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Conflicts between World Englishes:

Online Metalinguistic Discourse about Singapore Colloquial English

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Abstract

Negative attitudes of non-Singaporeans towards Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) are often used to support the Speak Good English Movement in Singapore. This article examines spontaneous metalinguistic discourse about SCE in an online Facebook group where Taiwanese migrants in Singapore gather for mutual support. Based on the idea that metalinguistic discourse is mediated through the social relation between interlocutors, this study reveals how the language ideologies surfacing in the investigated online space are formed through stance-taking processes between people sharing a nationality. We argue that this spatial context elicits and escalates negative ideologies of SCE, which are situated in popular hierarchies of varieties of English, and also hierarchies of Mandarin.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, language contact, language ideologies, migration, Singlish, social media, stance-taking

1. Introduction

This paper explores how Taiwanese migrants in Singapore discuss Singapore Colloquial English (SCE, a.k.a. Singlish) in an online Taiwanese group when the only shared social background is nationality. With the analytic framework of stance-taking, we highlight how language conflict is reproduced among co-national migrants when they align with each other in a metalinguistic discourse where Taiwanese migrants complain about SCE. These migrants do not confine their views to the English varieties in their repertoire. They reference a broader hierarchy of Englishes, not dissimilar to academic frameworks for studying symbolic order within World Englishes (WEs). This hierarchy of English varieties is then mapped onto a hierarchy of Mandarin varieties, which is relevant to the sociolinguistic similarities between Taiwanese and Singaporeans.

Various models have been put forward over the years to capture the relationships between WEs. Nation-states were assigned to the three circles of Kachru's model (Kachru 1986), according to "types of spread, patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used" (Kachru 1985: 12). Kachru intended for postcolonial "outer circle" countries such as India and Singapore to be viewed as norm-providing (Kachru 1991), but the model has occasionally had the unintended consequence of reifying the inner circle, and its association with nativeness (Park and Wee 2009: 392). Schneider's (2003, 2007) "dynamic model" more flexibly assigns postcolonial nation-states to a developmental stage of self-actualisation in their relationship with English, depending on the linguistic evidence for a local norm, and its adoption by institutions. Speaker ideology is not prominent in either of these accounts, but it is not absent. For example, during the "nativization" stage of Schneider's model, in which local features emerge, growth of the L2 community goes hand in hand with an increase in complaints about non-standard English.

Although language contact has, in many ways, been at the heart of these models, they have been challenged more recently for their focus on relatively formal, monolingual usage over, for example, creative multilingual performances such as new forms of rap and hip hop associated with globalisation (Pennycook 2003; Mair 2013: 254). These novel contexts have called the modelling of WEs around the unit of the nation-state into question. It has long been an issue, however, that national standard Englishes like Indian English receive more attention than ethnically bounded varieties (Canagarajah 1999). Mair (2013) eschews nation-state as a unit of analysis in favour of *ethnoscape* or *mediascape* (after Appadurai 1996), where relationships of power between varieties of English are played out. Such "scapes" have local hierarchies, such as Nigerian Pidgin English and Nigerian English in an online forum for the Nigerian diaspora. On this platform members are strongly influenced by "hyper-central" standard American English (AmE), but also by "super-

central” non-standard varieties such as AAVE and Jamaican Creole (2013: 262).

Yet as research into WEs has shifted its focus, for Park and Wee (2009), the nation-state continues to dominate speakers’ linguistic ideologies. They argue that in transnational interactions, “encounters with the language of the Other are typically mediated by imagined communities at the level of the nation state” (2009: 401). This is very evident in the discourse of Taiwanese migrants, where ownership of English is explored in terms of nationality.

In this forum, the Taiwanese migrants express concern about their uncertain linguistic status in Singapore. Historically, they share a repertoire with (Chinese) Singaporeans, namely Mandarin, Hokkien¹ and English, but the ecology of these languages is dramatically different in the host society. English is widely, often exclusively, used in Singapore. The Taiwanese migrants are, however, sensitive to the ambivalent status of SCE . On the one hand, SCE is feted as a unifying lingua franca for a multi-ethnic nation, a vessel of the nation’s culture, to be enjoyed in local media and promoted to tourists. On the other hand, anxiety about the perception of SCE by outsiders dominates Singapore’s campaign for an international business hub (Rubdy 2001). Some of the most prescriptive edges of the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) launched in 2000 may have faded, but the concerns expressed at the time by former Prime Minister Goh remain:

“Singlish is broken, ungrammatical English sprinkled with words and phrases from local dialects and Malay which English speakers outside Singapore have difficulties in understanding.” (Goh 1999)

“This is especially important for a hub city and an open economy like ours. If we speak a corrupted form of English that is not understood by others, we will lose a key competitive advantage.” (Goh 2000)

SGEM has been criticised from within Singapore as being “pedantic, preachy and even anti-Singlish” (Ang 2019). While the current SGEM committee is more sensitive to Singlish as an identity marker for Singaporeans, they still “emphasise the use of standard English as one way of connecting with others [...] across borders and cultures” (2019).

Several studies have explored how foreigners see their relationship with SCE. Kang (2012) interviewed South Korean mothers who chaperone their children in Singapore for its famously high quality English medium education. These mothers invoke two primary ideologies of SCE. The first is pragmatism: Korean mothers, despite mentioning some negative images of SCE (e.g.

¹ Hokkien people make up 39.7% of Chinese Singaporeans (Department of Statistics Singapore 2015) and 73.3% of Taiwanese people.

loud and unrefined), view Singlish as being useful locally. The second is sociolinguistic competence: the mothers believe their children, as future global elites, should have the flexibility to code-switch between different Englishes (Kang 2012). Such a view sees SCE as an inferior variety but also as a prosthesis for Korean children in Singapore to explore their potential for global mobility. In contrast, for blue-collar migrant workers, metalinguistic discourse on SCE is interlinked with how they negotiate their social inferiority (McKay 2013; Rubdy and McKay 2013). For example, Filipino domestic workers and Indian construction workers distance themselves from SCE and resist their lower social status in Singapore by asserting the superiority of Filipino and Indian English to SCE. McKay (2013) believes that, compared to nationality, social class has more influence on their language ideologies concerning SCE.

