a variety of different feelings towards Chinese vernaculars. Some felt that vernaculars served purposes of cultural preservation, and represented tradition and links with the past:

> **E** (P1): ''It (Hokkien) helps to preserve culture.''

Other participants living in a nuclear family generally saw vernaculars as merely interesting or unique (although they were unsure about this):

> **JU** (P4): ''… they are very cool.''
>
> **D** (P7): ''… only a few can (speak ''dialects'') so yah, er … unique?''

Some participants from the nuclear family group acknowledged the usefulness of Chinese vernaculars. However, such observations are usually recorded in a detached manner without any personal empathy. In general, their assessments are distant and more reserved as demonstrated by P1, P3 and P10.

> **E** (P1): ''…countries that use ''dialects'' are like Taiwan and Hong Kong… we do have certain links with them, but the more

> important links are with US or China so ultimately English and Chinese will still be of priority.''
>
> **EL** (P3): ''…to communicate with old people… not much other value that I know of.''

On the other hand, participants living in an extended family, in particular, those who spoke to their grandparents, using only Chinese vernaculars (*Group E1*) seemed to have more inherently positive views of vernaculars, expressing more positive sentiments about its uniqueness, its communicative value, as well as its emotional importance for their own lives:

> **N** (P10): ''I think it's special in a way because not everyone can understand it.'' / ''I'm close to my grandparents and I feel special being able to speak it with them quite fluently.''

Some participants from *Group E3* also evaluated vernaculars positively citing its usefulness with regards to maintaining relationship with their grandparents and their links to Chinese tradition:

> **B** (P17): ''Because of the relationship I have with my grandparents, I feel it has allowed us to be closer than perhaps if I didn't speak to them. It just helps with breaking the ice.''

However, this is the only positive view expressed in this group. Other extended-family participants in this group *(Group E3)* indicated more negativity, downgrading the functions of Chinese vernaculars:

> **M** (P9): ''Confusing.''
>
> **J** (P15): ''Good for swearing at my men (referring to use of Hokkien in the army).''

It is interesting to note that extended-family participants who predominantly used English or Mandarin *(Group E2)*, in particular, HM (P18) and HW (P19) demonstrated a sense of detachment in their feelings towards Chinese vernaculars that is more akin to the responses of those in the nuclear family group:

> **HM** (P18): ''I don't know how I'm supposed to feel. I don't feel proud of it or anything. It's just used for conversation.'' / ''…it's just language for communication and there's no meaning attached to it for me.''

Attitudes towards the importance of speaking Chinese vernaculars

Nuclear-family participants unanimously expressed the view, that they did not feel that these vernaculars had a functional purpose for themselves, and in the society at large, especially in comparison to English and Mandarin:

EL (P3): ''I don't have much use for it in my life. Not much relevance.''

JU (P4): ''English and Mandarin are languages we use in the working and social world. Whereas, dialect is used only with family.''

YH (P5): ''It doesn't make economic sense lah.''

SW (P8): ''No. Not many people uses it anymore.''

The only exception to this was M (P2) who saw Chinese vernaculars as having a significant role, due to the influence of her future profession:

''… for my profession you have to interact with people from nursing homes and hospice so definitely you will meet many people who speak dialects and can't speak other languages … next time everyone will know a few different languages like me. It won't be as important but it will be good to know (referring to Chinese vernaculars).''

Extended-family participants, specifically the participants that communicate with their grandparents in Chinese vernaculars soley *(Group E1)*, re-emphasized the concrete value of using vernaculars:

Al (P12): ''Yes, because we use it to communicate with others, especially the elderly.''

C (P13): ''If you want to talk about retaining your culture, then it is important to do it (use Chinese vernaculars) because it retains your roots. Different languages have different meanings that are unique to it… if everyone were to speak in Mandarin, then it won't be unique anymore.''

However, the same group (*Group E1*) of participants, even after agreeing on the importance of speaking vernaculars, also conceded to the importance of English and Chinese. Despite strong empathy for their vernaculars, they were also keenly aware of their limited sphere of influence.

B (P17): ''Unless my kids want to speak to my grandparents then it'll be important… seeing as how majority people don't speak dialect on a regular basis, it already makes it somewhat less relevant nowadays.''

N (P10): ''I only use it with my grandparents.''

Al (P12): ''In the social context now, speaking English and Chinese is more important as they are regarded as the more universal languages nowadays.''

