



# “You don't ask me to speak Mandarin, okay?": Ideologies of language and race among Chinese Singaporeans



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## ABSTRACT

Mandarin holds an artificial but official heritage language status for Chinese Singaporeans. Despite state efforts to regiment the racial and linguistic harmony of its Chinese population, Singapore has witnessed drastic linguistic-ideological shifts regarding Mandarin and other Sinitic varieties. Situating our analysis both diachronically and synchronically, we examine how the increased interactions between Chinese Singaporeans and non-local Chinese have led to confrontations that challenge a discourse of ‘shared’ Chineseness. Through two viral videos that capture such disputes, we demonstrate how language is racialized to discursively and semiotically discriminate against a subset of an aggregate of people with ‘shared’ linguistic and cultural norms.

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## 1. Introduction

In multiracial and multilingual societies, the challenge of maximizing equity and inclusion for individuals of distinct personal histories is particularly pertinent in today's political environment. In order to manage potential conflicts, the Southeast Asian island nation of Singapore has constantly stressed the importance of racial harmony since its independence from British colonial rule in 1965. Specifically, different policies have been put in place to maintain peaceful relations among its highly multiracial and multilingual population (Shanmugam, 2019).

Key to these policies is a racial classification system known as CMIO – Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others, representing the three major racial groups (PuruShotam, 1998, p. 33) – which was established during Singapore's colonial period. Governmental institutions use these classifications in the implementation of various policies. Schools socialize Singaporean students into the state's racial ideology, using ‘mainstream’ comportment and benchmarks, including those related to language. As in many other countries, Singapore's education system promotes the dominant racial groups' languages, making schools a setting for the reproduction of dominant language ideologies (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 1983). Singapore's distinctive bilingual education policy was devised to manage the racial and linguistic harmony of its diverse population. Under this policy, almost all schools are collectively English-medium, but students must also study one of the state's three other official languages as a so-called ‘mother tongue’ (MT). Essentially, each child's MT is determined by their racial identity: Chinese children are assigned to Mandarin, Malay children to Malay, and Indian children to Tamil (Ministry of Education,

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2020). While the MT policy seems like a functional strategy for managing a multiracial and multilingual population, it has some inherent problems. According to Starr and Hiramoto (2018, p. 2):

The elegance of this policy disguises a rather more complex reality, [...] the relationships between the official MT languages and the Chinese, Malay, and Indian populations of Singapore are far from straightforward. Significant portions of each community – and, in the case of Singaporean Chinese, the majority – have historically not spoken the language with which they are now officially associated.

Largely due to the MT policy, in Singapore, the term ‘Chinese’ is used to specifically refer to Mandarin or (Xinjiapo) Huayu, commonly known as Singaporean Mandarin. Other Sinitic varieties spoken in Singapore, such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, and Cantonese, among others, are referred to as ‘(Chinese) dialects’. As a result of rigorous implementation, after three decades of Mandarin MT education, Singaporean Mandarin has gradually inclined towards Putonghua, and is expected to continue to do so (“Singapore Senior Minister”, 2010). Lock (1988) and Shang and Zhao (2017) also note that Putonghua, or Mainland Standard Mandarin (MSM), norms concerning orthography, pronunciation, and grammar are tacitly followed in Singapore Mandarin media, textbooks, and the Speak Mandarin Campaign. These facts suggest that Singapore Mandarin has always looked to MSM as a model, despite the fact that this variety is not the real heritage language of almost anyone in Singapore.

Although Chinese Singaporeans’ overall fluency in Mandarin has improved over the years, their sense of identity has not become closer to that of MSM speakers in China. On the contrary, the gap seems to have widened and a distinct Chinese Singaporean identity has developed, to an extent that the state has begun to notice new ethnolinguistic tensions in Singapore. Contributing to these tensions is a rapid increase of foreigners in Singapore in the last two decades, with a significant proportion of these new immigrants coming from mainland China. For example, locals use the derogatory expression ‘Cheena’ to refer not only to these newcomers but also to things and attributes they consider excessively Chinese (Teo, 2016, p. 57). In the national newspaper *The Straits Times*, the Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law, K. Shanmugam, recently reminded Singaporeans of the need for racial harmony in the face of an upsurge of race issues around the world. Cautioning that “[c]ultural xenophobia is increasing across the world [and] Singapore is not immune to identity politics, and ethnic and religious nationalism” (Shanmugam, 2019), he expressed concern that visible displays of xenophobia are becoming more common in Singapore.

It is not simply xenophobia, however, that has led to the development of a distinct Chinese Singaporean identity. In 2009, Chee Hong Tat, at the time the principal private secretary to Singapore’s first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, made a controversial statement in response to a comment in *The Straits Times* by the acting head of the Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Dr. Ng Bee Chin. As a Singaporean of Hokkien descent, Dr. Ng had spoken up about the rapid loss of community heritage languages that was changing the local language ecology. Before MT education was implemented, most Chinese Singaporeans commonly spoke their heritage Sinitic varieties at home. However, younger generation speakers have increasingly replaced the heritage languages with Mandarin, likely because of its importance as a school subject. As a politician representing the state, Mr. Chee sided with the state’s Mandarin education policy and argued against Dr. Ng that “[i]t would be stupid for any Singapore agency or NTU to advocate the learning of dialects, which must be at the expense of English and Mandarin” (Chee, 2009). The public backlash against Mr. Chee’s remarks was swift and harsh (Tan, 2012).