The above studies reveal the relationship between one's language ideology and one's social position. Sociolinguists have found that emergence of language ideology in interaction also results from the stance-taking processes between interlocutors (e.g. Jaffe 2009; Morgan 2017). Stance-taking concerns "taking up a position with respect to the form or the content of one's utterance" (Jaffe 2009: 3). Interviewees do not only take a stance on the language or variety under discussion, but also the language ideologies or social positions of researchers. Morgan gives the example of a participant (from her fieldwork on Albania) taking a position on standardisation she believes to be in line with the values of the Western interviewer (2017: 13). She argues that rather than taking the metalinguistic comments collected from interviews at face value, researchers should consider the inter-subjectivity between interlocutors when analysing language ideologies. For example, in the aforementioned research, Korean mothers' projection of their kids as "global citizens" (Kang 2012: 174) may have to do with their alignment to the researcher as a Korean intellectual affiliated with the top university in Singapore.

In Seilhamer (2015), six English graduates in Taiwan are profiled by their former teacher through (mostly online) participant observation and in-depth interviews. Given the roles of the interlocutors, it is not surprising that participants' past academic performance in English, and their continued positive affective relationship with the language, figure heavily in these co-constructed stories. When pressed, participants tended to disavow ownership of English, often on the grounds of self-perceived low proficiency. Ideologies of ownership are mixed, with some subscribing to an inheritance paradigm, and others to an "imagined global community of English users" (2015: 378). Where there is enthusiasm for AmE, this is framed in terms of personal relationships. The variety of English learnt or spoken by Taiwanese as a group is not explored in the biographies, which further confirms that connections between English and nationality are more likely to emerge

through mutual stance-taking between compatriots, in settings such as the one we investigate here.

Inter-subjectivity is also at work between interlocutors in spontaneous conversation. By uncovering the dynamics of stance-taking in spontaneous data, we can gain insights into how language ideologies of SCE can emerge in a particular community. The data analysis will be preceded by an introduction to the context of Taiwanese migrants in Singapore, and an overview of the Facebook discourse markers relevant to this study. The data analysis is organized around three key posts and their responses.

2. Taiwanese migrants in Singapore: research background

Pre-1997, Taiwan and Singapore were referred to as two of the “four tigers”, along with South Korea and Hong Kong, thanks to rapid industrialisation. However, due to recent wage stagnation, Taiwanese people have been reported seeking opportunities abroad, with Singapore being one of the major destinations (Lin 2014).

Taiwanese media negatively frame this talent outflow as opening an era of *Táiláo* ‘Taiwanese labours’ (*-láo* ‘labour’ refers to blue-collar workers). *The Straits Times* (July 24, 2013), under the headline “Foreign labor from new places”, noted a trend in the food and beverage sector in Singapore to hire Taiwanese service staff, with Singaporean restaurateurs arguing that “Taiwanese are keen to come here because of bleak job prospects at home”.

Besides Taiwanese youths working as blue-collar workers, since 2009, Taiwan has also seen an outflow of white-collar workers to Singapore, for example in the high-tech industry (Huang 2019). Family migration is a major component of the Taiwanese population in Singapore, including white-collar workers’ families and marriage migrants (Chiang & Huang 2014). Chiang and Huang (2014: 87) quote a Taiwanese female who complains about “being cheated” by her Singaporean husband:

“Even to this day, I cannot adapt to Singapore. I feel ‘cheated’ by my husband who said that he would continue to work in Taiwan when we were married. As English is regarded as a ‘superior’ language compared to Chinese by Singaporeans, people looked down on those who spoke Chinese... English is used by all government officials. Five years ago, when China got wealthy, people valued the Chinese language more”.

This Taiwanese migrant ascribed her failure to adapt to Singapore to the linguistic discrimination of Singaporeans against Mandarin speakers. Taiwanese migration to Singapore has

shifted the previous socioeconomic symmetry within the four tigers to a recent asymmetry where Singapore has occupied a relatively higher status within the Asian market. In the new global order, Taiwanese migrants believe Singaporeans feel superior because they speak English. This prominent iconicity of English, however, has been complicated by the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Taiwanese people, as Mandarin speakers from the “inner circle” of Global Mandarin (GM), are in a position of power relative to Singaporeans who are in the “outer circle” of GM (Goh and Lim 2010). Taiwanese people consequently see themselves as having more bargaining power because of their status of Mandarin-speaking immigrants in a global linguistic market. Similar self-positioning can be observed among Taiwanese mothers who chaperone their children in Singapore for education. Taiwanese mothers are reluctant to be addressed as *péidú māmā* (lit. mothers who accompany children for study) as this term was developed by PRC mothers and has been stigmatised due to Singaporeans’ negative perceptions of PRC migrants (Lin 2010). Taiwanese mothers prefer to be addressed as *Táimā* (lit. Taiwanese mothers) as they believe compared to PRC Chinese migrants, Singaporeans in general have more positive perceptions of Taiwanese migrants.

This positive perception, however, seems to collide with demonstrated xenophobia in Singapore. The same Taiwanese mothers in Lin (2010) note that their children’s English competence is looked down upon by Singaporeans. A Taiwanese mother claimed that her daughter spoke AmE at school but was required by the teacher to speak SCE instead. Another reported that a teacher labelled her child as a foreigner whose poor English lowers the average score of the whole class. These Taiwanese mothers criticise SCE as inauthentic and second-class English to resist being characterised as socially inferior (Lin 2010: 47-53).

In contrast to Korean mothers, for whom early English education in Singapore is a class marker of “cosmopolitan striving” in Korean society (Kang 2012: 169), Taiwanese mothers decide to accompany their children to Singapore not only for pull factors from Singapore but also push factors from Taiwan (Lin 2010). Due to the perception of Taiwan’s quality of life as low, non-blue-collar Taiwanese migrants may feel themselves to be socially inferior. This surfaces in narratives where the Taiwanese report they have been discriminated against because Singaporean people believe themselves to be superior. Social inferiority becomes a collective perception among Taiwanese people in Singapore. This paper portrays how this collective perception contributes to the production and reproduction of language ideologies in the online group where Taiwanese migrants interact.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Concepts and methods

3.1.1 Ethnic enclaves

Ethnic enclaves are bounded spaces that are linked to a particular ethnic minority. They have two major functions that are relevant to our analysis (Page 2019). First, ethnic enclaves offer a “shielding function” in which members of an ethnic community protect one another physically, socially or culturally. When the members encounter “discriminatory behaviour of host-nationals”, they may seek emotional, social, or physical support from their fellow nationals. Besides, when the members come to the ethnic enclave, their ethnic identity is no longer marked, as they become the majority of this space. The complaints about SCE analysed here and the responses to them can be considered an illustration of the shielding function. Many of them concern how Taiwanese migrants believed they encountered discrimination from Singaporeans for speaking different English varieties from SCE. Second, ethnic enclaves perform a “cultural function”: members maintain their distinctive ethnic identity when they feel a sense of belonging from their fellow members. Our analysis also illustrates how Taiwanese identity is reproduced and strengthened in discussions about SCE.

