Much has been written about Singaporean language policy and bilingual education (see Pakir, 1994; Tan, 2007; Cavallaro, 2011). *Multilingual Singapore: Language policies and linguistic realities* edited by Ritu Jain provides descriptive, empirical and theoretical approaches to present a comprehensive account of Singapore’s multilingualism and presents an overview of past and current language policies and linguistic realities. Language policy and planning can address or disregard the linguistic diversity of a region (Ali and David, 2021). By addressing the linguistic diversity, language policy and planning can increase the ‘aggregate welfare’ of a region (Grin, 2000: 7). Language policy can either be an official process, or it can take place through daily life actions, when people decide which language to use in different contexts (Lo Bianco 2010). It can be top-down when imposed by higher authorities, or it can be bottom-up when negotiated by communities, parents, students, or individuals (David, 2021). According to Rannut (2009), much of the technological planning for minority languages involves bottom-up work. Language policy and planning takes place at three levels: macrolevel (government makes the decisions), microlevel (individual organizations/institutions decide their policies), and mesolevel (between the macro- and microlevels) (Baldauf and Kaplan, 2005). Decisions on these levels have been addressed in the current book. This sociolinguistic volume...
presents a detailed description of government administered language policies in Singapore, their impact on the many local languages in terms of language shift, and the reaction of the various speech communities (citizens, residents, and non-residents who live in the island city state of Singapore) to such policy initiatives. Moreover, the text moves away from the segregationist approach and manages to combine a macro-analysis of national policies and an investigation into how various social actors (individuals and communities) position themselves vis-à-vis language policy choices and discourses.

Authors in this edited volume succeed in harmonising and connecting the two levels. Drawing on empirical and deconstructionist (dismantling of traditional contestations) research designs, the book discusses and explores how top-down policies in Singapore homogenise and marginalise non-official mother tongues and the responses of language activists and community leaders to such policies. The final chapter provides a way forward for conducting further research. The book closes with an index providing an alphabetical roadmap of topics discussed.

The text consists of 13 chapters which display the well-organized structure of the book. It starts with a Foreword by Kang Kwong Luke which not only situates the ‘serious update’ (p. ix) of the language planning and policy (LPP) in Singapore’s ‘nuanced accounts of languages’ but also sets the tone through which LPP as a scholarly field continues to provide ‘in-depth treatment of the subject matter’ (p. ix). Next comes a detailed note of acknowledgements.

Ritu Jain, the editor, has written a comprehensive Introduction (chapter 1) in which she states that the objective of the book is to ‘illuminate the rich linguistic legacy of Singapore and offer snapshots of various policy measures, community responses, and resulting outcomes over time’ (p. 1). She provides the background for the many linguistically and ethnically heterogeneous speech communities in Singapore and the bilingual state-imposed language policy. She states that, due to the government’s language policies, a language shift has occurred, and she promises that the book will present ‘policy measures, community responses and resulting outcomes’ (p. 1). Whether she has kept this promise can only be determined by reading each chapter. She explains that there have been shifts in the Singaporean demographics due to the government wooing of foreign talent. This has altered the landscape of the speech communities in Singapore, resulting in adjustments being made to the government’s bilingual policy. She then provides an overview of the 12 chapters that follow, alerting the reader that while some of the chapters are based on research data, others present a summary of previous research while some present critical perspectives on the exclusionary nature of Singapore’s language policies.
In Chapter 2, Lionel Wee discusses some language-related policies that might need to be re-evaluated. Wee states that his aim is ‘to highlight the Singapore government’s desire to undertake bold policy moves [...]’ (p. 17) but goes on to ask if socioeconomic considerations (see Grin [2003] who discusses the ways in which linguistic and economic processes influence one another) motivate policy making with respect to language, identity, and culture. He moves on to describe the language policy which excludes speakers like Eurasians and Peranakan who fall outside the government’s preset language categories for schooling. He asks: If English is the mother tongue of the former, what then is the second language they need to learn in school? Because the Peranakan are officially defined as Chinese, is Mandarin then designated to be their official mother tongue? ‘The fact that Peranakans represent an interesting hybrid of Chinese and Malay cultures is largely ignored’ (p. 23). We are told that, due to such complexities, Singaporeans have the possibility of opting for hyphenated ethnic identities as of 1 January 2021.