The extended-family participants, who used English/Mandarin and Chinese vernaculars, in relatively similar amounts *(Group E3)*, held similar views to the extended-family participants who communicate with their grandparents and used only Chinese vernaculars *(Group E1)*. For these two groups, Chinese vernaculars fulfill communicative roles and are relevant to cultural transmission and preservation:

> **J** (P15): ''To preserve the culture of Singapore.''

In addition, Chinese vernaculars were distinctly more emotive.

> **B** (P17): ''Speaking dialect would make me feel nostalgic to an extent because it reminds me of my grandparents…''

Extended-family participants, who predominantly used English or Mandarin (*Group E2*), on the other hand, did not see the value of Chinese vernaculars. Their views resemble those expressed by most of the nuclear-family participants:

> **A** (P16): ''I don't think it's important now because the main focus is on English rather than dialects, and we don't see TV programmes in dialects in Singapore.''
>
> **HM** (P18): ''When there's English and Chinese, why is dialect important?''
>
> **HW** (P19): ''If you can communicate with your friends in English, why do you have to learn another language?''

What we see is a general dismissal of ''dialects'' which is seen as obsolete, irrelevant and useless.

Attitudes towards speakers of Chinese vernaculars

Both nuclear family and extended-family participants tended to judge speakers of Chinese vernaculars and their judgments were modulated by their perception of the speakers' age and the context of use.

> **E** (P1): ''Actually it depends on the age. If it was like people from around my age group, teenage people speaking dialect, I would think that they are very *gangsterish*. Whereas if it were someone around my grandmother's age, auntie's age, I think very normal because they grew up like that.''
>
> **M** (P2): ''Depends on who uses them… I will look at age range of person. If it is a bit older like those in 50s, maybe I will think they are not really very highly educated.''

Many responses expressed the same sentiment – the use of vernaculars is associated with the lack of education, and stereotyped as uncouth and unrefined.

Attitudes towards speaking Chinese vernaculars with parents

Across both nuclear family and extended-family participants, there were similar perceptions of parental attitudes towards the use of Chinese vernaculars within the home domain. The interviewees perceive parents to be neutral towards their use of the vernaculars.

> **E** (P1): ''I think they wouldn't mind.''
>
> **HM** (P18): ''They didn't show preference to what I should use.''

More importantly, participants felt that speaking with parents in Chinese vernaculars was rather unnatural,

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M (P2): ''…it's already a practice that we speak Chinese to my mom
and English to my dad. It's already like that…''

J (P15): ''It is kinda awkward!''
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Language identities: A question of groups and affiliations

Identity constructions: Nuclear family participants

Though there are many facets to our identity, the claim that language is a central feature of our identity is widely held and studied (Spolsky, 1999; edited volumes by Fishman, 1999; Fishman & Garcia, 2010). Though there have been instances where authors have argued that the two (identity and language) are distinguishable (Cameron, 2007), it is still difficult to envisage a world where a detachment between language and identity is a norm rather than an exception. Bucholtz (1999) ventured even further and argued that using a language indicates an example of ''positive identity practice'' and speakers who embrace the identity of a particular community is likely to speak the language and conversely, speakers who reject the identity will do the reverse

In this study, the Chinese Singaporeans can potentially have an identity that is linked to being Hokkien, Teochew or Hakka that is nested within a supra-ethnic Chinese identity or they could just have a Singaporean ''Chinese'' identity that does not include their ancestral vernaculars. This latter option is the desired goal of the Speak Mandarin Campaign (Tarulevicz, 2008). This process will involve surrendering any remnants of a ''dialect'' identity. The personal discourse on language and identity in this study exemplifies very clearly the loosening hold the vernaculars have on retaining a place in the ''language identity space'' of Chinese Singaporeans.

It was clear that all the nuclear family participants whom we interviewed, did not see themselves as part of a Chinese vernacular group, but rather saw themselves in relation to a Chinese mainstream identity. In contrast, the participants who spoke to their grandparents, using only Chinese vernaculars (*Group E1*), mainly saw themselves as having a dialect group identity, co-existing with a Chinese mainstream identity. However, there are individual differences within this group regarding the degree or intensity of their association. This was especially evident in their responses to the question: ''*Do you identify more with your Chinese dialect group or being Chinese*?'' However, this is not generally true for the entire extended family participants a some of them expressed a stronger identification with a more homogenized pan-Chinese group.

