

Bilingual education and the dialectics of national integration

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Introduction. My inquiry into bilingual education and national integration focuses on language ideologies and on the connection between these ideologies and broader ideological developments in, using Anderson's (1991) term, the imagining of the nation. Language ideologies emerge in specific historical and material circumstances. As Blommaert writes in his introductory chapter to *Language Ideological Debates* (1999), language ideologies and debates "nearly always develop against a wider socio-political and historical horizon of relationships of power, forms of discrimination, social engineering, nation-building and so forth." This focus on language ideology as it operates within such sociopolitical relations helps illuminate the often peculiar and contradictory effects of bilingual education. In particular, we will be able to see how such language ideologies establish both the possibilities and the constraints of bilingual education, resulting in a story of the *dialectics* of national integration.

The focus of my discussion is Singapore. As one observer writing to Singapore's *Business Times* (November 15, 1991) described it, Singapore is "small in size but big on language." Being a small country with a compact population involving a host of mutually incomprehensible languages and dialects (see Pakir, this volume), Singapore can be compared to a living linguistic laboratory. Unlike in bilingual Switzerland or Belgium where monolingual speakers of different languages are territorially separated, Singapore's small size and urban and dense population ensure that all four official languages involved in the nation's bilingual policy co-exist in very dynamic ways. And so Singapore offers unique insights into the dialectical effects of bilingual education in the imagining of the nation.

Issues and debates concerning language frequently dominate discussions in the mass media, in parliament, and in other venues of public discourse. This gives the ideological construction of language a very visible presence in the nation. In this paper, I will be looking at one instance of these "language ideological debates" in Singapore: the discussion over Chinese Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools and the creation of a Chinese elite. This debate is important because of its potency in demonstrating both the possibilities and constraints of bilingualism's role in national integration, and in demonstrating how these possibilities and con-

straints emerge from the particular construction of language ideologies. My paper begins with a discussion of these ideologies, looking at how English and the mother tongue languages in Singapore have been constructed in oppositional relation to each other. I then look briefly at the implementation of bilingual education, particularly as it relates to streaming in the schools. Attention will be given especially to the position of SAP schools within this streaming process. In the last section, I will bring these discussions of language ideology and bilingual education together to consider ‘bilingualism and the dialectics of national integration’ and how the particular language ideologies involved in Singapore’s bilingualism both facilitate and constrain the objectives of national integration.

The discursive-ideological construction of bilingualism. The challenges of national integration in multiethnic, multireligious, multilingual Singapore have always been a primary concern of the Singapore government. National integration has been the focus of housing policy, national service, a mandatory savings policy under the Central Provident Fund, community development programs, and so on (Chua Beng Huat 1995). The most recent endeavor has been an ambitious document called the *Singapore 21 Report*, in which the government outlines the nationalist agenda for the next century. A key issue covered in this report is whether or not Singapore will ever become “one tribe” (*The Straits Times* [ST] May 7, 1999).

Historically, the key to becoming “one tribe” has been through Singapore’s bilingual language policy. This effort has involved the discursive construction of very particular ideologies about language and about bilingualism, captured in what I call the ideological polarization of language (figure 1).

On the one side of this ideological polarization of language is English. The presence of English has been justified as necessary to meet the instrumental needs

Figure 1. The ideological polarization of language.

MOTHER TONGUE	ENGLISH
(Mandarin, Malay, Tamil)	
Mother tongue	Business and economics
Cultural ballast	Science and technology
Cultural identity	Higher education
Intra-ethnic communication and unity	Inter-ethnic communication and national unity

of national integration. In this justification, government leaders hold two key assumptions about the English language: one is that English is the key to economic survival and the second that English is a “neutral” language. To look at these assumptions more closely, consider a speech by Professor Jayakumar, former minister of state (Law and Home Affairs), that was reported in Singapore’s main English daily, *The Straits Times* (August 19, 1982). In this speech, Jayakumar outlines three integrative functions for the English language, drawn on these two assumptions.