3.1.2 Facebook discourse markers

The online ethnic space is pseudonymised as TIS in this study. TIS is a public Facebook group with more than 15,000 members. Anyone (even non- Facebook users) may see posts in this group, but users need to join this group if they wish to comment on the posts. The following strategies were adopted to preserve anonymity: (1) all IDs are pseudonymised (2) the original text is not included. (If the analysis concerns pragmatics shown in the original text, limited original text at phrasal level is offered) (3) the date when a post is published is not specified.

In the “about” section of this group, the administrators offer the following guidance:

“[...] this community expects everyone to share your life and/or working experiences with your co-nationals in this foreign land, to mutually help and interact with each other [...]. Inappropriate posts will be deleted by the administrators. For new members of this group, there are some rules: 1. No politics. 2. No personal feeling about your private life. [...]”²

² All translations are the authors’, unless otherwise noted.

As TIS is explicitly a group where members are supposed to be friendly and supportive, understanding how “Like” and “Comment” work in Facebook becomes important when we look at conversations in this online space.

West’s (2015) interactional sociolinguistic approach to Facebook shows that a virtual dialogical space is shaped by the actions of “Like” and “Comment”, driven in turn by social-networking considerations. A virtual ethnic enclave thus shares many similarities with a real ethnic enclave. According to the way Facebook works, in a public group, a user’s “Like” or “Comment” to any post is likely to appear in their friends’ “news feed” if they are also members of that group. Any action users take on a single post is a potential danger to their social networking, if their friends who are members of this group disagree with them. Theoretically, the best strategy is not to take any action on a post which is controversial. However, if users do not take any action on a post, we do not yet have a way of analysing this inaction sociolinguistically. Therefore, an analysis should start with the second most conservative action— “Like”.

“Like” is presented as *zàn* in the Taiwanese version of Facebook, a word which on its own means ‘to praise’ or ‘to commend’. The number of “Likes” for a post is usually higher than the number of “Comments”. West (2015: 54) argues “Like” is a “notable not”. “Like” is usually the way members of a social network avoid making comments and simultaneously manage “not to be silent and critical”. It is “the main way members avoid ‘hearable’ silences” (2015: 54). However, as when a post receives more “Likes”, this post is weighted more by the Facebook algorithm and has more chances of appearing on other users’ news feed (2015: 54). While clicking “Like” is personally safe, this action practically ensures that a discourse is circulated to more members of that group. That is, a post with many “Likes” is personally silent but publicly loud.

Although “Like” is positive, its discursive function varies. For example, “Like” can be used to express empathy to a sad post (before 2017 after which time Facebook has offered alternatives to “Like”). “Like” is in many cases “the unmarked response of a post” (2015: 88), ambiguous in nature, and subject to the viewers’ own interpretations of such an action.

Different from “Like”, “Comment” is an explicit way to respond to the post. While a poster and commenters do not share the same physical environment as face-to-face interlocutors do, they draw on topical resources in the Facebook post to evoke a sense of sharing a place (2015: 111). A virtual dialogical space is shaped between commenters and the poster as if they shared physical space. Intertextual ties “create coherent instances of dialogue between the Commenter and the poster”, in that each comment “typically links back to the original speaker's utterance” (2015: 146).

3.1.3 Stance-taking

We look at three stances in our analysis (Du Bois 2007). First, an “evaluative stance” is a stance taken on an object to characterise it “as having some specific quality or value” (2007: 143). Many of TIS members’ comments signal evaluative stances on SCE. For instance, “SCE is bad” (Excerpt 2). Second, an “affective stance” is a stance that positions a speaker along an affective scale, e.g. glad, amazed, etc. (2007: 143). As an ethnic enclave offers a shielding function, TIS members share their anger or frustration with SCE (speakers). Third, an “epistemic stance” is a stance taken on knowledge to show a speaker knows something (2007: 143). How knowledge of language is obtained is integral to the formation of language ideology. Through these three stance types, we can understand how language ideologies of SCE emerge, compete and are mainstreamed in this online ethnic enclave.

3.2 Metalinguistic comment analysis

A total of 30 posts was found to include SCE as the topic of a post. Of these, 11 posts involved a link to another website and were therefore excluded, as they have less weight in the Facebook algorithm. 10 of them simply shared SCE usage or funny videos about SCE. In these, posters engaged in little metalinguistic discourse, and comments were fillers, such as “thank you for sharing it”.

The three posts with the most comments were selected for this study, and these comments (see Table 1 for the number of comments) form the basis of the analysis. We start with a post seeking support for the author’s frustration with SCE, then move on to a post where a Taiwanese worker laughs at the failure of a local taxi driver to communicate with a Black foreigner in English, and end with a post on “funny” SCE phrases.

Table 1. Posts with SCE as the topic (**bold**: top three posts with the most comments/likes)

Topic	Year	Main idea	Likes	Comments
Seeking advice on dealing with SCE	2013	Seeking suggestions for improving English proficiency because the poster did not understand Singlish	14	41
	2012	Looking for someone to share whether they fail to understand Singlish in the workplace	1	23
	2013	Seeking for methods to quickly understand Singlish	29	117
	2013	Seeking for methods to overcome Singlish comprehension	10	29
	2016	What is your impression of Singlish?	6	6
Having communicative problems with SCE	2010	Singaporeans do not understand his pronunciation of 'triple'	0	2
	2015	A foreigner failed to understand a local driver	162	130
Personal thoughts on SCE	2012	Your children will speak Singlish in the future, so everybody should go to YouTube to check how Singlish sounds.	1	3

Table 1. Posts with SCE as the topic (**bold**: top three posts with the most comments/likes)

Topic	Year	Main idea	Likes	Comments
Looking for information about SCE	2013	What does 'suka' mean?	8	17
	2012	What do 'Teh susu', 'The si' 'kopi b', 'kopi c', 'milo susu' mean?	3	29
	2013	What does 'Who one' mean?	9	14
	2011	Is Spanglish the same as Singlish?	0	0
	2012	Asking whether an expression is Singlish?	0	5
	2015	What does 'Heng ah' mean?	10	6
Sharing SCE information	2011	Funny phrases in Singlish	15	47
	2012	Singlish 'Can'	75	12
	2013	A book on Singlish	45	26
Seeking for schools that teach standard English	2014	Looking for American schools	11	28
	2017	Looking for private English schools because the writer has picked up Singlish.	8 (1 'Haha')	4

3.2.1 Seeking advice on dealing with SCE

Excerpt 1: I don't understand local English (posted 2013)

Chen:

Is there anyone who can share with me how to quickly understand Singlish??

