

To what extent can the ethnic group of young Singaporeans be identified from their speech?

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Introduction

In the past, when researchers described the languages spoken in Singapore, they often assumed that the English in Malaysia and Singapore formed a single identity. Examples of this kind of description include Tongue (1974), Platt & Weber (1980), and Brown (1988a, 1988b).

More recently, especially since 1987, when English became the medium of education for all Singaporean children from the first year of primary school (Gopinathan 1994), while all primary education in Malaysia continues to be in Malay, Singaporean English has been increasingly evolving its own identity. Consequently, researchers now tend to assume that the English spoken in Singapore should be described on its own, with a separate identity from that of Malaysia. Examples of this kind of description are: Brown (1991:115-122), Gupta (1994), Deterding & Hvitfeldt (1994), Deterding (1994), Low (1994, 1998) and Deterding & Poedjosoedarmo (1998:ch 17).

It would, however, be extremely naïve to assume that young Singaporeans all sound alike when they speak English. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985) have shown that in a multilingual newly-independent country like Belize, a single individual may at different times project a range of ethnic allegiances by means of shifts in language usage. It would therefore not be surprising if young Singaporeans also maintain a combination of phonetic features in their pronunciation, some of which mark them out as distinctively Singaporean, and others which reveal their ethnic group (Chinese, Malay, Indian).

In this paper, the degree to which the ethnic group of young Singaporeans can be identified from their speech alone will be considered.

Ethnic identification

Platt & Weber (1980:46) stated that, while the ethnic group of the older generation of Singaporeans could often be identified, 'these cases are becoming rarer, particularly among the younger generation'. Platt et al (1984:6) repeated this claim, saying that a test had shown that telephone switchboard operators were unable to identify the origin of young Singaporeans beyond the fact that they were Singaporean.

However, these claims that the ethnicity of young Singaporeans cannot be identified conflict with the assertion of many Singaporeans, who are adamant

that they can easily identify the ethnicity of speakers on the basis of very little speech.

In this paper, the identifiability of two different kinds of speech is considered: first, for conversational data, we will look at the speech of first-year students when talking to their tutor; and second, for more formal data, we will consider the speech of highly educated speakers in a test situation.

Subjects for investigation of conversational speech

Ten ethnically Malay speakers and ten ethnically Chinese speakers were recorded having a brief conversation with the first author of this paper about their language usage and their hopes and aspirations for the future. These speakers were all first-year trainee teachers at NIE. All had obtained A levels (equivalent to high-school graduation) before their admission to NIE, and so might be regarded as fairly well educated.

All the students were enrolled in an Introductory Linguistics course, with the first author of this paper as the lecturer, so their conversation was not with a complete stranger. However, if we assume that educated Singaporeans have a wide range of styles in their use of English (Pakir 1991), one can also assume that, in talking to an expatriate who is one of their lecturers, they were certainly not using their most colloquial style. Even though they were involved in a conversation, they would have been using a reasonably formal style of speech.

While Pakir assumes a continuum of styles, in contrast Gupta (1991, 1994) claims that most young Singaporeans exhibit a form of diglossia in their use of English, and on this basis one might assume that the subjects were using their High variety.

The main ethnic groups in Singapore are Chinese, Malay, and Indian, the latter representing about 6% of the total population and being predominantly Tamil speaking. A comprehensive study of all aspects of ethnicity in Singapore speech would therefore have included ethnic Indians. However, there is a widespread pattern of language loss of Tamil, especially among well-educated Singaporean Indians (Saravanan 1994), so among those enrolled in the course from which the students were selected, it would have been hard to find ten first-year Indian students who maintained a reasonable competence in Tamil. For this reason, the study was restricted to ethnically Chinese and Malay Singaporeans.

Five British English speakers were also recorded. All five held a discussion with the first author of this paper, in the same way as the Singaporean subjects. All these five British speakers were university lecturers at NIE. Although not all their accents would be regarded as strictly RP, as two of them retained some features of a South London accent and one, originating from Huddersfield, had

some traces of a Yorkshire accent, these features were not very prominent. All five could be classified as either RP or Near-RP speakers (Wells 1982:297).

All the speakers were female. The study was restricted to female speakers to limit the variables in the study and because the overwhelming majority of students at NIE are female.

The recordings were all made onto audio tape in the Phonetics Laboratory at NIE. A high-quality microphone was placed before each speaker. Although the intrusion of the microphone inevitably interfered with the naturalness of the situation, it was essential to obtain reasonably good quality recordings.