Chapter 2 can be read as a critical review of the education system and linguistic ideologies, which are believed to be sacred cows. According to Wee (2021), The Primary School Leaving Examination, Education System, and the existing concept of meritocracy are ‘sacred cows’ (see pp. 5, 12–17, 25). The author looks at education and meritocracy from the neoliberal lens because continual self-development has been stressed in parallel with globalizing trends. Such globalized self-development can pose challenges to non-official mother languages in Singapore because, given that economic worth and sophisticated skills are two key components of self-development, they are not often associated with marginalised and non-official languages. Wee ends on a dismal note. He states that as the government sees language as a ‘homogeneous entity that bears a stable relationship to a well-defined community of speakers’ (p. 25), the problems with language policy will exacerbate as Singaporeans become more diverse.

In Chapter 3, Kingsley Bolton and Werner Botha review qualitatively five models which have been used to investigate the localisation of English in Singapore. Using data collected from university students, the authors demonstrate how Singlish and English can interact with each other and other local languages, and how such interaction can result in the process of code meshing or code switching. The phenomenon of code switching involves the segregation of languages. They claim that there is a paucity of research on language mixing and move on to discuss their research on language mixing by Singaporean undergraduates. They find that mixed vernacular speech was frequently used although ‘the linguistic patterns were invariably different, depending on the language background and ethnicity’ (p. 39) of the undergraduate respondents. They
conclude that Singapore English is an umbrella term that ‘refers to a continuum between a notional standardised Singapore variety [...] and a non-standardised variety [...]’ (p. 42). They however admit the research may not reveal all the answers and pose a range of suggestions for future research. The three chapters that follow focus on Indian speech communities and languages in Singapore.

In Chapter 4, using an online sociolinguistic survey (the online survey was triangulated with qualitative responses), Helen Dominic and Lavanya Balachandran discuss the attitudes to three different varieties of Tamil spoken in Singapore. The three varieties are Singaporean Tamil, Indian Tamil and literary Tamil. The respondents belonged to what Dominic and Balachandran call the ‘New Wave’ and ‘Old Wave’. Those in the former wave were born in India and then moved to Singapore whilst the latter and their parents and grandparents were born in Singapore. As to responses to attitudes about the varieties of spoken Tamil, respondents ranked literary Tamil as the highest on the purity scale as this is the language learned in schools, while many of the respondents from the New Wave indicated the variety they would usually speak is Indian Tamil and consider it to be purer than the other varieties of Tamil. The writers state that a responsive pedagogy should consider the Tamil language spoken in Singapore as an evolving language. This, they argue, ‘will critically challenge students’ personal views [...] that it is a dying language [...]’ (p. 62).

Jain discusses the other mother tongues of Singaporean Indians in Chapter 5. She states that ‘the very label ‘Indian’ is a misnomer that conceals a significant diversity of nationality, region of origin, migratory background, and language.’ (p. 65). Drawing on a community school enrolment and large-scale survey data, Jain explains that post-1990 five other Indian languages have been accepted by the government as second language subjects for students of Indian origin, whereas previously Tamil was the only Indian language available. Jain presents a picture of institutional support as well as community engagement in support of Indian languages and explains that the institution/government is detached from teaching and assessments which are left to community schools. The lack of government investment in teacher training, etc. results in what Jain calls ‘uninspiring language learning’ (p. 75). She shows a steady growth in the overall enrolment of students in the Indo-Aryan languages offered as second languages.

Due to the New Wave of Indians in Singapore and for other reasons, the enrolment for Hindi has increased at the expense of the other languages. However, many of these students are non-background learners, that is, Hindi is not their familial language. The author explains the many reasons for the popularity of Hindi but explains that the steady growth of Hindi has caused language sensitivities among the Tamil community. She concludes that, while the Singapore
model of state-community support is a pragmatic institutional support for conferment of status to a language, this does not invariably mean the preservation of a language unless the language has a status in society.