I am so frustrated now~~ T^T

29 Likes 117 Comments

In Excerpt 1, Chen seeks informational and emotional support from the ethnic space. Chen takes an epistemic stance that there is a shortcut to SCE proficiency. By using the word “frustrated” and a crying kaomoji (T^T), Chen takes a negative affective stance on SCE. Chen’s post does not receive a lot of “Likes”. For such a support-seeking post, an unmarked responsive marker “Like” which may bring about misunderstanding was not needed. TIS members instead directly comment below the post to offer their support.

Excerpt 2: First comments on Chen's post and Chen's further response

Tso:

It will be alright in half a year.

10 Likes

Chang:

Listen to me~ Singaporean English is a mixture of, English, Chinese, Malay, Taiwanese (Hokkien), and so on~ 😊

4 Likes

Chen:

That's precisely why it is bad [*Jiùshì zhèyàng cái zāogāo ā*]³~ Their English accent is really weird! And when I don't understand...they use the language I understand to despise me!!
T^T

3 Likes

In Excerpt 2, Tso responds to Chen's search for a quick method of understanding SCE, proposing that Chen will be all right after she has been in Singapore for more than half a year.

³ We acknowledge a reviewer's English translation for this.

Tso’s comment is an example of how the stance function is not always well-differentiated (Du Bois 2007: 114). A part of Tso’s comment is in affective alignment with Chen, in that she consoles Chen. However, she implies there is no quick method, in epistemic misalignment with Chen. The veiled misalignment results from the function of the ethnic space as a place for support rather than criticism. The implicit epistemic misalignment surfaces as another epistemic stance that SCE can be naturally picked up, albeit in a more medium period. Tso receives ten “Likes”, including Chen. The emerging metalinguistic discourse is that there are no resources which provide a shortcut to SCE proficiency.

The following commenter Chang also “Likes” Tso’s comment. He explains that SCE is made up of different languages. When Chang asks Chen to “listen to” him, he thinks Chen feels frustrated because she does not have this information. The use of a smiling emoji shows his affective alignment with Chen. Although Chang seems in epistemic misalignment with Chen, his comment about the hybridity of SCE, when linked with the absence of a shortcut and Chen’s frustration, entrenches a language ideology that the multiple substrate languages of SCE present outsiders with chaos and frustration. The ideology works on two levels: first, chaos and non-standardness are connected to the difficulty in finding materials of learning SCE; second, chaos implies this is not really a language and that is why it is hard to learn.

Chen “Likes” Chang’s comment to show she is in alignment with Chang’s epistemic stance on the hybridity of SCE. In Chen’s reply, the use of the phrase “*Jiùshì zhèyàng cái...*” also clarifies she knew this sociolinguistic fact.

<i>Jiùshì</i>	<i>zhèyàng</i>	<i>cái</i>	<i>zāogāo</i>	<i>ā</i>
precisely	such	thus	bad	PARTICLE

‘That’s precisely why it is bad.’

The utterance-final particle ‘*ā*’ is a pragmatic marker that shows the speaker assumes their interlocutor shares a common ground with them but for this speaker, their interlocutor does not appear to share the common ground (Wang 2019). Chen assumes the ideological link between a hybrid language and its inferiority should be common ground among TIS members. That is, while Chang’s epistemic stance is new, for Chen, Chang and she should share the same evaluative stance

which can be naturally inferred from Chang’s comment. Hybridity is then naturalised as the carrier of chaos, thereby frustrating non-SCE speakers.

Then, Chen takes a position on a new object —SCE speakers, who have been characterised as “feeling superior” (Section 2). Chen points out SCE speakers disdain her when she fails to understand SCE. She also indicates SCE speakers switch to a language that she understands to “despise” her (it is not specified whether it is code-switching or shifting to simpler English in the original text). The statement again ends with a crying kaomoji (T^T), confirming her negative affective stance on SCE speakers. The negative image of SCE speakers here validates the negative language attitudes against SCE.

Excerpt 3: Other immediate responses to Chen’s support-seeking

Lin:

Learning their English needs time!!! There is no shortcut

8 Likes

Chua:

Ha... You need to get used to it #^_^

1 Like

Tseng:

[Wikipedia link] There is some (usage) you can refer to, add oil (*Jiāyóu*)!!

6 Likes

In Excerpt 3, which follows Excerpt 2, by using the pronoun “their”, Lin shows his membership with Chen as a co-national. However, Lin’s epistemic stance that it takes time to learn SCE is in misalignment with Chen. Lin’s use of the term “shortcut” implies Chen is reluctant to spend time on learning SCE.

Following Lin, Chua comments that Chen should be used to SCE. Chua, with her surname and use of simplified Chinese in the original text, is a Singaporean. Her presence complicates the ongoing formation of language ideology against SCE, as the ethnic space is not mono-national anymore. Chua’s comment starts with an exclamation “ha” with an ellipsis, which means a wry smile, and ends with a kaomoji of embarrassment (#^_^). In kaomoji, ‘#’ represents wrinkles, usually used in negative emotions like anger or dissatisfaction⁴. That is, Chua is apparently in

⁴ <http://kaomoji.ru/> (accessed on 6 July 2020).

misalignment with Chen's affective, epistemic and evaluative stances on SCE. Chua's comment creates an awkward situation and only receives Chen's "Like" as an acknowledgement. Following Chua's comment, Tseng offers Chen a Wikipedia link to SCE usage – Tseng's comment is the first one that offers Chen resources to learn SCE. Tseng is in affective alignment with Chen, asking Chen to "add oil"⁵, equivalent to 'good luck' here.