Selection of conversational data

From the conversational data of each of the 25 speakers (10 Chinese Singaporean, 10 Malay Singaporean, 5 British), a stretch of speech, between 7 and 10 seconds long (average 8 seconds), was extracted. All the samples of speech represented one or more complete utterances – care was taken to try to ensure that each of the speech samples was reasonably complete and coherent on its own, but at the same time provided no obvious clues to the ethnic identity of the speaker.

The 25 instances of speech were then output onto a tape, with about 2 seconds between each utterance. Listeners were given a sheet (see Appendix) that asked them to identify the ethnic group of each speaker as one of British, Chinese, or Malay. The beginning of each utterance (about five or six words) was printed on the sheet to ensure that the listeners would not lose track of which speaker they were dealing with.

Sixteen listeners participated in the listening test. All but one of the listeners were female, and all but one of them were ethnically Chinese. All the listeners were trainee-teachers in a post-graduate teacher training program. As they were on a different program from the Singaporean speakers, it is extremely unlikely that any of the listeners knew any of the student speakers. It is also unlikely that the listeners knew any of the British lecturers, none of whom taught on their particular post-graduate program. The complete exercise took about five minutes, so it is unlikely that fatigue would have played any part.

Observation of the listeners taking the test suggested that they could, in many cases, identify the ethnic group of the speaker immediately, with no need to hear the whole utterance. However, the ethnicity of some of the samples of speech was more difficult for them to determine.

Results of the identification test for conversational data

The results of this listening test using conversational data are shown in Table 1. For the British speakers, the listeners achieved 77 out of 80 correct

identifications, which is a rate of about 96%. For the Singaporean speakers, there were 289 correct identifications out of 320, which is a successful identification rate of just over 90%.

		identified as		
		British	Chinese	Malay
ethnic group of speaker	British	77	3	0
	Chinese	0	151	9
	Malay	2	20	138

Table 1. Identifications of the ethnic group of 5 British, 10 ethnically Chinese and 10 ethnically Malay Singaporean speakers by 16 Singaporean listeners on the basis of about 8 seconds of speech

It would appear from Table 1 that the listeners may be able to identify the ethnically Chinese speakers more accurately than the Malays, and this may be because the listeners were nearly all themselves ethnically Chinese. However, five out of the 10 Malays were identified with 100% accuracy. Further research is needed, with an equal number of Malay listeners, to find if there is a greater ability to identify one's own ethnic group.

Lim (1996:64; also see this volume) conducted listening tests with longer samples of speech than those used here. She used Chinese, Malay, and Indian speakers as well as listeners of all three groups, and she also found that, overall, the Chinese were identified most accurately (at 80%) as opposed to the Malays (75%) and the Indians (65%).

We must conclude that Singaporean listeners are able to identify the ethnic group of other young Singaporeans on the basis of a very short stretch of conversational speech. This conclusion is not consistent with the claims of Platt & Weber (1980) and Platt et al (1984), but it does agree with the findings of Lim (1996).

We do not know for certain what features listeners use to identify the ethnic group of the speaker. Lim (1996) asked her listeners what features they thought they were using, and many replied 'intonation'; but in many cases, listeners found it hard to specify exactly on what basis they made their decisions. Her further acoustic measurements indicate that ethnic Malays may have a lower average pitch and also a slower tempo of speech than ethnic Chinese Singaporeans. The role of the /eɪ/ and /əʊ/ diphthongs in determining the ethnic flavour of speech is investigated further in Deterding (this volume), and possible differences in the realisation of /e/ and /æ/ among ethnic Malays and Chinese is studied in Suzanna & Brown (this volume).

We should also note that, although the Singaporeans could identify the ethnic group of other Singaporeans reasonably successfully, the rate for this falls far below that of identifying British speakers. We can conclude, therefore, that while there are some features of the speech of young Singaporeans that may mark their ethnic group, there are undoubtedly many other features which serve to mark them as Singaporean.

Subjects and data for investigation of formal speech

The subjects for the investigation of the formal speech were the 13 students on a post-graduate course for improvement of oral communication skills who scored highest on the final oral test. They included five Chinese, four Malay and four Indian students. The data consisted of recordings of them all reading the same passage. We can assume that they were extremely conscious of their pronunciation and were being exceptionally careful about it, as pronunciation was one of the major criteria for evaluating their performance during the test.

	identified as		
	Chinese	Malay	Indian
Chinese 1	120	9	21
Chinese 2	109	17	19
Chinese 3	58	13	74
Chinese 4	105	28	13
Chinese 5	109	21	14
Average % correct for Chinese	71%		
Malay 1	18	114	10
Malay 2	73	35	38
Malay 3	43	81	26
Malay 4	4	115	30
Average % correct for Malays		61%	
Indian 1	73	14	58
Indian 2	65	34	41
Indian 3	74	32	45
Indian 4	29	24	95
Average % correct for Indians			42%

Table 2. Identifications of the ethnic group of 5 ethnically Chinese, 4 ethnically Malay and 4 ethnically Indian Singaporean speakers by 142 Singaporean listeners on the basis of their recorded reading of a short passage

The respondents who were asked to listen to these recordings and determine the ethnic group to which each speaker belonged were second-year diploma students who did not know the speakers to whom they were listening.