Identity constructions: Extended family participants

> **N** (P10): ''I think more Chinese[4] but Hokkien is important to me as well. It's part of my childhood and upbringing.''

> **Al** (P12): ''More Hokkien than Chinese I suppose, it's more because since young I was brought up by my grandparents…more exposed to Hokkien lifestyle, more traditional ways of life and whatnots.''

These participants also provided concrete reasons for their identity, such as the influence of family practices in the area of common religious practice, as well as an association with dialect group-specific food was noted:

> **N** (P10): ''Yah, we go to this particular temple for Hokkiens, we have our food, we have our language, it's like a special group we belong to because Chinese is so general.''

However, the exception in this group was K (P14), even as he reflected on how his identity, was affected by the size of the dialect group in comparison to a mainstream Chinese group, as well a more salient Chinese identity within Singapore society:

> **K** (P14): ''I identify more with being Chinese, because being in a Hokkien group is in a far smaller scale. People don't make comparisons between dialects but between races.''

These sentiments were also evident in B's (P17) response:

> **B's** (P17): ''[I am] definitely Chinese. Because when I say I'm Chinese I feel like I'm referring to a large majority of people. When you talk about being Hokkien, it feels quite secondary in the sense that it's not as obvious or predominant.''

For the remainder of the extended-family participants, a predominant Chinese identity was expressed, rather than one that incorporated their dialect group identity:

> **J** (P15): ''Being Chinese. It doesn't matter what dialect (group) you come from.''

More specifically, these extended-family participants gave reasons for their lack of identity with their Chinese dialect group. One common reason was their lack of proficiency, as well as the frequency of usage of their vernaculars:

> **J** (P15): ''I am a Hokchia and do not understand a single bit of it.''

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4   ''Chinese'' here refers to the pan-Chinese ethnic group.

Other reasons cited included that of the lack of opportunities to interact with other speakers of their Chinese vernaculars, outside of the home domain:

> **S** (P11): ''…don't hang out with them much.''

In sum, among the extended-family participants, there was no identification with their Chinese vernacular language group, except for a few participants (who spoke to their grandparents using only Chinese vernaculars). These participants held dual identities, and were significantly more attached to their Chinese vernacular language group.

Language maintenance and shift: The future of Chinese vernaculars in Singapore?

Pessimism towards the maintenance of Chinese vernaculars

Most of our participants expressed that Chinese vernaculars were being lost in the Singapore linguistic landscape, and were generally pessimistic towards the possibility of future generations speaking their Chinese dialect. To most of them, the falling number of speakers of Chinese vernaculars around them is evidence of language loss:

> **JU** (P4): ''…our generation now already do not speak much dialect…''

Even more so, in self-reflection of their language shift away from Chinese vernaculars, and their declined usage of it, participants generally are very pessimistic about the possibility of maintenance. Participants also felt that English and Mandarin had displaced these vernaculars extensively within Singapore society:

> **YX** (P6): ''…most people have moved beyond to just concentrate on Mandarin and English.''

Others believed that there was just no incentive or importance for maintaining the use of vernaculars, and they do not perceive any official support for it either:

> **C** (P13): ''…being eroded in the education system, because it's already an unofficial kind of thing, when things become unofficial, become informal, you see an erosion when things go somewhat like underground.''

However, some optimism for language maintenance came from the observation that for the lower-income group in Singapore, Chinese vernaculars would continue to be used within their households, as expressed by M (P2):

> ''…there will always be this group of lower income families who
> are not as highly educated and for certain they will speak dialect
> and their children will pick it up. So if not majority, there will
> be a minority who still speak dialect.''

In addition, some participants pointed out a resurgence of interest in Chinese vernaculars, especially in Singapore popular media. Michelle (P2) notes that:

> ''…recently 881[5] and this kind of movies came up and a group of
> young people will be interested in speaking Hokkien and think
> Hokkien is cool. There was a report that more people went to watch
> 'Ge Tai' which uses Hokkien songs.''

Those there was some optimism, the general belief is for the language to gradually fade away due to it shrinking domain.

Self-assessments / self-reflections on language maintenance

Both nuclear and extended family participants recorded similar beliefs with regards to the question: ''*Will you speak to your children in Chinese dialects? Why?*' These beliefs were largely similar to the current communicative practice between their parents and themselves in the home domain. Firstly, some of the participants were passive towards Chinese vernacular maintenance among their children in the future:

> **YX** (P6): ''Beyond a few customary phrases, no.''
>
> **N** (P10): ''…it depends, maybe if they want to learn I would.''