Excerpt 4. Chen's acknowledgement

Chen:

I know it takes time to learn it~ but I think I should practice more and listen more!! It should be quicker to learn it...

2 Likes

Chen:

Thank you everyone~~

0 Like

Chen seems sensitive to the misaligned comments. In addition to "Likes", Chen acknowledges all the contributions from Lin, Chua and Tseng. Chen reflects that she knows it takes time to learn SCE, in misalignment with her original post. The ideology that there is a shortcut to acquiring SCE is relinquished.

Yet, Chen's acknowledgement does not put an end to the comments. TIS members further debate how much speech accommodation is required from Taiwanese migrants, invoking the same negative ideologies of SCE and SCE speakers. The debate is centred around the division between "us" (Taiwanese) and "other" (Singaporeans). A major argument emerges that Taiwanese immigrants do not necessarily need to accommodate to SCE, as it is an inferior variety.

Excerpt 5. Don't learn Singlish

Wang:

[...] I have been living here for more than 10 years. I try to maintain my Taiwan Mandarin as well as American English (my American husband has his role). I must not have a Singaporean accent. I'm afraid nobody can understand me in the future when I go abroad [if I pick up the

⁵ "Add oil" has multiple pragmatics functions, for example to cheer someone up, to wish someone good luck, to express solidarity, etc. In general, "add oil" is a discursive marker that signals a positive affective stance on interlocutors.

accent]. So, enjoy the Singaporean accent but don't speak with it fluently.

1 Like

In Excerpt 5, Wang shows an overt negative language ideology of SCE, initially licensed by Chen's opening remarks, but diverging from Chen's later acknowledgement of SCE as a language in need of proper learning. The trend to negatively comment on SCE and SCE speakers encounters mild resistance, in a similar vein to the first few comments. One of the administrators notices the metalinguistic discourse against SCE and comments:

Excerpt 6. Administrator's comment

Admin:

My English is not as good as yours, but since I picked up SCE, none of my colleagues has appeared confused when I speak English [...] It is unnecessary to emphasize which language is superior. The main point is to communicate [...]

7 Likes

The administrator shows misalignment with the negative evaluative stance on SCE and takes a new epistemic stance on the communicability of SCE. Notably, as stated in the rules of TIS, administrators are permitted to delete "inappropriate" posts. When the administrator joins the debate, metalinguistic discourse about SCE has been licensed as an apolitical and public issue that is debatable in this public space.

Excerpt 7. Chen's clarification

Chen:

I didn't mean to say Singlish is not good!! I simply want to seek help for quickly understanding [Singlish]...Each language has its cultural background...Singlish is not pollution to authentic English~ It's an innovation! But under such an innovation...still many people need to learn it so that they can catch it up...they should not be insulted and blamed!

1 Like

Excerpt 7 is Chen's final comment. Seeing her post becoming controversial, Chen clarifies her stance on SCE. She adopts a new epistemic and evaluative stance on SCE hybridity, where SCE becomes a good "innovation" rather than a negative "pollution" of the English language. The ideological resemblance between hybridity and inferiority is cancelled. Yet, as most of the commenters in this space are Taiwanese, the spatial context of this ethnic enclave constrains the

range of responses. Although the negative stance on SCE can be suppressed through other metalinguistic discourse, it is hard to show affective misalignment with Chen's frustration with SCE speakers. Chen retains her epistemic/evaluative stance on SCE speakers as victimisers who "insult" and "blame" SCE learners.

3.2.2 Having communicative problems with Singaporeans in English

Excerpt 8: Even Black foreigners don't understand Singlish (posted 2015)

Peng:

Discussion: Has anyone been corrected by Singaporeans for your accented English? Or has anyone ever corrected Singaporeans for their Mandarin [accent]? [...] Although my English is not superb, neither have I studied in the U.K. or U.S., I can use English to communicate. Our accents might be different. Why correct others' non-Singlish to make yourself feel superior? I could also say your Mandarin is not as good as mine! It is nice that each person is good at one language, isn't it? Today something similar happened again, so I want to gossip about it [...] I shared a taxi with [...] a Black foreigner. Because it was the driver's first time to take him, [...] the driver called him. When the Black foreigner got in the taxi, he told the driver next time he could just text him because he couldn't understand what the driver was saying. [...] The point is: even an English-speaking foreigner doesn't understand what the driver speaks [...]

162 Likes 130 Comments

Peng starts by categorising the post as "discussion", inviting TIS members to share their opinions. The first part of her post emphasises how unfriendly SCE speakers can be. To make her evaluative stance less targeted towards SCE speakers, Peng compares them with unfriendly Taiwan Mandarin (TwM) speakers. However, such a comparison is disingenuous. Considering the Taiwanese ethnic space, Taiwanese users are unlikely to admit they correct Singapore Mandarin (SgM) speakers, for Peng has framed the act of correcting negatively.

Invoking an established hierarchy of national Englishes, Peng implies that Singaporeans correct Taiwanese out of their self-positioning as speakers of better English. Although she is opposed to correction, she reminds readers of their elevated position by alluding to a hierarchy of GM, in which TwM is surely superior to SgM. Such an ideological move is also an act of boundary-making between unfriendly "outsiders/host-nationals" (Singaporeans) and friendly

“insiders/co-nationals” (Taiwanese).

When she moves on to the story part, her stance is more explicitly evaluative of SCE speakers. The word “gossip” informally invites readers not to take what follows seriously; thereby implying that her post should be pardoned from criticisms. In the story, the local taxi driver’s English was not intelligible for the “Black foreigner”. For Taiwanese readers, an English-speaking Black person, using a taxi to commute in Singapore, is likely to be from an inner circle English country. This English speaker therefore has authority to evaluate SCE, since compared with Singaporeans, they are perceived to have an ownership of English that is based on inheritance or nativeness (Seilhamer 2015). Peng uses a gossip genre to tell a “funny” story, which is in fact responding to the symbolic values connected to different English varieties. The narrative negates the legitimacy of SCE. The language ideology emerges that although SCE speakers self-position as speakers of good English, actually SCE is inferior. SCE speakers are positioned as illegitimate speakers of English who are not qualified to correct others’ English.