In terms of economic integration, he argues that “English is the major international language for trade, science, and technology, and proficiency in the language is essential as Singapore becomes a leading financial and banking center,” and a leader in the service and high technology industries. This suggests a perceived direct relationship between the direction and possibilities of economic development and English. According to Jayakumar, English is the “key to the productivity concept. With increasing modernization, skilled workers who know English will be in greater demand . . . it is the key to acquisition of skills and training and career advancement.” Singapore’s leaders frequently point to the fact that the economic advantage Singapore has had over most countries in Southeast and East Asia is this skilled, English-proficient workforce.

These assumptions about the English language also work toward social integration. The argument given by government leaders is that proficiency in English will bring a person and society out of poverty. The English language (and proficiency in English) is thus presented as accessible to all Singaporeans. When this argument is linked to the notion of meritocracy, itself a powerful discourse in the imagining of Singapore, English also puts everyone on an equal playing field. As suggested by then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, English “is our common working language. . . . It provides a neutral medium, giving no one any advantage in the competition for knowledge and jobs” (*The Mirror* June 19, 1978).

Jayakumar also talks about the relationship between English and cultural integration. Because English is neutral in that it does not belong to any of the major ethnic communities in Singapore, it can be the language for inter-ethnic communication and racial harmony. Jayakumar argues that when English “is the common language here, it will enable all Singaporeans—regardless of race—to communicate with one another.” Former education minister Dr. Tony Tan made a similar comment in his speech to parliament (March 16, 1990), arguing that through English “there is a greater understanding among Singaporeans of all races,” which has “helped substantially to build the peaceful harmonious Singapore that we have today.” Note that these leaders are not suggesting that English can be the language of national identity. They are only saying English can be the language of cultural integration. While it can be argued that English is the de facto national language (Pakir, this volume), Singapore’s leaders have never given English the discursive space of national language. To do so would mean English

could also occupy the space of culture, which, as I will show in a moment, has also been systematically denied in the ideological polarization of language within bilingualism.

Underlying both these notions of English is the view that it is possible to separate language, culture, and technology—that it is possible to adopt English for its technological advantages without adopting its culture. As Lee Kuan Yew puts it: “I don’t think I want to model my life on the Anglo-Saxon. I want to catch up with his material and scientific progress. I want to pick up and emulate some of his methods of organizing society. But I am not accepting as superior his culture or way of life. In fact, I view some of the present day values and practices in [the West] . . . as deplorable, [and] which indeed should be strenuously avoided at all cost” (*ST*, January 8, 1988). This view underscores the notion of the neutrality of the English language.

Opposite English in this polarization of language ideologies are the three mother-tongue languages, Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin. As with the English language, the discursive construction of mother tongue language ideologies focuses on national integration. Already in the 1955 Legislative Assembly, when an independent Singapore outside of the Malayan Federation was not yet even conceived, Lee Kuan Yew raised the complexity of the language issues facing the goals of national integration: “In a free and independent Malay in which every Chinese, every Indian, every Malay, will no longer be Chinese, Malay or Indian but Malayan, what language or languages shall they speak? What language or languages shall the Government use? What language or languages will be acceptable to the people? What are the language or languages of an independent and democratic Malaya? They are thorny delicate problems” (Singapore, *LAD* 1955/1956).

The following year, on the basis of the findings of an All-party Education Committee (of which he was a member) set up to look into these questions, Lee Kuan Yew proposed some answers. While the ideal scenario for national integration would be one dominant language and one dominant culture, he argued, “when one gropes, however consciously, for the language, one comes up against all the primordial prejudices of the other groups.” Thus, the recommendation was “bilingualism in the primary stage and trilingualism in the secondary stage” (Singapore: *LAD*, April 12, 1956).