In addition, consistent with previous negative assessments of the value of Chinese vernaculars, the importance of teaching English and Mandarin to their children was emphasised:

> **E** (P1): ''…I would still use English or Chinese as a foundation…
> when you go to school or enter the business world, English or
> Chinese is more important. It's what people use to converse, not
> dialect.''
>
> **HM** (P18): ''Chinese and English is sufficient so what's the point
> of using dialects?''
>
> The only participant who felt strongly for the maintenance of
> vernaculars was YH (P5). He said:
>
> ''Yes, I will speak to them in a myriad of languages, they will be
> as multilingual as I am.''

---

[5]   A locally produced movie which was a big hit both at home and abroad. Hokkien was widely used and sung in this movie. It has been credited to revive nostalgia and fervor in the maintenance of Hokkien.

However, it must be noted that though YH was from a nuclear family, he had grown up speaking only in vernaculars with his parents because his parents had a low proficiency in both English and Mandarin. He is an interesting exception among our participants in this respect.

Support for efforts towards Chinese dialect maintenance and preservation

Across almost all the participants, there was an agreement that they would support a campaign to maintain Chinese vernaculars in Singapore. There was a general feeling of sadness and waste in the loss of the Chinese vernaculars:

> **E** (P1): ''It would be sad… Just the thought that generations from now, no one will speak Teochew or Cantonese at all in Singapore, it's just going to die, it's just very sad, the thought.''
>
> **SW** (P8): ''It's a part of history and would be a pity if it dies out.''

Of greater significance, is the fact that certain participants were unaffected by the loss of the vernaculars, and did not see any purpose in maintenance efforts. There were also participants who would support such language maintenance campaigns, but had strong doubts regarding its eventual success.

Most of the expressed pessimism towards a large-scale language maintenance effort ironically came from the extended-family participants, who felt that they did not mind if the dialect was completely lost:

> **A** (P16): ''There is no practical use for it… I don't think [that it would be wasted if dialects died out] so.''
>
> **HM** (P18): ''If it happens (Chinese dialects die out), it happens.''

Some participants also felt that it was difficult for such a campaign to achieve success, due to their perceptions of Singaporeans' general attitudes towards Chinese dialect use:

> **C** (P13): ''… I have my reservations on its success… for people (Singaporeans) to see its importance is difficult.''

On the whole, there were mixed responses towards these hypothetical large-scale language maintenance efforts. Even the speakers with positive orientation are not optimistic about the eventual maintenance of Chinese vernaculars.

7.   Discussion

The interview data helps us to understand the effects of family structure on individual identity, attitudes and evaluation toward Chinese vernaculars. Three main differences can be identified among participants living in

extended families, and those living in nuclear families. Firstly, the presence of parent-to-grandparent interactions, within an extended family, provides a certain amount of passive language input for participants, which is not available for participants living in a nuclear family.

Secondly, opportunities for frequent participant interaction with grandparents, and increased chances to actively use vernaculars in a communicative context, are available to the former group of extended-family participants, but not to the latter group of nuclear family participants.

Finally, living in an extended family, provides participants with an opportunity to establish stronger relationships with grandparents, especially if their grandparents played a primary role in their upbringing, to some extent, building an inseparable connection between language and emotional attachment to their grandparents. This strengthens the perceived value of Chinese vernaculars, among extended-family participants, in ways that may be inconceivable to the nuclear family participants. The connection between family relationship-maintenance and language is best demonstrated in Fillmore's (2000) case study of a Chinese family in the United States in the midst of intergenerational language shift. She describes the family in question as one in which there is little understanding across generations due to language barriers. Sadly, in this case, the young boy in her study ignored his grandmother and stopped speaking to her altogether, effectively precluding any possibility of a relationship between grandparent and child. In contrast, some of the participants in our study living in an extended family have readily acknowledged the intimate connection that developed with their grandparents through the use of Chinese vernaculars when communicating with them.