The episode also rekindled a reckoning of Chinese Singaporean identity amongst Chinese Singaporeans. In recent years, many grassroots initiatives dedicated to saving heritage Sinitic varieties by offering language classes, such as My Father Tongue<sup>1</sup> and LearnDialect.sg,<sup>2</sup> have struck a chord with the Chinese Singaporean community (Starr and Hiramoto, 2018). Likewise, clan associations such as the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, and Char Yong DaBu Association have seen growing interest from young heritage language learners (Ng and Smalley, 2017). At the same time, there is increasing awareness of their ethnolinguistic heritage among Chinese Singaporeans, which for some has translated to less enthusiasm in recognizing Mandarin as their MT (Starr and Hiramoto, 2018). For example, Tan (2012, p. 347) pointed to a handful of resentful sentiments in Singapore’s digital space, as seen in the representative comment below, which suggests an outright rejection of Mandarin as the MT of Chinese Singaporeans: Language-wise, it should be the language spoken by mother passed down from her ancestors. For decades, I still cannot accept why our mother tongue has been hijacked from us. These local language revitalization movements have amplified the sense of dissimilarity between Chinese Singaporean identity and mainland Chinese identity.

This paper investigates the language ideologies of Mandarin-speaking Chinese Singaporeans in present-day Singapore amidst this growing consciousness of their true ethnolinguistic heritage, and of the government’s past (and ongoing, albeit less aggressive) efforts to stem the use and transmission of non-Mandarin Sinitic varieties. In doing so, we investigate how the ethnolinguistically heterogeneous population of Chinese Singaporeans has been Mandarinized and their true heritage languages ethnicized. For the state, this linguistic project of altering the MT of Chinese Singaporeans consists of celebrating and promoting Mandarin while creating belittling and negative perceptions of the heritage Sinitic varieties. We argue that this

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/myfathertongue/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://learndialect.sg/>.

raciolinguistic ideology<sup>3</sup> (Alim et al., 2016) that has been prevalent in the official discourse and foisted upon Chinese Singaporeans has been ultimately unsuccessful in convincing Chinese Singaporeans that their MT is Mandarin and not their heritage Sinitic varieties. The picture is further complicated by English-Mandarin bilingualism, with younger generations of Chinese Singaporeans being reported to possess higher proficiency in English than in Mandarin. That is, while the state may have been successful in engineering the linguistic assimilation of Chinese Singaporeans into a Mandarin-speaking whole, the nation's overall educational language policy has led to stronger dissociations between Chinese Singaporean identity and mainland Chinese identity. We demonstrate this phenomenon by focusing on two examples, each involving an encounter between a Chinese Singaporean and a mainland Chinese individual. While xenophobic on the surface, these events also reveal the raciolinguistic ideology of Chinese Singaporeans that motivates the xenophobia, and their underlying attitudes towards Mandarin and mainland Chinese people. Ultimately, we wish to show that the raciolinguistic ideologies of Chinese Singaporeans are shaped in part by (1) increasing awareness of their non-Mandarin ethnolinguistic heritage, and (2) an emergent Chinese Singaporean identity that is defined in contradistinction to mainland Chinese identity.

## 2. Sociolinguistic background

Singapore has a citizen population of 3.5 million, comprising a Chinese majority, Malays, Indians, and other ethnicities, as seen in Table 1 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2019).

**Table 1**  
Singapore citizen population 2019 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2019).

| Chinese   | Malay   | Indian  | Other ethnic groups | Total     |
|-----------|---------|---------|---------------------|-----------|
| 2,660,989 | 525,117 | 261,376 | 53,458              | 3,500,940 |

Table 1 also illustrates how the state divides its citizen population into four categories under the CMIO system. The system is used extensively in administration and the implementation of diverse policies, including MT education (Rocha, 2011, p. 107; Starr and Hiramoto, 2018, pp. 4–5) and public housing allocation (see Hiramoto and Teo, 2015), to manage racial order and harmony. The relevance of CMIO has, however, been called into question given its divisive logic and the existence of ethnolinguistic heterogeneity within each racial category (see e.g., Kathiravelu, 2017). This suggests that the CMIO system and the government's formula for prescribing racial harmony are problematically simplistic.

Far from a monolithic group, as suggested by the CMIO framework, the citizen Chinese population<sup>4</sup> descends from migrants from different provinces in southern China, mainly Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan, who started settling in Singapore after 1819 (Ng, 2014), bringing languages such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, and Cantonese. Mandarin was virtually absent in Singapore until recently (Dixon, 2005a, 2005b), although it was introduced to Singapore towards the end of the 19th century (PuruShotam, 1998, p. 43) with the rise of nationalist movements in mainland China (Weng, 2018). In fact, in the 1957 census, only 0.1% of Chinese Singaporeans claimed Mandarin as their MT (Newman, 1988, p. 440). This situation of linguistic heterogeneity remained largely undisturbed until the Speak Mandarin Campaign was implemented in 1979. Even then, only 7.9% of Chinese households spoke Mandarin as their main home language. Nonetheless, the campaign quickly cemented Mandarin as the standard variety in Singapore, and referred to it as the 'Chinese language', while the non-Mandarin, locally-spoken Sinitic varieties were collectively and reductively labeled 'Chinese dialects'. With this, not only did Mandarin education at schools become more rigorous, but all Chinese Singaporeans were encouraged to use Mandarin instead of their heritage varieties. Strikingly, this has resulted in Mandarin drastically overtaking non-Mandarin Sinitic varieties as the most frequently spoken home language of Chinese Singaporeans within the span of three decades, from the 1980s to the 2010s (Bokhorst-Heng and Silver, 2017, p. 4; see also Leimgruber et al., 2018).