Results of the identification test for formal data

The results of the listening test using formal data are shown in Table 2. As can be seen, the average accuracy rate for all subjects was only 59%, far below that for the conversational data discussed above. For individual speakers, the accuracy ranged from 25% to 84% correct. Accuracy rates by ethnic group were 71% for the Chinese speakers, 61% for the Malay speakers and 42% for the Indian speakers.

Conclusions and Implications

The above data indicate that the style of speech of young educated Singaporean speakers has considerable influence on the ability of other Singaporeans to identify their ethnic origin: the ethnicity of the most formal variety of the best-educated speakers cannot reliably be identified; but the conversational speech of slightly less well-educated subjects provides quite clear clues to the ethnicity of the speaker.

Attempts have been made previously by sociolinguists working in Singapore to display graphically the relationship between style of speech and proficiency in English, notably by Pakir (1995). The authors of the present paper attempted to incorporate additional variables, including ethnicity, in Deterding & Poedjosoedarmo (1998). A modified version focusing on style and ethnicity is reproduced in Figure 1.

The merged tops of the inverted triangles attempt to illustrate the reduction in ethnically distinct features in formal style. The diverging points at the bottom of the inverted triangles represent the increase in ethnically distinct features as the style of speech becomes less formal.

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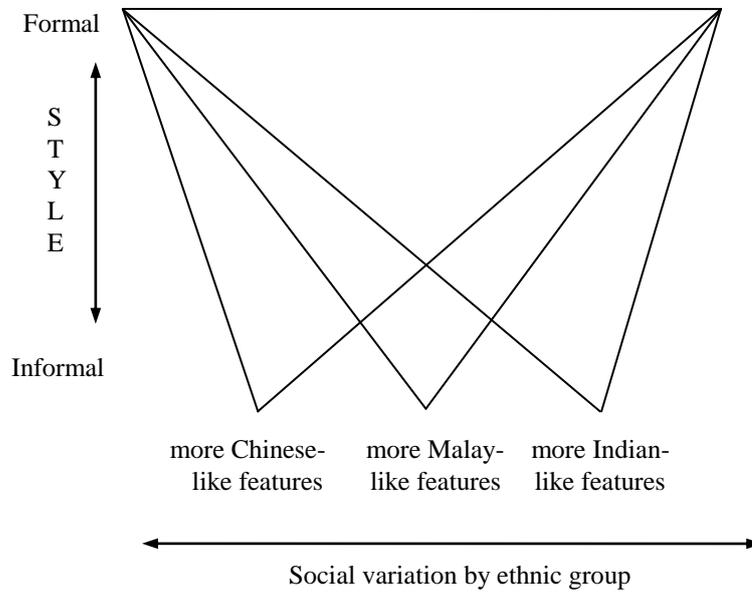


Figure 1. Stylistic variation by ethnic group among educated Singaporean English speakers

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Appendix Questionnaire used for the conversational data.

What ethnic group do you belong to?

Chinese _____ Malay _____ Indian _____ Other _____

Are you a Singaporean ? Yes _____ No _____

You will hear 25 speakers. What ethnic group do you think each of the speakers you will hear belongs to? (Please tick one box for each speaker.)

	British	Chinese	Malay	
1				to my sister we do speak English ...
2				um because she was from poly ...
3				so it's like he make it a point for us ...
4				it makes us embarrassed you know ...
5				and I can go to the market ...
6				I have not actually been ...
7				go away from what ...
8				because I .. I speak ...
9				the school was really split ...
10				because um the younger ones
11				yes I look forward to
12				when I came here, I thought ...
13				because during my secondary ...
14				well with the responsibility ...
15				she may not be learning the language ...
16				I think from my friends I heard from ...
17				I know it sounds very contradictory ...
18				because even though they are not ...
19				but before I graduated ...
20				we didn't .. we didn't speak English ...
21				you were given very accurate ...
22				not too bad but the best part is ...
23				yeah because I not only teach principles ..
24				and so the pace was far too ...
25				I think maybe because ...

Thank you for your time.