Working on extensive interview data, archival sources, and historical artefacts and using an autobiographical narrative lens Anitha Devi Pillai and Rani Rubdy in Chapter 6 critically discuss how Singapore’s model of multilingualism has drawn on the essentialist approach to create a link between ethnicity and language. They focus on the changing status of another Indian language, Malayalam, over three phases: 1900–1960s, 1970–1980s and 1990 to the present and focus on demographic factors, community-driven initiatives, and domains (religion, official and home) of use. They also discuss some institutional support in the form of official documents such as road maps in the earlier phase, i.e., 1961–1962.

Whilst there was language preservation in the first phase due to the efforts of the first-generation migrants (1900–1960), in the second phase (1970s–1980s) a language shift occurred among second- and third-generation Malayalees due to the diminishing population with many returning to Kerala and due to the government’s urbanisation programmes that resulted in a dispersal of Malayalees from their enclaves. More recently, (1990–2019) there has been a revitalisation of the language due to the arrival of new migrants who are fluent in Malayalam and who lead community-based initiatives to revitalise the language like getting more airtime on television, which has resulted in more domains of use yielding ‘a strong allegiance to the language amongst third-generation Malayalees’ (p. 98). In short, given that Singapore’s ‘model of multilingualism is rooted in the process of homogenisation’ (p. 86) and that minority languages have little economic value, Pillai and Rubdy provide reasons for the past shift of Malayalam and current revitalisation activities by members of the community. But they conclude that ‘the struggle to maintain and revitalise Malayalam […] presents a challenge to the community and the state alike’ (p. 88) and there is a need to mitigate the threat of a further shift and ‘devise more proactive ways’ (p. 99) to permit the language to thrive at the community level. However, there is a need for both the community and state to ‘be equally invested as partners’ (p. 100).

Geoffrey Benjamin says in Chapter 7 that enquiries he made suggested certain Austronesian languages, both Malayic and non-Malayic, might still be spoken in the neighbouring countries of Malaysia, and Indonesia. However, using historical and sociological sources and focusing on several Malayic varieties for example, Singapore Malay, Orang Seletar, Baba Malay, Minangkabau, Chitty Malay, Banjarese, Karimun Malay, and Iban, he discusses the current situation of some of these speech varieties in Singapore. Based on essays by
university students he talks about the levelling effects of Singapore Malay and states: ‘These very local Malay varieties have now all but disappeared from Singapore’ (p. 115). He admits Peranakan is undergoing a degree of revival, but states Chitty Malay is moribund in Singapore.

Moving on to discuss the non-Malayic varieties of Austronesian languages like Javanese, Baweanese, Bugis, Cebuano, and Batak, he also shows a shift to Malay in Singapore as seen in essays by undergraduates. But there is hope because Baweanese ‘has the strongest revivalist following’ (p. 118). He states such languages like many other languages are dwindling in Singapore due to the government’s language-related policies which have resulted in a levelling to Malay and English.

In Chapter 8, Anne Pakir focuses on Baba Malay (hereafter BM) and explains that the Babas are descendants of early Chinese settlers in Malacca in Malaya and says ‘it was possibly the inter-marriage between the Chinese and the local Malay women that gave rise to BM’ (pp. 124–125). Some of the Baba community moved to Singapore. She discusses the many factors, like Singapore’s bilingual language policy, exogamous marriages, outmigration, and de-commodification of BM. which has resulted in the lack of intergenerational language transmission resulting in a bleak future for Baba Malay.

Pakir talks about the many community initiatives leading to cultural resurgence despite language endangerment. Interview data from prominent leaders of two associations involved in cultural resurgence are presented. One focusses on promoting performance arts and language classes whilst the other focusses on social integration of the community. In short ‘cultural values and traditions of the Babas will be passed on [...] even if the language of transmission has shifted to English’ (p. 135). She explains that ‘the cultural resurgence efforts appear to have gained greater traction than the language revival efforts’ (p. 129) and that the community remains tightly knit. In the concluding sentence she quotes a telling sentence by one of her interviewees, who states that language is ‘a very important carrier for cultural transmission, although English can serve this purpose as well’ (p. 136).