In recent years, another on-going linguistic shift has been identified, with as many as 72% of Chinese Singaporean households using English instead of Mandarin as their dominant home language (Lim, 2019). Bokhorst-Heng and Silver (2017) discuss this shift as the unintended consequence of the state's 'English-knowing bilingual education' policy and pragmatic decisions by parents to place greater importance on English than Mandarin in their child's education. While more Chinese Singaporeans are embracing their heritage southern Sinitic varieties as part of their linguistic identity, they are also aligning their identity with English fluency.

<sup>3</sup> While we acknowledge that our use of 'race' diverges from the convention (especially that of the Euro-American one), we do observe striking parallels between raciolinguistic ideologies elsewhere and ethnoracial ideology in Singapore. For Chinese Singaporeans, Mandarin-speaking mainland Chinese are linguistically and culturally excluded as a different 'race'. In addition, the ethnoracial tensions that arise between Singaporean Chinese and mainland Chinese must be read as the result of the explicitly race-based CMIO categorization used in Singapore.

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese community in Singapore is much larger, as it includes non-citizens such as permanent residents, foreign workers, visitors, and students. The number of non-citizen Chinese individuals in Singapore has risen exponentially over the years. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics (2019), in 1970, the non-citizen resident Chinese population stood at 73,246, but by 2019, this figure had increased to 332,719. In comparison, the non-citizen resident Malay, Indian, and Other populations were 33,647, 28,208, and 3684 in 1970, and 15,666, 101,261, and 75,623 in 2019, respectively. Note that these figures do not include other non-residents such as workers, visitors, and students.

### 3. Ethnicizing dialect and mandarinizing race in Singapore

As summarized in the previous sections, the rise of Mandarin and the decline of local Sinitic varieties in Singapore are often attributed to a slew of government policies undertaken from the 1970s on, such as the bilingual education policy and the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The bilingual education policy mandated English-medium study as well as the learning of a default MT in all schools. Prior to its introduction in 1966 and for some time after, students attended Chinese-medium, Malay-medium, or Indian-medium schools with English taught as a second language (Dixon, 2005a) until the policy went into full effect by 1987. The English-knowing bilingualism policy met three broadly-defined goals: (1) to establish English as a *lingua franca* to promote cross-cultural communication and understanding among different local races (Goh, 2017); (2) to afford Singaporeans the economic and global opportunities brought about by competence in English (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999); and (3) to prevent Singaporeans from losing their Asian values and traditions stemming from their heritage, and to shield them from less-than-desirable ‘western’ influences (Ng, 2014).

Similarly, three arguments have been advanced for the Speak Mandarin Campaign – one educational, one cultural, and one practical/instrumental (see Newman, 1988; Bokhorst-Heng, 1999). The educational argument came about amidst dwindling enrollment rates in Chinese-stream education in the 1970s, when the state imposed its belief that the use of other Sinitic languages outside of classrooms interfered with the learning of Mandarin in schools. In this sense, the campaign also sought to complement the MT program and to facilitate the learning of Mandarin in schools by discouraging the use of ‘dialects’ at home, especially during its early phase (Ng, 2014). The cultural argument was built on fears that Chinese Singaporeans would lose their Asian identity and culture as they became increasingly exposed to western lifestyles and ideas through English. It posited that “Chinese Singaporeans needed to be re-ethnicized through Mandarin, which would also provide them with a cultural ballast” (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999, p. 243). Finally, Mandarin was also thought to serve communicative and practical functions – to facilitate communication, social cohesion, and the related project of nation-building (Teo, 2005). Thus, the campaign designated Mandarin as a *lingua franca* for Chinese Singaporeans even when Hokkien was already used as a common language within the Chinese community (Platt, 1980; see Starr and Kapoor, 2020, p.4). The choice of Mandarin was also motivated by the rise of China as a global power, as the state believed that fluency in Mandarin would present numerous economic opportunities (Teo and Lim, 2002; Wee, 2006; Starr and Hiramoto, 2018).

Implicit in the discussion thus far is the notion that English-Mandarin bilingualism would be able to fulfill the needs of Chinese Singaporeans according to a “functional polarization” of language, as described by Bokhorst-Heng (1999, p. 239). A strict division of labor was theorized, where English would serve an instrumental role encompassing the domains of education and the workplace by remaining neutral and culture-less while Mandarin would be the language of identity, of ethnicity, and of culture (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999, p. 240). Nonetheless, the effectiveness and overall success of this bilingual enterprise has been questionable, especially when we consider the fact that English has become the most commonly spoken home language today, and that many younger Chinese Singaporeans are reported to have dismal proficiency and little confidence in using Mandarin (see Lee, 2012; Ng, 2014; Theng, 2016).

The linguistic engineering of a Mandarin-speaking Chinese Singaporean community has often been discussed in instrumental and pragmatic terms – as necessary for education planning, a sense of cultural identity and belonging, social cohesion, and nation-building. What is often glossed over, however, is how the state’s anti-‘dialect’ and pro-Mandarin stance, and in particular the earlier efforts of the Speak Mandarin Campaign, had ethnicized non-Mandarin Sinitic varieties in Singapore. These Chinese ‘dialects’ were discursively pitted against Mandarin, with the former described as vulgar, polluting, uneducated, divisive, and primitive, while the latter was elevated as refined, rich in culture, the language of unity, facilitating academic success, and linked to a 5000-year old history (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999, pp. 250–252). This “co-naturalization of race and language” (Rosa and Flores, 2017, p. 2), of Chinese ethnolinguistic identities and Sinitic languages, operates at two levels. To aid in our explanation, we adopt Irvine and Gal’s (2000, pp. 37–39) semiotic processes of linguistic differentiation: iconization, erasure, and recursivity. Iconization can be understood as the process whereby linguistic features associated with certain social groups or activities are interpreted as iconic representations of them, as though the feature itself captures or displays the inherent nature or essence of the group or activity. Erasure refers to the process whereby ideology renders certain groups of people or activities, even their attributes, unnoticeable by oversimplifying complexities in a given social context. Recursivity refers to how differences that are made out to be iconic are recycled to further justify, and hence iconize, other types of differences.