Following Peng’s negative stance on SCE speakers, a total of 162 “Likes” and 130 comments were received. Most of the comments cite personal experiences to present SCE speakers as unfriendly and narrow-minded people. None of the early comments challenges her negative evaluative stance on SCE and SCE speakers. Instead, as requested by Peng, commenters rush to share their stories of being corrected by SCE speakers.

Excerpt 9: Indian Singaporean patient asks me to use Singlish

Liang:

There was a complaint letter by an Indian patient against me. The reason: my English doesn’t have a Singaporean accent!! After the staff in charge of the complaint read the letter, he/she frowned at the patient and told her that I am not Singaporean, so it’s normal I don’t have a Singaporean accent! That Indian patient shook her head and at the same time used her thick Indian accented English to answer: “You should use Singaporean accent when you are in Singapore!”

31 Likes

Liang is a nurse. She shares her story of being corrected by an Indian Singaporean. Her comment receives 31 “Likes” (including Peng who has elicited this shared experience), which shows many members are in alignment with her stance on Singaporeans. When Taiwanese people mention Singaporeans, they usually think of Chinese Singaporeans. Liang’s example involving an Indian Singaporean is thus loaded. The local Indian patient is portrayed as an irrational person and

is stereotyped with her “shaking head”. The narrative that her local colleague “frowned at” the patient further frames the patient as irrational. The patient’s argument “*you should use Singaporean accent when you are in Singapore!*” is invalidated through Liang’s description of the patient as a speaker with the strong “Indian accent” (note, not “Singaporean Indian accent”). In Singapore, Indians are stereotyped as untrustworthy, argumentative, contentious, feared and comical (Tan 2004; Velayutham 2009). Liang draws on this ethnic stereotype to strengthen her framing of Singaporeans as unfriendly and irrational to foreigners. Recall that Peng highlights that SCE speakers wrongly self-position as good English speakers. Through a semiotic process of “fractal recursivity” (Irvine and Gal 2000), Liang echoes Peng by showing that Indian Singaporeans wrongly self-position as SCE speakers. While Liang’s comment is less concerned with SCE, her comment reinforces the image of Singaporeans in general as unfriendly, irrational and illegitimate users of the English language.

Excerpt 10. Cheng’s comment on Peng’s post

Cheng:

When I just arrived here, they often corrected my English. I also felt frustrated. I feel they are pretty weird. As an international country, they don’t seem to know there is such a thing called an accent? They should at least know British and American pronunciations are different.

5 Likes

Cheng uses “frustrated” to frame her affective stance on SCE speakers. Since an ethnic space serves to offer social support, authors share their frustration to elicit others’ positive affective stances. Cheng’s strategy of victimising herself is then validated by her argument that Singaporeans do not have enough metalinguistic awareness of English accents. There does seem to be, among Singaporeans, a degree of difficulty in identifying the vowel patterns that characterise British English (BrE) and AmE, although this improves with education, travel and media exposure (Starr 2019). Cheng is likely touching on an insecurity here. She constructs a language ideology which reveals that the conflict between English spoken by Taiwanese and SCE is in fact a conflict between AmE and BrE.

Excerpt 11. Be tolerant

Pan:

Some people correct others. Many people don’t know Taiwanese use American English and Singaporeans use British English. They cannot stand the English accent of mainland Chinese

more. It is inevitable to feel frustrated, but don't forget, when they correct you, four fingers are pointing at themselves. We should be more tolerant. Stop being angry, but also don't be influenced and speak Singlish... 😞 😊

13 Likes

Pan's comment (Excerpt 11) takes up the ideological construction of the conflict between Taiwanese English (TwE) and SCE as the conflict between AmE and BrE, which is in alignment with Cheng's epistemic stance. Meanwhile, she invokes the negative stereotypes of PRC immigrants in Singapore, locating PRC English speakers at an even more inferior position within the hierarchy of WEs. Interestingly, stereotypes of PRC immigrants are appropriated here not only to mark the superiority of TwE but to highlight the unfriendliness of SCE speakers. With the proverb "*when they correct you, four fingers are pointing at themselves*", SCE speakers are morally deprecated, and SCE metaphorically becomes the mistakes to be corrected (pointed by those four pointing fingers). At the end of Pan's comment, the earlier view of SCE as BrE makes way for a more powerful ideology of SCE as an undesirable language. Her appeal to other TIS members to be more "tolerant" invokes the earlier evaluative stance of SCE speakers as ignorant and contrasts the morally positive Taiwanese migrants with the immoral SCE speakers. The language ideology is reproduced—SCE is inferior but SCE speakers think they are superior, which is morally indefensible.

Excerpt 12. My Singaporean husband

Chu: My husband is Singaporean. I often don't understand his English accent, and he also doesn't understand my American accent. [...] We then speak Chinese. However, [...] his Chinese is not as good as mine. [...] What I could say is respect each other. Tell them your Chinese is not as fantastic as ours, so don't want to correct others' English accent!!

12 Likes

In Excerpt 12, Chu shares her experience of dealing with her Singaporean partner's English. The language ideology that Taiwanese people speak AmE is reproduced. However, the equivocation of SCE with BrE in the earlier comments has been erased. As a result, the language conflict between Chu and her partner becomes a conflict between AmE and SCE, an inner circle variety and an outer circle variety. Chu describes how her husband's SgM is "not as fantastic as" her TwM, again placing the language use of her Singaporean partner in an inferior position, this time in a hierarchy of Mandarin. Namely, SCE speakers are speaking inferior languages (both

English and Mandarin), so they have no authority to “correct” Taiwanese people as the speakers of both inner circle English and Mandarin varieties.

The strength of the ethnic enclave in this fresh exchange prevents users from challenging the poster. The language ideologies are formed from the contrasts drawn between Taiwanese people and Singaporean people. TwE is presented as AmE, and Taiwanese people are moral, knowledgeable and tolerant, while SCE is cast as an inferior language, and SCE speakers as unfriendly, irrational, and ignorant of metalinguistic knowledge.

3.2.3 Sharing Singlish information

In the category of sharing information about SCE, posters usually treat SCE information as something ‘funny’. The intention of these posts is not necessarily bad. However, the poster cannot control how members respond to such a post.