Moving on to the Malay language, Mukhlis Abu Bakar, and Lionel Wee in Chapter 9 discuss the Malay language, both Standard Malay and Colloquial Malay, the former being used in educated formal settings and the latter in informal settings. With respect to pronunciation, they are spoken with a Sebutan Johor-Riau accent. They move on to describe two systems of pronunciation of the Malay language. The two systems are a naturalised standard pronunciation called Sebutan (Pronunciation) Johor-Riau and Sebutan Baku, an artificially created system of pronunciation. Singapore introduced the latter in 1993 as the
standard pronunciation for Standard Malay. The writers provide a critique of Sebutan Baku and the implications it has for Malay Singaporean identity. They provide features to show Sebutan Baku is identical to Bahasa Indonesia and has no native speakers, and they argue for retaining Bahasa Baku as expressed by Malay political leaders. But the use of Bahasa Baku, a created model of pronunciation, has been contested and the writers state: ‘It appears that after 25 years of Sebutan Baku, the ability to speak in proper Sebutan Baku is limited to a handful of speakers’ (p. 154). The writers conclude by stating ‘Sebutan Baku [...] could distance the Singapore Malay community from its linguistic and cultural heritage that is anchored to Sebutan Johor-Riau’ (p. 155). The two chapters that follow, Chapters 10 and 11, focus on Mandarin and Chinese dialects.

The focus on Mandarin in the early 1900s when Mandarin was chosen by the community as the medium of instruction and in 1966 by the government as a second language or mother tongue for Singaporean Chinese was followed by the Speak Mandarin Campaign (launched in 1979) by the government. This has led to a fall in the use of Chinese dialects at the expanse of Mandarin, Ng Bee Chin and Francesco Cavallaro argue. However, Singapore Mandarin Chinese trails behind English which is the lingua franca amongst the Chinese community. In fact, ‘by 1959 less than 50 per cent of Singaporean Chinese opted for Chinese-medium instruction’ (p. 163) in favour of English medium instruction and by the 1990s ‘the Speak Mandarin Campaign moved away from targeting dialect speakers to encouraging English speakers to speak more and better Mandarin’ (p. 166). But ‘in 2004 the Mandarin syllabi [...] were refined to cater to different [...] students from different home-language backgrounds and with different levels of Mandarin Chinese abilities’ (p. 166).

The writers provide research data which show Singaporean Mandarin Chinese emerging as a distinctive variety of world Chinese in choice of lexicon, code-mixing, pronunciation, and syntactic differences. They then move on to discuss earlier research on attitude and identity. They conclude that ‘It is difficult to reconcile the disparate findings [...]’ (p. 171) due to different methodologies used and conclude that the role of Mandarin Chinese appears to have been replaced by Singlish. Sense of self and identity, they state, is a relational construct that depends on contexts and with more mainland Chinese immigrants coming into Singapore, Singaporean Chinese may redefine who they are. They conclude that a government cannot force languages on to a people.

In Chapter 11, Goh Hock Huan and Lim Tai Wei discuss the stigmatised status of Chinese dialects in Singapore. They first provide an account of the historical and social contexts of major Chinese dialects, namely Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew and move on to present preliminary results of an ongoing dialect
use and attitude survey and conclude by providing recommendations for the maintenance and preservation of Chinese dialects. Based on an ongoing survey by one writer, the preliminary results on use and attitude toward the dialects are discussed. However, the writers acknowledge the results do ‘not claim to be comprehensive’ (p. 185). The use of the dialects, (in which domains and with whom), attitudes toward the use of dialects by respondents to the survey and their attitudes toward dialects as a form of identity are discussed. The findings showed that there was a ‘positive attitude towards dialects’ and agreed that ‘dialects were indivisible from traditional Chinese culture in Singapore’ (p. 187). The writers conclude by stating that, from the preliminary survey, ‘the overall attitude of the major dialect groups towards dialect use is still positive’ (p. 191) but largely confined to the home domain by elderly members of the family. They state that Chinese dialects ‘will most likely survive for another couple of decades, given the presence of middle-aged generations’ (p. 192).

