

# **Style, Identity and Literacy**

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# **Style, Identity and Literacy**

English in Singapore

**Christopher Stroud and Lionel Wee**

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# Preface

The last few years have seen a growing number of attempts to reconsider what multilingualism means in an era of globalization. Changing social, cultural and economic conditions under late modernity have led to changing conditions of language. The ways in which capital has come to operate in these new times has shifted, leading not only to financial insecurity and crises as a result of bad debt, but also to increasing disparities between over-paid elites and disenfranchised workers; neoliberal policies have not only eroded social support for medicine, unemployment, pensions and disability, but have changed the discourses of what were formally thought of as public institutions [hence the use, for example, of KPI (Key Performance Indicators)-speak in universities]; large-scale immigration and changing political discourses about difference have led to new regimes of nationalist identity across Europe and elsewhere. Amid all this, languages and the roles ascribed to them have shifted: they have become commodified, tools of inclusion and exclusion and carriers of neoliberal discourse. Indeed, multilingualism itself has become a commodity in the new economy (Duchêne & Heller, *in press*; Duchêne & Piller, *in press*).

One reaction to these changing conditions, particularly the hegemony of English and the concomitant decline in other languages, has been to take to the ramparts with the old tools of modernity. Hence, the way forward for some has been to focus a critique on English as a neoliberal and imperialistic language while arguing for support for other languages through a framework of linguistic human rights (Phillipson, 2009). From this neo-Habermasian position, the quandary of late modernity is not in modernity itself but rather where it went off the rails in recent times. The problem, therefore, is the manipulation of modernity, not its epistemologies. An alternative tack, however, has been to ask whether the ways we think about languages, either as a result of changing social conditions or as a long-term epistemological concern, have been adequate. From this point of view, the way forward is not to



use the same tools of modernity to struggle against it, but to rethink language and multilingualism as part of that struggle. As Hoy (2004) reminds us, any endeavour of critical resistance has to engage in a project to rethink the terms of the debate.

It is in this space of addressing concerns about language and inequality in late modernity, and trying to find alternative ways of thinking our way out of these dilemmas, that this book by Chris Stroud and Lionel Wee needs to be understood. Key ideas that they bring to this debate are *voice* and *linguistic citizenship*. Drawing on Bakhtin, they suggest that voice may be a more useful point of departure than language. This position sits very well with similar arguments by Blommaert (2010) for understanding how speakers use resources rather than languages, or with Blackledge and Creese's (2010) focus on the Bakhtinian carnivalesque as part of their critical approach to multilingualism. Blommaert is highly critical of work that continues to deal with large reifications of languages as entities in competition with each other, and that assume the 'spatial "fixedness" of people, language and places' (Blommaert, 2010: 44). The 'linguistic-ideological dimension' to these views of fixed languages and worldviews are anathema to the analyses of mobile linguistic resources needed for a sociolinguistics of globalization.

A common strand across this new generation of work on the sociolinguistics of multilingualism is that it is not so much languages (as reified entities) as it is linguistic (and non-linguistic) resources such as genres, discourses and styles where the interesting work of identity formation and semiotic construction occurs. Stroud and Wee's focus on voice makes a related point and ties to the idea of linguistic citizenship. Here the central concern is not state citizenship so much as the kind of reflexive citizenship that underlies all those smaller decisions we make around language resources as we shift between linguistic communities. The idea of linguistic citizenship points at once to questions of consumption, choice and reflexivity as well as to the fact that linguistic diversity is a central means by which democracy may be achieved. Speakers use and negotiate their linguistic resources across different sites, thereby constituting the terrain for democratic engagement. The idea of linguistic citizenship does not tie language users to static notions of linguistic identity but rather sees this as an open (though also contextually constrained) field of choice, a question of *multilingual portfolios*.

The context for these arguments is Singapore. Language in Singapore, it might be observed, has attracted a great deal of attention over the years, perhaps more than is warranted for a small island state of a few million people stuck at the end of the Malaysian Peninsula. Huge amounts have been written about the particular forms of English that have emerged in Singapore (Singlish), much of this within that exoticizing tradition of World Englishes

that dwells so much on those particular features – particles such as *lah* or *lor*, terms from Hokkien or Malay, means other than inflectional morphology for realizing tense and aspect – that distinguish English in Singapore from other varieties. Fortunately, this is not another book in that tradition (they would have had to try another book series if it were). Much too has been written about language policy, multilingualism, education and the various efforts to police English and Chinese (the Speak Mandarin Campaign and the Speak Good English Movement). Why, we might ask has Singapore become such a focus of attention? The answer lies in a mixture of factors: the fact that English is one of the languages in the mix and that a great deal of the writing about Singapore has been in English; the fact that Singapore funds its tertiary institutions well and pays its overseas academics generously, so there are always enough researchers around to delve into language in Singapore; the fact that language policy has always been part of public discourse in Singapore, so that discussions about language, policy and education are frequently aired in newspapers and other public forums; and the fact that the multilingual context of Singapore, the particular contradictions, developments and debates on policy are indeed interesting to many an applied linguist.