Excerpt 13: Singlish as a joke (posted 2011)

Yang:

Some jokes about Singlish: *this girl 'no three no four'* (*Bù sān bú sì*), *'he see me no up'* (*Tā kànbùqǐ wǒ*), *'put your horse come'* (*Fàng mǎ guòlái*), *'where got?'* (*Nǎ yǒu?*)

15 Likes

In Excerpt 13, Yang shares SCE phrases described as “jokes” because these phrases are all morpheme-by-morpheme translation from Mandarin. For example, “*no three no four*” is translated from a Chinese idiom which is equivalent to “neither fish, flesh nor fowl” in English:

<i>Bù</i>	<i>sān</i>	<i>bù</i>	<i>sì</i>
not	three	not	four

‘It’s neither three nor four.’

Likewise, “*to see someone no up*” is from Mandarin, meaning ‘to look down upon someone’ (Chng 2003). “*To put your horse come*” is roughly equivalent to ‘bring it on’. The last phrase, SCE “*Where got?*” corresponds to the Mandarin phrase *Nǎ yǒu* (lit. where exists), used to question the interlocutor’s proposition.

As Mandarin speakers, TIS members can understand this ‘sense of humour’. Below the post, TIS members offer other SCE phrases which they see as “jokes”. Their evaluative stances on SCE are similar— “funny”. The language ideology is formed that SCE is simply a language that directly translates Mandarin into English, undermining the status of SCE as a language. After another nine similar comments emphasising how hilarious SCE is, we find a comment which takes a reflexive stance on the dominant metalinguistic discourse.

Excerpt 14: Please respect Singlish (posted 2011)

Huang:

This kind of Singlish, for me, is just like “Taiwan Guoyu”, which sounds very familiar. It’s like how we Taiwanese speak Mandarin. Everyone knows how to speak Mandarin, but can everyone speak with the perfect Beijing accent? Sometimes, “Taiwan Guoyu” is also very cute... Auntie Wen Ying is also famous, isn’t she? Respect the local culture. Gossips are okay. [...] (Think about it. Is the pronunciation of Taiwanese people’s English standard enough? To be frank, what I’ve heard is mostly “Taiwanglish”, but it sounds cute and familiar! Respecting others is respecting yourself.)

9 Likes

Huang’s comment takes a reflexive stance displaying both metalinguistic and ideological awareness. He is obviously in misalignment with the previous evaluative stances taken on SCE. Nevertheless, he still needs to hedge on conflict with his co-nationals, so he says “gossips are okay”. The analogy between SCE and “Taiwan Guoyu”, the other stigmatised Mandarin variety with phonological transfer from Taiwanese Hokkien, emerges as a powerful “contextualization cue” (Gumperz 1982), which appeals to Taiwanese collective memory. Auntie Wen Ying, an elder actress known for speaking “Taiwan Guoyu” is the personification of the contextualisation cue. Here, Huang takes a positive affective stance on his fellow Taiwanese and simultaneously challenges their evaluative stance on SCE.

“Taiwan Guoyu” formed when Taiwanese Hokkien speakers learned Mandarin during the Mandarin-only movement in Taiwan. As a stigmatised variety, it is linked to “congeniality” and “backwardness” (Su 2009). A verbal guise study on language attitudes shows that Taiwan Guoyu is considered, among the five Mandarin varieties tested, the least professional, the least prestigious, the least standard, but the friendliest (Khoo 2019). Huang strategically uses “Taiwan Guoyu” to assign Taiwanese people the same stigmatised (inferior) status as SCE speakers within the global linguistic market. He then indicates that Taiwanese do not speak AmE but speak “Taiwanglish”.

AmE is “a desirable goal” in Taiwan (Yeh 2013). An indigenised TwE not only has a much lower value but is in no way linked with a collective Taiwanese identity. When Huang invokes such a contextualisation cue, TIS members can perceive the stigma connected to “Taiwanglish”. Huang’s challenge to the negative stance taken on SCE takes the form of an in-group talk. After Huang, comments shift to serious discussions on the etymology of SCE phrases.

4. Discussion

Two broad language ideologies compete in this online Taiwanese space. First, SCE is an inferior language in the global market of WEs, which does not legitimise the power asymmetry between Singaporeans and Taiwanese. In some studies, this ideology is triggered by social class, for example the blue-collar South(east) Asian migrants in McKay (2013); Rubdy and McKay (2013). Here, it is triggered by the expression of common nationality among Taiwanese nationals who occupy an ambiguous position in Singaporean society. Second, an ideology of cultural relativism is sometimes invoked —SCE is like any other language with its own culture which should be respected. In TIS, the latter is formed in response to the former.

Although some comments challenge the ongoing formulation of negative ideologies against SCE, they are framed in a relatively mild way. As the administrators have set a tone for TIS as a place where members mutually support each other, TIS works much like an actual ethnic enclave. Besides, the fact that the administrators did not delete any of the posts means users’ comments on SCE and/or SCE speakers were not considered inappropriate in this public forum. Instead, language conflict between Taiwanese migrants and SCE speakers was seen as a collective rather than individual concern. Regardless of the epistemic and evaluative stances, users of such an ethnic space tend to align with one another affectively. Metalinguistic discourse is thereby developed through the shared experiences among Taiwanese migrants.

Given that the national status of the Taiwanese migrants is the basis of their interaction, it is not surprising that their ideologies of English are expressed at the level of the nation-state. It is the choices that they make at this level that are striking. Collectively, they subscribe to an inheritance model, which positions American native speakers as the national owners of English (Seilhamer 2015). The adoption of AmE, however, is presented as a nationally determined choice of the Taiwanese, rather than as an individual preference. This national adoption of inner circle, native, AmE as a model, confers status on the Taiwanese migrants. The Taiwanese may not be the owners of English, but in their exonormative orientation, they have higher status than the

endonormatively oriented Singaporeans. They also have higher status than PRC speakers, who may be learners of AmE but are not positioned as speakers of the variety. As Park and Wee observe, “transnational communities ... are still very much national in character, and ... can and will highlight their relevant national identities when it becomes advantageous to do so” (2009: 401). The notion of a Taiwanese-owned English (“Taiwanglish”) is threatening and destabilizing to this order.