A bilingual policy based on multilingualism thus offers tangible evidence of the government’s commitment to Singapore’s various races, and to a “Singaporean Singapore”—playing on Lee Kuan Yew’s (1998) notion of a Malaysian Malaysia—rather than a nation based on one dominant ethnic group. No one could mistake the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) commitment to multilingualism as documented in their tenth anniversary book: “We repudiate [the Malaysian Tunku’s and the Alliance Party’s] position that suppression of the mother tongue or their relegation to positions of minor importance is a prerequisite for national unity. Linguistic diversity is in no way incompatible with the interests of a united

Malayan nation” (PAP 1964: 286). With such a proclamation it would have been very difficult politically for the PAP to abandon its commitment to multilingualism upon independence. As such, the guarantees of multilingualism and multiculturalism have been enshrined in the nation’s constitution.

But the ideological construction of mother-tongue languages goes well beyond the state consolidating its own power. For even the term “mother tongue” suggests deeper ideological issues may be at play. As Pakir has also mentioned in this volume, the “mother tongue” status of these languages is not to be understood in the traditional sociolinguistic sense of the word. Crystal’s use of “mother tongue” represents this more traditional view: “A person’s ‘mother tongue’ or ‘first language’ (L1) is distinguished from any further languages that may be acquired (L2, L3, etc.)” (Crystal 1987: 368). In Singapore, a person’s “mother tongue” may well be the language acquired later in life, such as in school, and may not even be used in the home at all. The mother tongue is an ascribed language, assigned on the basis of one’s father’s ethnicity, and ideologically framed in the “a race = a culture = a language” equation.

The focused construction of this equation began in the late 1970s. With consecutive years of rapid economic development, Singaporean society began to change—and in ways that were not particularly welcomed by the leadership. These changes, coupled with a devastating evaluation of the bilingual policy in the 1978 Goh Report indicating an alarming failure of the policy, led to an aggressive “*Speak Mandarin Campaign*” aimed at consolidating the Chinese community around Mandarin (and eliminating their use of other Chinese dialects). With this effort came a very particular discursive construction of the mother-tongue languages.

Mother-tongue languages, the leaders have argued, are essential to countering the negative effects that have come with Singaporeans’ exposure to the English language. Because English is a neutral language, it has no cultural value for Singaporeans. Any cultural values it does have are ones seen to be inappropriate for Singapore. As such, if Singaporeans were to learn only English and not their mother tongue languages, they would be in danger of becoming “deculturalized.” Lee Kuan Yew referred to the Caribbean society to portray what Singapore might well become. He described it as being “deculturalized” and as being a “calypso-type society . . . speaking pidgin English, mindlessly aping the Americans or British with no basic values or cultures” of their own, and leading a “steel-beating and rum-brewing-and-drinking, happy go lucky life” (November 5, 1972). Frankly, he declared, “I do not believe this [kind of society] is worth the building . . . worth the [*sic*] preserving.” In recent years, particularly with the publication of Lodge and Vogel’s work in 1987 on the relationship between ideology and national competitiveness, the link between good Asian values and economic development has given the mother tongue–values link even greater importance and urgency.

The mother-tongue languages have thus been presented as insulating Singaporeans from this kind of deculturalization. Unlike English, which supposedly can be separated from culture, the mother-tongue languages are embedded in the logic of multiracialism, captured in the equation “a race = a language = a culture.” The analogy of computer programming is often used: through mother-tongue education, children would be “inculcated with good Eastern values and cultures. . . . These values will thus be programmed like a computer in the children and form their basic principles in dealing with society and with problems” (MP Choo Wee Kiang, *PDS*, January 17, 1989).

Therefore, the argument goes, each person must have an ethnicity as prescribed by the government, which means he or she has a mother tongue as determined by her or his ethnicity, and which means that she or he then has a culture transmitted by that mother tongue. And with each of the different communities firmly rooted in their cultures, when pulled together, a common Singaporean culture will emerge. In a recent speech in Parliament, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong used the imagery of overlapping circles (think of the Olympic logo) to capture his vision of the nation (May 5, 1999):

Our society is made up of four overlapping circles, like the People’s Association logo. Each circle represents one community. The four circles overlap each other. What we can do is maximize the overlapping area. This is the area where all Singaporeans, whatever their race, work and play together. It is an open playing field with English as the common language and equal opportunities for all.