What then do these authors bring to this context that adds something new? They point out there is a paradox in Singaporean language policy in that while overtly favouring four official languages (Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English), Singapore has moved towards a position that hugely favours the hegemony of English. But this we have known for a long time (Pennycook, 1994). More importantly, they seek answers to how this happens in the micro-sociolinguistic interactions of adolescents rather than in the macro-sociolinguistic dictates of government or institutional regulation. Part of this focus is on the ways in which young people seek to reconcile identity conflicts and contradictions. Important in this context is the idea of *sociolinguistic consumption* as a way of understanding the relationships between small-scale sociolinguistic acts, large-scale sociolinguistic orders and the particular values ascribed to languages as part of their commodification. Once languages are subject to commodification and become objects of consumption, questions of language, ethnicity and identity shift towards questions of language and class. Young adolescents are therefore participants (as are we all) in different linguistic markets where different forms of capital (in Bourdieu's sense) are attached to different languages. Given the interest in this book in English language literacy, and particularly as it operates as prime site for exclusionary educational practices, Stroud and Wee's critical project here is able to draw attention to questions of power and social reproduction in relation to language, literacy and identity.

In order to do this, they develop some key further resources, in particular *style* and *language ideologies*. Style has emerged from its earlier delimited domain in sociolinguistics to become a more significant category for the understanding of sociolinguistic variation and identity (Coupland, 2007). The exploration of sociolinguistic identity has thus increasingly been explored through a focus on style, a concept that now embraces not just sociolinguistic variation from vernacular to standard but also a much wider focus on multimodal semiotic practices (Bucholtz, 2009). As Rampton (2011) has recently remarked, however, this focus on style may come at the expense of an analysis of class: style draws attention to questions of agency and a capacity to stylize oneself and thereby may draw attention away from a focus on social structures that limit the capacity for stylization. This is where Stroud and Wee's focus on consumption, class and capital is a useful corrective to a portrayal of style in terms only of personal choice. Important too is an understanding of the different ways in which languages are understood ideologically, or as Seargeant (2009: 26) put it in an earlier book in this series, the 'structured and consequential ways in which we think about language'. Indeed Stroud and Wee's book echoes several of the themes that have emerged in this series: the importance of understanding multivocality and local language practices (Higgins, 2009), the politics and inequalities around literacy in an era of global capitalism (Hernandez-Zamora, 2010) and the struggles around English within globalization (Saxena & Omoniyi, 2010). This is an important book, not only because it brings some new insights into the over-written territory of language in Singapore, but more importantly because it opens up new ways of understanding language and consumption, language and voice, and language and citizenship.

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# 1 Social Practices and Linguistic Markets

(1)

**Yan:** You have to know [English] otherwise people will laugh at you.

...

**I:** What happens if the shop assistant is a Malay?

**Y:** Then I will speak in Malay

**I:** Will you attempt English first?

**Y:** No. They will say I am like this spoiled girl. I mean, like, they will know, they can sense that I know they are Malay. Then if, like, I am speaking English, then it is like I am boasting my .. you know.

**I:** Really?

**Y:** I know some people think that way.

The above is an extract taken from an interview with Yan. Yan is a Malay female, about 16 years old, who is growing up and studying in Singapore. In the extract, Yan points out that knowledge of English is crucial in Singapore (*otherwise people will laugh at you*). As the inter-ethnic lingua franca and prestige variety in Singapore (and, of course, in many other societies as well), English serves an important gatekeeping function by allowing selective access to social and economic goods, thus influencing in important ways the social trajectories of those who may (or may not) be considered to speak the language well. This gatekeeping function creates a strong motivation for Yan to improve her English. Yet, one of the problems that she faces comes from the kind of identity she projects if she insists on using English instead of Malay, which is the official mother tongue of her ethnic group<sup>1</sup>. In interactions with her co-ethnics, insistence on using English is associated with snobbery (*They will say I am like this spoiled girl; it is like I am boasting*). Because of this, Yan feels that she has no choice but to use Malay when interacting with a Malay shop assistant. In this way, Yan

is responding to what she sees as pressure from a particular social group to privilege ethnic identity even in the context of a commercial transaction (*I know some people think that way*).