The status of nations who are not ‘owners’ of English, yet not adopters of native-speaker models, is ambiguous. The Taiwanese migrants are sensitive to discourses that are found within Singapore itself about SCE: SCE is hybrid, chaotic, impure, even a “poor imitation of English” (Chng 2003: 47). Yet it is, in the view of the migrants, a variety collectively owned and used by Singaporeans. Although there is brief mention of a BrE model in Singapore, which does not gain much traction in the forum, SCE, in its miscegeny, is treated as common to all Singaporeans, and invariable in its presentation. There is little emphasis on professional Singaporeans switching between lects, or moving along a continuum between SCE and Standard Singaporean English, as described by Alsagoff (2010) and Leimgruber (2012).

The exception to the view of SCE as totalising for Singaporeans is ethnic minorities, as we saw in the case of the Indian Singaporean who was described in the forum as having an “Indian accent” rather than a “Singaporean Indian accent” or simply a “Singaporean accent”. At that moment, the ideological association of a nation with a variety conflicts with an ideological association between an ethnicity and a variety; a tension which is also found among Singaporeans. For example, a racial controversy was sparked when an Indian Singaporean actor was required to speak with “Indian-accented English” to create a comic effect during a local movie audition (The Straits Times June 1, 2017).

We did not anticipate the simultaneous deployment of hierarchies of Mandarin in this conversation which is superficially concerned with hierarchies of English. Members highlight their particularity as Taiwanese migrants, through the favourable position of Taiwan in terms of both WEs and GM. Since the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), initiated in 1979 in Singapore, Mandarin has become a dominant language among Chinese Singaporeans. Unexpectedly, indigenisation of the language has taken place leading to so-called “Singapore Mandarin” (Chua 2003), while PRC Mandarin is still considered the standard. The SMC was a reaction to perceived low levels of Mandarin in Singapore and the need to improve these to secure the relationship to PRC (Rubdy 2001). Along with the shift to English, it is considered a big part of the shift away

from other Chinese languages.

Goh and Lim (2010) develop a “Global Mandarin” model based on Kachru’s three circles model of WEs. After the Japanese rule, the Chinese Nationalist Party took over Taiwan and forced Taiwanese people to speak Mandarin to re-Sinicise Taiwan (Hsiao 1997). TwM formed when speakers of the local languages learned Mandarin as the new lingua franca and when different contact-induced varieties underwent dialect-levelling in the younger generation. In their model, TwM, considered a Taiwanese version of Chinese authenticity, occupies the inner circle. This model omits the stigmatisation of Taiwan Guoyu invoked above by the last writer. In fact, Goh and Lim’s positioning of TwM is closer to ideologies which depict it as “softer” and more civil than the “boisterous” and uncivil PRC Mandarin (Chen 2015: 58-59). In contrast to TwM, in their model, SgM is considered to be outer circle. Although Goh and Lim’s relegation of SgM to the outer circle is based on measurable indicators of spread, and levels of native and non-native acquisition, recent research has shown that there is an ideological component to this- Mandarin speakers in Singapore rank TwM more favourable as compared to SgM (Chong and Tan 2013).

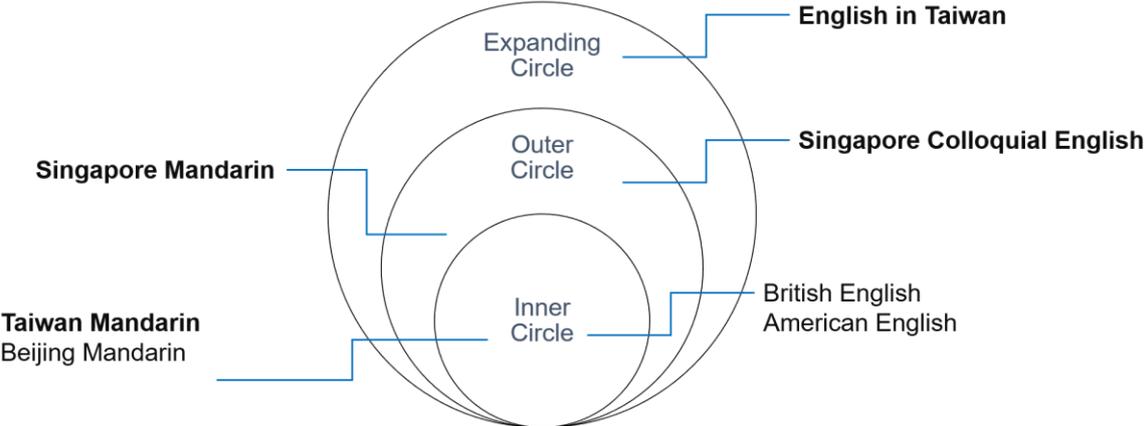


Figure 1. Taiwan and Singapore in terms of WEs and GM

This ideologically constructed difference is very evident in the examined metalinguistic discourse, where members map hierarchies of English to hierarchies of Mandarin. As shown in Figure 1, both SgM and SCE are located within the outer circle in terms of the global linguistic market of WEs and GM constructed by the Taiwanese migrants.

Although the status accorded to AmE (and indirectly TwE) can be linked to the “hyper-central” status of AmE in a “World System of Standard Englishes” (Mair 2013), there is limited interest among the members of the forum in debating the centrality of English versus Mandarin (de Swann 2001). In this way, they diverge somewhat from the Taiwanese marriage migrant that we quoted earlier from Chiang and Huang (2014: 87), who expressed frustration in not being able

to conduct everyday activities in Singapore using Mandarin, rather than English. Although issues of language choice are certainly in the background for our commentators, publicly, they are more inclined to a parallelism which allows them to re-calibrate the relationship between nations in the Southeast Asia region, and their position in a region which has seen recent economic restructuring. Their discourse is a response at the micro-level to macroeconomic restructuring in the broader Asian context.

5. Conclusion

This online ethnic space is a site where sociolinguistic differentiation between migrants and locals is developed and negotiated. Language conflict can be reproduced and even strengthened when members of the ethnic space take a relatively positive affective stance on each other. The stance-taking between speakers leads to an environment where certain language ideologies become mainstreamed. This article has illustrated how these language ideologies, through their invocation of ideological hierarchies of both WEs and GM, can be responses to regional economic restructuring. The ethnic space also allows members who are not aligned with these mainstreamed language ideologies to resist them by appealing to the shared experiences of the stigmatised vernacular in their hometown. This shows that there can be room for difference, even in an ethnic enclave where migrants with a common nationality share their experiences.

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