Outside this common area, where the circles do not overlap, each community has his [*sic*] own playing field. In this separate area, each community can retain and speak its own language and practice its own culture and customs. This practical approach of nation building whereby every community has two playing fields has given us multi-racial harmony. This approach helps us to build a harmonious nation of diversity.

As we look at the implementation and effects of bilingualism, we will see that the language ideologies embedded in the bilingual policy both provide the possibilities of what language can do in the government’s efforts of national integration, and at the same time, result in tension, paradox, and limitations.

The implementation of bilingual education in Singapore. Perhaps one of the most important features of bilingual education in Singapore as it relates to national integration is the development of language-based streaming. The first stage

in the streaming process comes at the end of primary four. On the basis of their final examination results, students are streamed into EM1/EM2, EM2, or EM3. In the EM1/EM2 stream, English is taught at the first-language level and the mother tongue at the first-language or second-language level. In the EM2 stream, English is taught at the first-language level and mother tongue at the second-language level, with remedial lessons in either English or mother tongue. And in the EM3 stream, academically weak students learn either oral English or mother tongue (which is weaker).

The second stage in the streaming process comes at the end of primary six. On the basis of their Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE) results, students are streamed into special, express, or normal secondary courses. Once again, each level is characterized by a particular level and mix of bilingualism.

The special stream is for “those pupils who are ablest” (only the top 10%) to do two first languages, and possibly a third (such as German or French). Students must score A* in their mother tongue language and A in English before they are allowed to take higher mother tongue. This stream is only offered in the ten SAP schools—schools that have been selected by the government to be elite, “effectively bilingual institutions,” responsible to protect the Chinese heritage and to produce the next generation of “social brokers.” Given the construction of language ideologies discussed earlier, two issues stand out with respect to these Chinese SAP schools. Although all three mother-tongue languages are placed on equal footing within the ideological polarization of language, there are no similar SAP schools for Malay or Tamil. The lack of a critical student mass at this level has been the most common reason given. Furthermore, because these schools, at least initially, were the only ones to offer both English and mother tongue at the higher language level, there is also the perception that these are elite schools, and with it a government-led agenda to produce a Chinese elite. In fact, the recent debate concerning SAP schools in Singapore has been couched in terms of “fostering a Chinese elite.”

Since the implementation of SAP schools, two other developments have occurred that have essentially diffused the uniqueness of the SAP schools as it pertains to language and curriculum, and at the same time reinforced the language-intelligence link. In 1987 the government introduced the status of “independent schools” (with a separate board of directors). Two of the eight independent schools are also SAP schools. These schools accept only the top 3 to 5% of students. Historically, these have always been the top schools in Singapore, producing the nation’s leaders. And in 1994, the status of “autonomous schools” (schools that are either government or government-aided) was introduced—seven of the eighteen autonomous schools are SAP. Although they cannot offer the “special stream,” the non-SAP independent and autonomous schools also offer classes in Higher Mandarin.

In addition to the special stream, secondary students may also be streamed into the express stream, which is for above-average students and offers English at

the first language level and mother tongue at the second language level. The normal stream (academic and technical) is for average students. The academic stream offers English and mother tongue at the second language level; the technical stream offers English and basic mother tongue.

Finally, university entrance has a language requirement; students must obtain a certain level in their English and second language proficiency in order to be accepted. If they are borderline in their language subjects but show promise in all other areas, they are allowed to take remedial lessons during their university program; however, they must pass in order to graduate.

Thus at all levels, streaming in the schools is very much based on language. Because of this link between language and streaming and language, and hence language and intelligence, bilingualism is also intricately tied to the structuring of society in terms of social class and status. Census statistics for 1991 show a strong linkage between proficiency in the English language and high levels of social status and class (see also Pakir in this volume). The relationship between language and social class is also very pertinent to the discussion of the dialectics of national integration, but for lack of space I will focus specifically on the complex challenges that English-knowing bilingualism presents to the cultural component of national integration. The challenge is very real. As Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong put it recently in Parliament, even with the emphasis on unity in diversity, the “divide between the races is always there.” As such, “the national heartbeat may become separate heartbeats over time.” This tension lies at the center of the ‘dialectics of national integration’.