All three processes can be found in the legitimization of Mandarin as Chinese Singaporeans’ MT. First, as noted above, there was a process of iconization that construed Chinese ‘dialects’ as an undesirable/negative choice, and Mandarin as a desirable/positive choice. Second, there was an attempt at erasing the ethnolinguistic heterogeneity present in the Chinese Singaporean community with the use of the term ‘Chinese’ to refer not only to Mandarin, but to define the other Sinitic varieties in relation to Mandarin. Third, by legitimizing the un/desirability of the languages, speakers of Mandarin are recursively valorized with positive values while those of Sinitic varieties are negatively evaluated.

An example suffices to illustrate the raciolinguistic processes described above. Bokhorst-Heng (1999, p. 250) recounts a telling episode where a government minister proclaimed that Chinese ‘dialects’ were vulgar in comparison to Mandarin, which, he claimed, had fewer swear words and was more suitable for refined people. The comment denigrates the status not only of non-Mandarin Sinitic varieties but also of their speakers by a semiotic process of indexical inversion (Inoue, 2004); because Chinese ‘dialects’ index vulgarity, so ‘dialect’ speakers must also be vulgar. As Rosa and Flores (2017, p. 9) note, indexical inversion is a powerful means of producing raciolinguistic ideologies through the overdetermination of spoken

Despite the valorization of Mandarin and the tacit reference to MSM standards in Mandarin education and media, Chinese Singaporeans have to date resisted adopting iconic MSM features into their own Mandarin. Of the more recognizable features that distinguish Singapore Mandarin from MSM are the absence of *qingsheng* ‘neutral tones’: e.g., *pàopào* (vs. *pàopao*) ‘bubbles’, *yīfú* (vs. *yifu*) ‘clothing’; tonal differences e.g. in the realization of high rising Tone 2; the lack of *erhua*, i.e., rhotacization: e.g., *nǚhái* (vs. *nǚhǎir*); the use of Singapore- and culture-specific lexical items: e.g., *bāshā* ‘wet market’, *shādiē* ‘satay’ (a Malay dish of meat skewers), and *bāxiān* ‘percent’ (transliteration from English); and morphosyntactic differences: e.g., the widespread use of sentence-final particles (see e.g. Lock, 1988; Lee, 2010; Leimgruber et al., 2020; Starr, 2020). Chinese Singaporeans also frequently code-switch between Mandarin and English or non-Mandarin Sinitic varieties. These distinctions are means by which Chinese Singaporeans differentiate and distance themselves from mainland Chinese.

The discussion thus far has elucidated the state-initiated language-ideological construction of Mandarin as necessary and important vis-à-vis non-Mandarin Sinitic languages, which are in turn negatively portrayed in the official discourse. Such sign-based differentiation has further instigated conscious and deliberate acts of differentiation by Chinese Singaporeans in their construal of their own social and racial-national positions (Irvine and Gal, 2000) in relation to non-local Chinese (im)migrants. These positions often adopt a culturally xenophobic flavor, which is further amplified by a strengthened sense of Chinese Singaporean identity and a heightened awareness of the increasing number of non-Singaporean Chinese in Singapore. The number of Chinese immigrants grew from 150,447 in 1990 to 448,566 in 2015, an increase of 163% (Yang et al., 2017; see also footnote 2). While these immigrants are widely scattered across different local sectors, a local journalist, Thiagarajan (2020), reports that they have become “the target of local unhappiness”. She also reports that “regardless of whether they [mainland Chinese] are low-wage workers on temporary work permits or ultra-rich tourists”, they are “feared because they’re considered to be either too rich and arrogant, or too ‘low-class’ and dirty”.

Within the last decade or so, there has been an abundance of xenophobic online postings reporting confrontational encounters or unpleasant experiences with foreigners in town. They include self-recorded videos by Chinese Singaporeans of their interactions with non-local Chinese migrant workers. These videos are then rallied as documentary evidence of the foreignness of non-Singaporean Chinese, and their inability to assimilate into Singaporean society. In what follows, we consider two representative videos of this kind, in which Singaporeans confront non-local Chinese interlocutors – migrant workers from China working in the service industry – about their unsatisfactory service. We examine how the raciolinguistic ideologies of Chinese Singaporeans emerge in such instances of linguistic discrimination and confrontation, which further mask racial-national discrimination against mainland Chinese workers.

The first video showcases the act of speaking English as indexical of one's localness, while speaking Mandarin semiotically iconizes one's foreignness. Prior to the filmed interaction, a squabble erupted between a male Singaporean customer (M) and a female Mandarin-speaking server (F) in a food court concerning how the latter had prepared the former's food order. The man was agitated by the server's refusal to put noodles and broth in separate containers. While the server was quick to offer him an explanation, the fact that she spoke in Mandarin was so unfavorably received by the man that the exchange quickly transformed into a full-blown confrontation. In the example below, Mandarin is in SMALL CAPITALS (see Appendix for transcription notations).