Young adolescent Singaporeans, of course, do not deny that there are people and institutions (such as their parents, their teachers, their potential future employers) that deeply value academic qualifications. But it is also the case that for many of these adolescents, the activities involved in acquiring such credentials may sometimes conflict with the activities required to maintain or gain localized peer recognition. In some cases, any formal recognition by school authorities may even mean a loss of popularity or credibility amongst one's peers. And if the two forms of recognition happen to be in conflict, it may sometimes be peer credibility that gets to be prioritized over official recognition by the school.

Yan is therefore most certainly not alone in the kinds of predicaments that she faces and in this book, we focus on a number of other Singaporean adolescents who have to deal with similar dilemmas as well. Our goal here is threefold. First, we are interested in how the micro-interactional identity work performed by our adolescent informants contributes to a macro-sociolinguistic paradox. The paradox is this. Despite the espousal of a multilingual language policy on the part of the state – a policy that recognizes four official languages (English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil) – Singapore society appears to be moving largely toward a situation that favors the reproduction of English language hegemony. How the collective experiences of adolescents such as Yan can lead unequivocally toward the privileging of English – despite the fact that there exists social pressure to continue using other languages like Malay – can contribute to a broader understanding of the kinds of constraints and pressures that multilingual societies have to cope with, especially in the context of globalization and late-modernity. The main answer to our first question is presented in the following chapter, where the indexical values of different languages in the Singapore landscape are discussed. Here, we see that despite the Singapore government's attempts at arguing for the equal value of English and the official mother tongue, its own policy formulations seem to clearly favor the former over the latter. And these signals of language valuations are picked up by adolescents such as Yan, who then face the challenge of reconciling an official commitment to the equal value of English and the official mother tongue, on the one hand, with a social reality where English seems to be particularly privileged, on the other.

This need to reconcile conflicting linguistic demands leads to our second goal. That is, we also wish to understand how attempts at learning English in Singapore may implicate particular kinds of identities among adolescents,

thus possibly creating for them conflicts of various sorts, both inside and outside the classroom. We will see, in Chapters 5 through 7, that there are times when these adolescents resolve conflicting identity demands by favoring their desire to preserve peer-oriented relationships, even though they are aware that this might undermine the very activities that they themselves believe could help them improve their English. But in order to even begin making sense of the data presented in these three chapters, some preliminary remarks about the relevant analytical concepts and the methodology involved in our data collection are pertinent. These preliminary issues are addressed in Chapters 3 and 4.

And third, we are aware that it is not enough to merely note the language-learning problems faced by these adolescents. Because of this, we also wish to explore some of the ways in which identity concerns can be beneficially harnessed by educational institutions so as to develop teaching strategies that can help them acquire a more standard variety of English. In other words, the challenge is to find ways of getting these adolescents to learn standard English while not simultaneously requiring them to compromise on the kinds of identities that they are already heavily invested in (Norton, 1995). We do this in Chapter 8.

As we tackle these three questions, it will become clear that there are broader issues at stake that are being implicated as well. One of these is how assumptions about the nature of language and literacy affect language education policy. For example, it becomes difficult to ignore the fact that much of language education policy is predicated on the unquestioned assumption that language is an ontologically stable and delimitable phenomenon. This kind of assumption tends to encourage a view of language and literacy skills as decontextualized technology that ought to be easily transferred across contexts. And of specific concern to the theme of this book, it also tends to de-emphasize the influence that considerations of identity can have on the successful acquisition of literacy practices. We discuss this issue in Chapter 8 also.

Another issue concerns the broader nature of policy-making in a late-modern society such as Singapore. Language education represents just one aspect of a larger set of policies that the state is aggressively pursuing as it aims to ensure the continued economic growth and wellbeing of the country. The state, for example, is concerned about the low fertility rate and outward migration of Singaporeans, and because of this, has attempted to attract 'foreign talent' to consider taking up Singaporean citizenship. The resulting situation consequently presents a number of challenges for Singapore, as the social and linguistic order that the state has so carefully constructed on the basis of clear historically inherited ethnolinguistic affiliations and boundaries