The dialectics of national integration. To guide this discussion of bilingual education and the dialectics of national integration, I will focus on the recent debate in Singapore concerning SAP schools and the creation of a Chinese elite. As with most language ideological debates, this debate is very much part of wider sociopolitical processes and linked to a complex story of power relations, competing views in the imagining of the nation, of discourses and counter discourses, and so forth. In this small space, I unravel some of these complexly interwoven narratives to see how the ideological construction of language both facilitates and limits the possibilities of the bilingual education policy in bringing about national integration.

This particular discursive moment in Singapore’s on-going debate about SAP schools was ignited in Parliament after the announcement of a tenth SAP school. Member of Parliament (MP) K Shanmugam set the tone when he posed this question: Are the students of SAP schools able to mix harmoniously with non-Chinese Singaporeans? Will this pose a threat to the pluralistic spirit of Singaporean society? In the months that followed, active debate on the topic dominated discussions in Parliament, government speeches, and in the press.

Essentially, the debate has gone something like this: Singapore’s bilingual education policy based on multilingualism embodies the government’s commitment

to imagining Singapore as a multiracial, multicultural nation. However, to concentrate on developing the language and culture of the various communities separately and in isolation of the others could potentially work against this multicultural ideal. There is a tension between ethnic identity and national identity, which is seen as a threat to Singapore's social cohesion. When it appears that particular attention is given to just one of the ethnic communities, and when that community is the dominant group, the threat to social cohesion goes beyond the maintenance of separate identities to one of social equity. In the rest of this paper, I will unpack these various aspects of the debate. What we will find is that much of the debate emerges from the constraints of the ideological construction of bilingualism, leading to a story of the dialectics of national integration.

The SAP school debate and the question of social cohesion. To introduce us to this first aspect of the SAP school debate, let me isolate a number of excerpts from *The Straits Times*. An editorial (March 24, 1999) summarized the debate as follows: "The question is what the fostering of cultural elites, especially through SAP schools, means for inter-racial understanding, tolerance and harmony within Singapore. . . . The question is whether different cultural elites separately help to preserve one national identity for Singapore, or whether that single identity can be weakened by pulls from different cultural directions within."

Earlier in March, similar questions were raised at a seminar held at Hwa Chong Junior College where academics and community leaders discussed the role of Chinese intellectuals in the next century (*ST*, March 1, 1999): "Should Singapore develop a pool of Chinese intellectuals or just an intelligentsia spanning the various races? Would the segregation of the intelligentsia by race or language ultimately divide Singapore along racial lines?"

These questions indicate a conflict between the development of an "ethnic identity" and that of a "national identity." Because the system of English-knowing bilingual education is structured such that it would be very difficult for a student to learn a language not associated with her or his ethnicity, the instruction of the mother-tongue languages along racial lines also maintains a sense of difference among the various communities. This is particularly so in SAP schools where the only mother tongue language offered is Mandarin, thereby excluding the majority of non-Chinese students from enrollment. English is presented as the way out of ethnic distinction; yet one can see the constant tension this brings to the policy.

What makes this issue so potent is that SAP schools are, in theory anyway, designed to produce the next generation of leaders. As noted by MP Dr. Tan Cheng Bock, "It is a well-known fact that a sizeable number of able Chinese students attend such schools and some are going to be leaders of this country" (*ST*, March 2, 1999). At the center of the debate then is not so much that these schools exist, or that there is an effort to produce a Chinese elite, but that these efforts operate in exclusion to the other ethnic communities. Because SAP school students

have little interaction with non-Chinese students, the fear is that they will be less sensitive to the fears and hopes of other communities. In Parliament, MP Zulkifli Baharudin presented the issue this way: “What hope can we have if a section of our community grows up into adulthood in an entirely different ethnic-based education? What hope have we got if we allow them to erect walls between us and making it less possible to reach out, embrace and understand other communities in our society?” (*ST*, March 18, 1999).