01 M: ((to the Chinese server))  
02 You have to speak English okay.  
03 Don't ask me to speak [Mandarin okay?  
04 F: [°XINJIAPO HUANYING° GEGE GUOJIA DE REN!  
Singapore welcomes everyone from any country!  
05 M: You don't [ask me to speak Ma::ndarin!  
06 F: [HENDUO GUOJIA DE REN DOU HUANYING A::!  
People from many countries are all welcome!  
07 M: You come to Singapore to work.  
08 This is m::y country.  
09 I am Singaporean (0.6) Okay?  
10 You must learn how to speak a bit of English.  
11 (10.0).  
12 ((backs away to take a shot of the restaurant signboard with his phone))  
13 F: ((continues to prepare another customer's order silently; visibly distressed))

Early in the interaction, the man angrily asserts that the Chinese server 'ha[s] to speak English' (line 2) and that the server has no right to request him to respond in Mandarin (lines 3, 5). In response, the server appeals to Singapore's celebrated multiculturalism, that 'Singapore welcomes everyone from any country (*xinjiapo huanying gege guojia de ren*)' (lines 4, 6). However, this rhetorical move only escalates the situation, as the man aggressively denounces the server's claim by foregrounding her foreign status (lines 7–12). Here, English is used iconically to represent Singaporean norms whereas Mandarin is semiotically erased from Singaporeans' (linguistic) attributes.

As the server chooses to disengage with the man, the man retreats to take a full shot of the scene. As he walks back, he adopts a different voice (Bakhtin, 1981) and starts to recount his encounter with the server in the manner of a reporter (lines 14–20, 23–24, 26, 28–29). In the midst of his live 'reporting', however, the man is surprised by the server's sudden indirect retort, which is accomplished through a co-occurring interaction she initiates with another customer (C) waiting in line (lines 21–22, 25, 27, 30–34, 41). Frustrated by this unexpected challenge, the agitated man breaks his 'reporter' character and returns to his usual voice (i.e., as in the previous exchange in lines 1–13) and begins to address the server directly (line 35). He code-switches back and forth between Mandarin and English, claiming that because the server 'cannot speak English (*ni buhui jiang yingwen*)' (line 35), she should 'go back to [her] country, okay?' (line 36). He supplements this xenophobic slur with a bit of hyperbole: 'Singaporeans don't speak Mandarin (*Singapore ren buhui jiang huayu*)' (line 42).

### Example 1 (continued)

- 14 M: ((walks back; zooms in on the server; starts to address the presumed audience))  
 15 °Ok° here we have another problem with uh government's policies=  
 16 =bringing in foreign workers.  
 17 In this case, this lady is from China.  
 18 And she cannot understand English  
 19 [I'm just trying to get her-  
 20 (((turns the camera to focus on his food order))  
 21 F: ((to the customer waiting in line))  
 22 XIANSHENG=NI NENG BANG WO JIESHI YIXIA MA?  
 Sir, can you help me explain?  
 23 M: ((adjusts the camera to show his food))  
 24 -to separate (3.0)  
 25 F: ZHEGE [TA DE °noodle°-  
 These noodles (for his order)  
 26 M: [this  
 27 F: TA YAO FENKAI FANG, [YE FENKAI FANG BU LIAO  
 He wants the noodles and broth separated, that can't be done  
 28 M: [my:-  
 29 (((turns the camera back to the server))  
 30 F: TA YAOSHUO YINGYU HUAYU, [DOU KEYI SHUO DE MA?  
 He wants (me) to speak English or Mandarin, can't one speak both?  
 31 C: ((to the Chinese server)) [TA MEIYOU JIANG-  
 He didn't say,  
 32 TA MEIYOU JIANG °NIDE° HUAIHUA  
 he didn't say anything bad about you  
 33 F: BUYIDING SHI YAO- TA SHUO WO MEIYOU GEN TA SHUO YINGYU LAH!  
 It's not- He said I didn't speak with him in English  
 34 BUYIDING SHI YAOSHUO YINGYU LUO!  
 It's not necessary (for me) to speak English  
 35 M: ((to the Chinese server)) NI BUHUI JIANG YINGWEN, NI HUI-  
 You cannot speak English, You cannot-  
 36 You go back to your country, okay?  
 37 This is my country. WO SHI Singapore REN, okay?  
 I am Singaporean  
 38 F: ((to the man)) XINJIAPO REN JIU ZHISHI XINJIAPOREN ZAI ZHE LI MA?  
 "Singaporeans" means only Singaporeans are here?  
 39 TA GEN WO TONGYANG DE REN DOU HUANYING A!  
 He and I are alike and are all welcome.  
 40 (((gazes at the customer briefly))  
 41 C: (((to the Chinese server)) NI JING JING JIU HAO LE LA.  
 It's better to just stay quiet.  
 42 M: ((to the Chinese server)) Singapore REN BUHUI JIANG HUAYU=KEYI MA?  
 Singaporeans don't speak Mandarin, okay?  
 43 JIANG YINGWEN, KEYI MA?  
 Speak English, okay?  
 44 F: ((no response; continues to work))  
 45 M: ((to presumed audience)) uh=this is another case of the government's law lah  
 46 bringing in foreigners and giving us Singaporeans trouble

As the man unfolds the story, contextualizing it in the grander discourse of government policy, he also adjusts his camera angle first to include the whole food stand (lines 12–14) then to show the server (line 14). Meanwhile, he briefly shows

viewers the food order that he had a problem with (line 20) before turning the camera back to the server again (line 29). As Fig. 1 shows, his choice of first-person pronouns helps structure his narrative, part of which he presents in the form of a neutral report.