However, the interview data indicates that there are important individual differences in the language identity and attitudes towards Chinese dialect among the participants living in an extended family. In particular, the subgroup of extended family participants who speak to grandparents using only Chinese vernaculars *(Group E1)*, attribute a greater importance towards the use of Chinese vernaculars than nuclear family participants. In addition, they also express a distinct emotional importance and recognize the functional value of using Chinese vernaculars, identifying strongly with both their Chinese dialect group and a mainstream Chinese ethnic group. Another subgroup of the extended family participants who speak roughly an equal proportion of Chinese vernaculars and English or Mandarin with their grandparents *(Group E3)*, are not too different, in terms of their attitudes and evaluations toward Chinese vernaculars when compared to the first subgroup. The main difference, however, between these two subgroups, is that participants in the first subgroup *(Group E1)* express a

stronger hybrid identity, in terms of being both a member of a particular dialect group, as well as belonging to the larger Chinese ethnic group in society. Most participants in the second subgroup *(Group E3)* had the tendency to identify themselves solely as Chinese, and being a member of a Chinese dialect group was not part of their self-definition.

This is a significant and pronounced social change. Up till the 80s, "Clan Associations", which usually converge along "dialect ethnic" lines were still active. The Hokkien Association, for example, boasted a strong membership but this has whittled away drastically in the last two decades because of the Speak Mandarin Campaign (Leong, 2007). One of the main aims of the "Speak Mandarin Campaign" was to eradicate the ethnic divisions within the Chinese group and judging from the responses of the participants in this sample, it has achieved its purpose. Li *et al.* (1997) reported a shift from a Teochew identity to a pan-Chinese identity in their participants. This is also evident in the current sample.

The last subgroup of extended family participants *(Group E2),* those that speak almost no vernaculars with their grandparents, and speak mostly or completely in English and Mandarin to communicate with their grandparents, has vastly different identity and attitudinal conceptions when compared to the first two subgroups. Their responses indicate a sense of detachment with regards to their feelings about Chinese vernaculars, and they do not perceive their Chinese dialect as important as English or Mandarin. In addition, they do not regard Chinese vernaculars as having any functional or emotional value. Interestingly, the positive influence that living in an extended family on language attitudes and identification towards Chinese vernaculars, seemed to be marginal for participants in this subgroup. Linguistic accommodation on the part of grandparents towards English or Mandarin in grandparent-grandchild interaction may be a significant reason to explain this phenomenon. Grandparents accommodating to their grandchildren, in terms of language choice, may have offset the effects of the extended family structure on bringing about positive language attitudes in their grandchildren. By using English or Mandarin rather than Chinese dialect in grandparent-grandchild interaction, the cross-generation input and transmission of dialect is lost.

This is a point also highlighted in Anderson's (1998) study of language shift among the Northern Arapaho community in the United States, where he also found an asymmetrical direction of accommodation in communicative practices, where the bilingual speakers (and older generations) tended to accommodate to the monolingual English speakers (younger members of the community). Sandel *et al.* (2006) also found a similar trend of the elderly accommodating to younger speakers (in terms of language choice) within the home domain. In our study, although grandparents live under the same roof for the subgroup *(Group E2)* of participants, the grandchildren

cannot reap the benefits of their presence because the opportunity to converse in Chinese vernaculars with their grandparents is almost non-existent.

In the light of these findings, one cannot assume that living with grandparents will unquestioningly contribute to a greater use of the language to be maintained in the home domain. Even though living in an extended family presented participants with a degree of opportunity to interact with their grandparents using the minority language, the participants did not always use this opportunity presented by their family environment. In tandem with these observations, it can also be said that actual language use in the family domain is a key determinant of the development of positive language attitudes and identities, rather than simply living with one's grandparents.

Additionally, in view of the interview data, the working of language ideology in Singapore, through concrete language policy maneuvers, has clearly affected participants', with regards specifically to their perceptions of the value of different languages and varieties in their linguistic landscape. The government's language policy of providing institutional support for English and Mandarin, but denying other Chinese vernaculars of any formal recognition, has impacted on both extended family and nuclear family participants. Both groups of participants have consistently, in their interviews, expressed the sentiment that English and Mandarin are more practical languages for education, as well as for wider communication in the working world. Opinions on future language maintenance, too, has reflected the workings of this policy as all the participants generally felt that they would prioritize the importance of English and Mandarin, over and above other Chinese vernaculars to their children in the future. In this way, the functional value of English and Mandarin are emphasized, in accordance to a predominant language ideology, which believes in English as a language for communication between ethnic groups, and Mandarin as serving communication needs across the different Chinese dialect groups (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999).