In Chapter 12, Ruanni Tupas (2015) states that the linguistic landscape (LL) and people are integrated into one system of meaning, ideology, and social relations. Using the data from the LL in a Singaporean shopping complex that Filipinos frequent, he discusses the inequalities among Filipino workers in Singapore and the multilayered othering of the Filipino speech community. He explains that Filipinos in Singapore inhabit ‘sites of racialised and classed spaces’ (p. 198) and discusses their multilayered othering as reflected in the LL in a shopping complex.

Multilingualism, Tupas states, does not merely refer to the distribution of languages but is in fact, the hierarchisation of languages. He provides examples of the LL to show cultural insertions in Tagalog in English-dominated signs, the use of ‘market English’ to signify Filipinos as servants of globalisation and the use of Taglish which ‘perpetuate intra-national class-based social divisions’ (p. 209). Tupas states that Filipinos are invisibilised in Singapore as multilingualism is framed in terms of Singapore’s official bilingual policy, but they are also differentiated through a ‘class based mobilisation of languages and language practices’ (p. 211).

In a coda entitled ‘Towards a liquid-multilingual Singapore?’ Li Wei presents an outsider’s view. Given this scenario of contending languages, against the backdrop of government-instituted bilingual but English dominant language policy, Li Wei discusses the implications for sociolinguistic research mentioning the existence of fluidity and creativity in language and identities in the 21st century. He states, ‘Singaporeans have been constructing multiple selves through flexible and dynamic use of languages’ (p. 215). He argues that Singlish is perhaps a misnomer and asks: ‘Why does an independent nation not want to embrace its
own distinctive language?’ (p. 215). He says some signs of change and examples of Singlish can be seen in the linguistic landscape of Singapore. The world, he states, is moving into an era of post multilingualism and in this highly dynamic and fluid world is the highly dynamic and fluid speech of Singaporeans. He suggests research can focus on the complex interweaving of languages, translanguaging practices (see Canarajah, 2011; Garcia and Li Wei, 2014) and the emergence of new languages. Li Wei states quite definitely that neat compartmentalisation either of languages or of social groupings is no longer sustainable.

Overall, the study does provide a comprehensive picture of the varied languages of Singapore and the ramifications on some of these speech communities and their languages due to the government’s language policy. Some of the research is relatively new, such as the introduction of some of the Indo-Aryan languages being permitted to be taught as a second language. In addition, what was also new for me was the influx of new workers and the revitalisation effects of this on specific languages and consequently also a broadening of certain language policies.

As a reader, I noticed much duplication of the same facts, i.e., the bilingual language policy and language statistics are found in many of the chapters and such repetition could have been whittled down to make the text more reader-friendly. Forward and backward cross links between chapters would also have been helpful. The spelling for certain words should be standardized across the chapters. I would also advise resequencing chapters 2 and 3. Perhaps they should come later in the volume after the description of other languages and speech communities.

A concluding chapter by the editor providing an overview of the effect of language policy on shift, maintenance and revitalisation of different languages, and the effect of changes in immigration policies on the loosening of certain policies would have brought the volume to a clear and comprehensive close. To some extent, however, the concluding chapter or coda by Li Wei suggesting areas of new research, given an era of post-multilingualism in a highly dynamic and fluid world, does provide new ideas for further research.

The volume provides an exhaustive list of languages in Singapore and the effect of language policy on their status quo. Despite variance in research methodologies used by the writers the volume will be useful to anyone interested in language policy and speech communities in Singapore. Slight modifications in language policy and community initiatives due to the ‘new’ immigrants provide room for hope for the survival of some of these languages/culture. The emphasis on culture by specific speech communities might also provide new areas of research. Can culture survive sans language?
References


(Received 3rd June 2022; accepted 17th January 2023)