| Narrative Structure |                                                                                        | Functions                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Agenda Setting      | 14 M : ((walks back; zooms in on the worker; starts to address the presumed audience)) | [Agenda Setting]<br>There is a policy failure<br>[Pronoun]<br>We<br>[Indexicality]<br>Neutral third-party                                                 |
|                     | 15 °Ok° here we have another problem with uh government's policies=                    |                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | 16 =bringing in foreign workers.                                                       |                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | 17 In this case, this lady is from China.                                              |                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | 18 And she cannot understand English                                                   |                                                                                                                                                           |
| First-hand Witness  | 19 [I'm just trying to get her-                                                        | [First-hand Witness]<br>My experience<br>[Pronoun]<br>I, My<br>[Indexicality]<br>Myself<br>(Self-reference)<br>↓<br>Fellow Singaporeans<br>(by extension) |
|                     | 20 [((turns the camera to focus on his food order))                                    |                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | 23 M : ((adjusts the camera to show his food))                                         |                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | 24 -to separate (3.0)                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | 26 M : [this                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | 28 M : [my:-<br>29 [((turns the camera back to the worker))                            |                                                                                                                                                           |
| Agenda Closing      | [ ... ]                                                                                | [Agenda Closing]<br>Policy Failure<br>[Pronoun]<br>Us (we)<br>[Indexicality]<br>Neutral third-party                                                       |
|                     | 45 M : ((to presumed audience)) uh=this is another case of the government's law lah    |                                                                                                                                                           |
|                     | 46 bringing in foreigners and giving us Singaporeans trouble                           |                                                                                                                                                           |

Fig. 1. The Man's narrative structure.

He first sets up the agenda of the upcoming 'report' by identifying an existing problem with government policies that 'we' (i.e., Singaporeans) face pertaining to foreign workers (lines 14–18). Subsequently, he makes a discursive move by switching to the first-person noun 'I', indexically shifting his role from that of a reporter to that of a fellow citizen who is now tasked to recount his first-hand discovery in chronological order (lines 22–23, 25–26, 28). Eventually, the man closes his report by restating his agenda, that there are government policies that 'give us Singaporeans trouble' (lines 44–45).

In this 'report', the man not only discursively silences the immigrant as a speechless, English-incapable service provider at the interactive level, but also elevates her as a sign-symbol indexing the state's failed policies at the raciolinguistic-ideological level. The server, however, is anything but a speechless symbol for the man's intended audience. Upon realizing that the man has returned to film his 'report', she seeks translation assistance from another customer, 'Sir, can you help me explain (*xiansheng ni neng bang wo jieshi yixia ma*)?' (lines 21–22). She begins with what she sees as the real cause of the dispute, that the noodles and broth cannot be served in separate containers as the man had requested (lines 25, 27). Further embedding her response in the reported speech of the man's linguistic request (line 30), the server asserts that she enjoys the right to choose between Mandarin and English. She then makes the revelation that the man became agitated not because of the incorrectly prepared order, but because of his insistence that she did not respond to his complaint in English (lines 33–34). Throughout the whole exchange, the customer who translates the man's rants to the server only offers a brief, albeit untruthful, recapitulation of the man's words, assuring her that 'he didn't say anything bad about you (*ta meiyou jiang nide huaihua*)' (lines 31–32). Towards the end of the interaction, the man starts to utter xenophobic comments. Noticing the server's plea for his assistance with her gaze, the other customer calmly, almost disinterestedly, tells her 'to just stay quiet (*ni jing jing jiu hao le la*)', advising her to disengage with the man completely (line 41).

The linguistic boundary between the customer's and the server's seemingly disconnected dialogues is discursively disrupted by the man's code-switching from English to Mandarin in line 35 as he cuts in to sharply accuse her: 'you cannot speak English (*ni buhui jiang Yingwen*)'. Up until this moment, the man *appeared* to not understand Mandarin as he had showed no sign of responding directly to the server earlier in the interaction (lines 1–6), to the extent that the server asks the other customer for translation assistance. Barth argues that "boundary maintaining mechanisms must be highly effective" for poly-ethnic societies to maintain "the existence of extensively relevant value differences and multiple constraints on status combinations and social participation" (1969, p. 19). As such, the man's original insistence on using English and resistance to using Mandarin exemplify such boundary maintaining mechanisms, which can also be seen as othering the server. Nonetheless, by switching to Mandarin, which at this point in their exchange is a deliberate act of boundary breaking (Auer, 1998), the man draws himself and the server into a co-occurring dialogue. Even so, the man's use of Mandarin functions to further reinforce his othering of the server. By switching to the common tongue not to discuss the dispute and try to solve the original problem, he uses the language the server understands to reiterate that English is required to belong to Singapore. His intent is probably to convey his distaste in the language that the server speaks, but his communicative move has an unexpected consequence for his original 'reporting' narrative frame. As he utters xenophobic slurs against the server 'You go back to your country, okay? This is my country' (lines 36–37), he breaks his 'character' both as a neutral reporter and a first-hand witness who narrates only 'facts'; instead, the more he talks back to the server, the clearer it becomes that his 'report' is nothing but a

blatant racist account. Through active use of the language he despises to address the server, he performatively substantializes his racism against her. Language *per se* is not the actual cause of the dispute; it is his raciolinguistic ideology against the Mandarin-speaking mainland Chinese server that aggrandizes a trivial problem that otherwise could have been solved easily.

#### 4.2. Case study 2: have you even fulfilled your responsibility?

Our next data is a video made by a male Chinese Singaporean businessperson (B) in an apartment building's mailbox area. In the video, the Singaporean man catches a Chinese immigrant letter carrier (L) working for the national postal service, SingPost, throwing away mail in the trash bins by the mailboxes. The mail in question is advertisement flyers for the Singaporean man's business. After the Singaporean man recovers a bunch of discarded envelopes from multiple trash bins, he furiously confronts the letter carrier about his actions. At first, the letter carrier denies the allegations, but he later admits his wrongdoing while trying to elicit sympathy by describing the difficulties he faces as a migrant worker.