However, it can be argued that for extended family participants (that spoke with grandparents using only Chinese vernaculars, (*Group E1*), this ideology is contested in certain ways. To them, even though there is the explicit acknowledgement that English and Mandarin serve significant purposes, and that their use of Chinese dialect is limited in its scope, in particular, the home domain, they still inherently hold on to a Chinese-dialect group identity, together with another broader mainstream Chinese identity. In this sense, the prevailing official language ideology has not succeeded in displacing this social identification completely, even if it has made it less salient over the years, through campaigns such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC). In this sense, the effects of living in an extended family,

and having increased opportunities of language use with grandparents, has to some extent, fostered distinct and strong identities which ideology cannot replace. In addition to this, the same subgroup of extended family participants (*Group E1*), also expressed more specific understandings and appreciation of the value of the various Chinese vernaculars, such as that of serving a functional need of elderly communication, and bridging the gap between older and younger Singaporeans. In reference to their own experiences in conversing with their grandparents using Chinese vernaculars, some of the participants, particularly those in the extended family group also recognize that the vernaculars share functional communicative purposes. They can see that they are unique in conveying meaning and they have as much importance, but perhaps in a different way, in comparison to English or Mandarin.

As Michael Clyne (2003) puts it, the decision to pursue any degree of language maintenance or shift strongly depends on the individual. His work on language contact situations in Australia highlights that individuals make important cost-benefit decisions relating to the languages they choose or choose not to speak. On one hand, the use of particular varieties can be motivated by individuals' beliefs that it presents an opportunity to express multiple identities which they inhabit, or even as a tool for effective communication, and solidarity-building within the family unit. On the other hand, however, individuals need to grapple with concerns that these varieties can be a negative burden or 'baggage' on their identity, and with issues of negative 'identification from the wider society'. His explanation cogently captures the internal conflict that this group of participants in our study *(Group E1)* find themselves in, and highlights the tension between their recognition of the value of Chinese vernaculars (in the home domain), and top-down attempts by the government to legislate language in the social sphere.

The proscription and denigration of other Chinese vernaculars best seen through the Speak Mandarin Campaign, has also, to a large extent been effective. More specifically, the stereotypes of these vernaculars as coarse, unrefined and indicative of someone who is uneducated (see Bokhorst-Heng, 1999) permeated our participants' responses. However, it is also true that for some extended family participants, "dialects" resonate with them at a deeper and more emotional level. It is a language associated with nostalgia and a deep sense of affection and bond with their grandparents.

In conclusion, our research has established the extent to which living in an extended family, can have specific implications for language attitudes and identity constructions. More importantly, our study has distinguished different circumstances of language use within an extended family that lead to varying language attitudes. Finally, adopting a more macro-sociolinguistic perspective, we examined how language ideology was

reflected in the interview responses of our participants, as well as how these propagated beliefs, and value systems, were altered radically by the effects of living in an extended family. In doing so, the extent to which language ideology has been successful in the Singaporean context was reassessed, in relation to our current key findings.

It must be emphasized, at this point, that due to the limited sample size used in our research, the results may not be indicative of a larger population of Singaporeans. However, it is hoped that this study constitutes a key milestone in the study of language attitudes, especially in relation to Chinese vernaculars in Singapore, and provides a prelude to larger-scale studies. This study, even if not all encompassing – hopefully will provide some initial data and observations on the younger generation's affiliations with Chinese vernaculars in comparison to other standard languages.

More importantly, it highlights the effects of family structure on language use and attitudes. It is essential that studies be conducted to understand how different degrees of attachment to grandparents could be crucial in language use patterns and corresponding language attitude creations. As indicated by Giles and Johnson (1987), it is easier to influence the course of language maintenance in the private and safe boundaries of the home environment. The more we understand the dynamics of this environment in promoting language maintenance, the more likely we are to stem language shift.

8.   Concluding remarks

This study was conducted at a time when Singapore was commemorating the 30th year of the ''Speak Mandarin Campaign''. As a result, the issue of successful bilingualism and the demise of Chinese ''dialects'' were very topical in various public forums. Many strong opinions about the issue were publically debated (see Chay, Lee & Chong, 2009) for a synopsis of all the views expressed. A comment by a blogger will be repeated here to pay a tribute all the grandparents in this study.

> ''Can and should we measure the value of a language based on the number of speakers who speak it? Must everything be valued by a quantifiable measure? So what if only a village of 20 people speak that dialect? If one of that 20 is my grandfather, that ONE person means a lot to me. And he is a part of my history and my family, which I will lose if I don't speak that dialect.'' (by Carpediem, March 19, 2009)

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