Unlike in the previous example, the Singaporean man in this example speaks to the letter carrier in Mandarin after realizing that the immigrant worker does not understand English very well. However, the accusatory and increasingly heated tone of the Singaporean man's utterances, and that he dominates the conversational turns and only occasionally grants the letter carrier permission to contribute, suggest that his use of Mandarin is not simply accommodation. The example also shows that the variety of Mandarin that the Singaporean man uses is different from MSM. For instance, he does not use neutral tones and rhotacization whereas they are found aplenty in the letter carrier's Mandarin. In addition, he uses various grammatical constructions that are absent in MSM (Chen, 1999) but characteristic of Singapore Mandarin, such as the reduplication of the adverb after a verb, e.g., '*ni ting hao-hao* (you listen well-well)'. He also code-switches to English for nominals like *flyer* and *SingPost* (in Mandarin, *chuandan* and *XinYou* respectively) as well as the tag question marker *right*. As such, as the exchange unfolds, it becomes evident that the Singaporean man consciously uses Mandarin to semiotically maintain the sociocultural distance between him and the letter carrier – to emphasize their cultural and national difference in spite of their ethnolinguistic proximity.

#### Example 2: A Singaporean man at a residential building's mailbox area (Urban Creatures, 2018)

- 05 B: NI DAODI JINZE LE MEIYOU=WO WEN NI NI JINZE LE MEIYOU.  
Have you even fulfilled your responsibility? Have you?
- 06 (1.5)
- 07 NI DONG HUA LE DUOSHAO XINSI LAI ZUO ZHAXIE DONGXI MA?  
Do you understand how much effort was put into making these (flyers)?
- 08 L: ((moves away a bit; looks down at the flyers that he is holding))
- 09 B: NI ZHIDAO MA?  
Do you know?
- 10 L: ((continues to look down; nods, and takes one piece up to inspect))
- 11 B: ZHE SHI RENJIA DE XINSI=NI MINGBAI MA?  
Do you understand this is people's hard work?
- 12 L: ((softly)) ZHE WO ZHIDAO=WO ZHIDAO  
I know, I know this.
- 13 B: NI LAI ZHEBIAN TAO GE SHENGHUO  
You came here to make a living
- 14 L: ((nods))
- 15 B: WO YE SHI TAO GE SHENGHUO  
I am also making a living
- 16 L: (2.5)  
((softly)) ZHEGE WO ZHIDAO  
This I (know)
- 17 B: HAI YAO QING RENJIA SHEJI, HAI YAO- HAI YAO JIAO RENJIA QU YIN  
And (I) had to ask people to design (the flyers), and, and ask people to print (them)
- 18 L: ((no response; looks at the flyer again))
- 19 B: HAI YAO HUAQIAN  
And also spent money

Particularly noteworthy, in Example 2, is when the Singaporean man asks the Chinese man if he has 'fulfilled [his] responsibility (*jinze*)' (line 5) as a letter carrier. This notion of fulfilling one's responsibilities or duties – a key concept in Confucian ethics and Chinese culture – also evokes the notion of 'hard work' and constitutes an iconized ideal of a Chinese individual (Hiramoto, 2012) and of a Singaporean (see e.g. Barr, 2000; Lee, 2000). Additionally, his discursive self-portrayal as a 'hardworking Chinese' falls back on a pervasive discourse in Singapore society that categorically constructs non-Chinese Singaporeans, in particular Malay and Indian Singaporeans, as 'lazy' (see e.g. Moore, 2000; Lyons and Ford, 2009). But while the Singaporean man stops short of accusing and judging the letter carrier of an ethical failing, he invites the Chinese man to consider that possibility by posing the question to him (lines 7 and 11). Then, the Singaporean man brings up their shared circumstance of having to 'make a living (*tao ge shenghuo*)' (lines 13 and 15), which sets the scene for him to highlight differences in their work ethic. The Singaporean man details his 'hard work' involving great pains and expense to have the flyers designed, printed, and distributed (lines 17 and 19). On the other hand, not only did he not complete his job, the letter carrier had discarded the flyers and lied about running out of flyers to distribute. The Singaporean man thus discursively

constructs himself as a responsible, hardworking Singaporean, and indexes these traits to an idealized Chinese Singaporean identity via the semiotic process of iconization. In contrast, the letter carrier's identity is semiotically juxtaposed against said ideal, due to his not having fulfilled his occupational responsibilities, and his acts of laziness and dishonesty.

Thus far, we have seen in this data that, even as the two men continue to communicate in Mandarin, the foreignness of the letter carrier's identity is highlighted (line 13) and exposed as something irreconcilably different from that of Chinese Singaporeans'. The distance between the two becomes most pronounced later in the conversation, as seen below, when the Singaporean man refers to the letter carrier as an outsider who has been welcomed to Singapore with the use of exclusive 'we (women)' vis-à-vis 'you (ni)' (line 23).

#### Example 2 (continued)

- 23 B: NI LAI XINJIAPO ZUOGONG=WOMEN HUANYING NI  
*You came to Singapore to work, we welcome you*  
 24 L: ((nods))  
 25 B: KESHI BUYAO BA ZHEGE DONGXI, ZHEGE ZHIDU NONGDAO ZHEME CHA=  
*But do not take this thing (lightly), and ruin the system*  
 26 L: ((nods))  
 27 B: =JIUSHI WEILE YI-GE REN, SingPost DE MINGYU SAODI LE  
*...just for a person, SINGPOST has sacrificed its reputation*

The Singaporean man then implies that welcoming (people like) him into Singapore comes with associated risks, which if not taken seriously, might 'ruin the system (*ba ... zhege zhidu nongdao zHEME cha*)' and 'sacrific[e] reputation (*mingyu saodi*)' (lines 25, 27). The Singaporean man thus further distances himself from the letter carrier by construing him as an 'other' and a 'threat'. This discursive strategy repudiates any notion that they might share anything in common, despite the fact that they are both ethnically Chinese and are also speaking the same tongue.

As mentioned earlier, while it is compelling to think that the Singaporean man's use of Mandarin in this data is a simple act of linguistic accommodation, a closer examination of the facts suggests that there is more to it. In their discussion of identity and interaction, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) observe that "identity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices" (p. 588). As the Singaporean man's discursive strategies have shown, he actively dissociates and distances himself from the letter carrier's identity as a Chinese national – an identity that the Singaporean man runs the risk of being associated with via the state's administrative actions. In the process, the Singaporean man articulates an emergent Chinese Singapore identity that is dissociated from speaking MSM (Chong and Tan, 2013), and indexed with traits of diligence and responsibility. This episode thus illuminates the conundrum that Chinese Singaporeans are implicated in when they choose to use Mandarin, while a consideration of identity as emergent and constructed through discourse reveals a raciolinguistic ideology where speaking MSM is not seen as an integral part of the Chinese Singaporean identity.

#### 5. Conclusion

To summarize, this paper has discussed the shifting language ideologies of Chinese Singaporeans from synchronic and sociohistorical perspectives. Chinese Singaporeans have historically spoken various non-Mandarin Sinitic languages since the early 19th century, when Chinese settlers first arrived in Singapore.<sup>5</sup> It was not until the state's intervention in the form of various language policies in the 1980s that Chinese Singaporean families started experiencing a rapid linguistic shift from their heritage southern Chinese varieties to Mandarin. These language policies were largely prompted by the increasing socioeconomic influence of China. Moreover, Mandarin, as the standard variety in China and a language associated with high culture, was juxtaposed against non-Mandarin Sinitic varieties in Singapore. It is likely, however, that any such positive associations regarding Mandarin were metalinguistically produced, given that Mandarin was scarcely spoken in Singapore then. Mandarin in Singapore can thus be said to be "a compelling copy which needs no original for its effectivity" (Inoue, 2003, p. 325). As processes of linguistic differentiation have revealed, the prescribed notion of 'the Chinese language' is in reality problematic for being rather too simplistic. As such, it is not surprising that Singapore Mandarin, while being described as close to Putonghua-sounding Mandarin, also shows dissimilation from MSM.

While Mandarin became an artificial icon of Chinese Singaporean identity, great importance and value were simultaneously being attributed to English with another government campaign, the Speak Good English Movement, which started in 2000. As a result, in recent years, the dominant home language of Chinese Singaporeans is experiencing another linguistic shift, from Mandarin to English. The issue of identity for Chinese Singaporeans is further complicated by increased awareness of the sociopolitical history of their ethnolinguistic heritage, as well as the recent influx of (im)migrants from mainland China, which has resulted in frequent friction between the two populations. In these confrontational situations, consciously or not, speaking Mandarin readily indexes one's ideological affiliation with the sociopolitical legacy of the language, and hence subjects the speaker to careful scrutiny of their racial-national loyalties.

<sup>5</sup> The settlement of the Chinese diasporas across Southeast Asia predates the 19th century, prior to the establishment of the Straits Settlements in 1826, of which Singapore was a part. We thank a reviewer for alerting us to this fact.

Examining two representative viral videos in which Chinese Singaporeans engage in disputes with non-local Chinese, and more specifically, migrant workers, we observed that a variety of strategies were used to mark Chinese Singaporean identity in contradistinction to that of mainland Chinese. A general pattern illustrated by the two videos is a lack of context that benefits the documenters. Viewers are presented with post-climatic interactions shown only to support the documenters. The mainland Chinese (workers) in these videos are often characterized as transgressors who have (un)consciously broken various social norms that the documenters consider 'Singaporean'. In some cases, as examined in our first case study, the documenters attribute the foreigners' acts of transgression to the simple fact of them not being fluent in English. In other cases, as shown in our second example, the documenters summon discourses of Singaporean values to discursively distance themselves from the transgressors. Crucially, these values are also associated with pan-Chinese Confucian values (Barr, 2000), which serve as an effective common ground on which Chinese Singaporeans differentiate themselves from mainland Chinese. However smooth their exchanges might be in Mandarin, in both videos, both parties demonstrate awareness that their linguistic sharedness does not translate to cultural propinquity.

We have investigated how speaking MSM can be negatively perceived by Chinese Singaporeans as an un-Singaporean practice. Simultaneously, English can be used to rhetorically and semiotically exclude non-local Chinese individuals from participating in Singapore's celebrated cosmopolitan multiculturalism. Through a close analysis of two confrontational situations where language is summoned to justify Chinese Singaporeans' acts of racism and xenophobia against mainland Chinese migrants, we have demonstrated how language is racialized to discriminate among groups within an aggregate of people who cannot otherwise be differentiated based on overt physical traits such as skin color.

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## Transcription notation

|             |                               |
|-------------|-------------------------------|
| CAP         | speech in Mandarin Chinese    |
| <b>bold</b> | emphasis, stress              |
| -           | increased emphasis            |
| [           | overlap; simultaneous speech  |
| (( ))       | non-verbal action             |
| ::          | lengthening                   |
| =           | latching                      |
| -           | unfinished/interrupted speech |
| ,           | falling-rising contour        |
| .           | falling contour               |
| o o         | soft                          |
| (0.0)       | silence (in seconds)          |

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