The racial exclusiveness of the SAP schools emerges here as a principal concern of the non-Chinese communities. Yet Brigade-General George Yeo’s (minister for information and the arts) response to the debate completely missed this fundamental issue (*ST*, April 2, 1999). Closing SAP schools, he argued, would be akin to closing schools run by Muslims, Catholics, and Buddhists. Yet, unlike the Chinese SAP schools, enrollment in these schools is not exclusive, based neither on ethnicity or religion.

As is typical of the PAP leadership, the government’s response has been comprehensive. One strategy has been to merely reiterate the ideal model of multiculturalism in the imagining of the nation. In this model, the complex nexus of national and ethnic identities are presented as complementary, rather than in competition with one another. *The Straits Times* (March 22, 1999) reported Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s response to the debate as follows:

He said Singapore, being a multiracial country, faces the challenge of channeling ethnic pride towards the building of a national identity. This means allowing the different communities to retain their separate identities instead of forcing their different cultures and customs into a common mould. “Our approach is like weaving a beautiful piece of tapestry out of different colored strands of silk,” he said.

“Each community needs to nurture a core group of people adept at its own language and culture to preserve the community’s uniqueness,” he said. So SAP schools should be seen in this context.

The image is one of “unity in diversity,” whereby the encouragement of cultural distinction will somehow lead to a national identity. While this argument is somewhat ambiguous in that it remains unclear how exactly this unified national identity will emerge, it nonetheless represents the government’s continued commitment to the ideals of multiracialism. The various ethnic communities are seen as equal partners in the imagining of the nation, co-existing in harmonious relation with one another. However, as will be discussed in a moment, if indeed this were the case, there would be no debate.

Another strategy in the government's response has been to demonstrate its awareness of and responsiveness to the potential negative effects of exclusive Chinese elite schools. For a number of months and in various forums, government leaders (including Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong) stated in detail the various efforts taken to help SAP school students keep in contact with other races (*ST*, March 18, 22, 23, 1999). Cluster schools, extracurricular activities involving non-SAP schools, cultural awareness activities (fashion parades, food festivals, etc.), and so forth, were among the efforts mentioned. However, as columnist Cherian George put it, rather than furthering the possibility of transforming SAP schools from exclusive to inclusive, these efforts suggest that interaction with minorities in the SAP schools remains "literally an extra-curricular experience" (*ST*, March 24, 1999), undermining and minimizing the true nature of inter-ethnic interaction.

The particular construction of language ideologies within the bilingual policy also has played a key role in this debate. Given the perceived inherent link between language and culture, one possible avenue for cultural integration would be encouraging SAP school students to learn another local language as their third language. However, this possibility has been limited by the ways in which the mother tongue language has been embedded in the "a race = a culture = a language" equation. The equation suggests a rather limited utility for these languages, particularly in contrast to such languages as French or Japanese that offer more pragmatic possibilities. This is illustrated by the fact that while the non-Chinese communities have frequently requested that their children be allowed to learn Mandarin as their second language, no similar requests have been made by the Chinese community to learn Malay or Tamil. As I have argued elsewhere (Bokhorst-Heng 1999a), this is undoubtedly because, with the recent opening up of China's markets, Mandarin has taken on "value-added" status; it has crossed the polarized divide between English and mother tongue to take on economic value as well as culture. Because the other mother tongue languages have not been able to cross the barrier in the same way, there is no perceived pragmatic value to learn these languages, and they remain locked in the "a race = a culture = a language" equation.

The possibilities and constraints posed by the ideological construction of bilingualism are seen also in one other response given by government leaders to the SAP school debate. In response to the concerns raised by MP Baharudin, Education Minister Teo Chee Hean pointed out that all races are unified through the use of English as a common language. The bilingual policy "has served Singapore well," he argued. "It has enabled us to unify the country while at the same time allowed each community to feel that it has the room and space to develop itself and to retain its own unique identity and characteristics" (*ST*, March 18, 1999). At a very basic level, although this argument may work in ethnically mixed schools, it holds little merit in the SAP schools, where the mother tongue has physically isolated the Chinese students from the others.

Furthermore, the ideological polarization of language meanings presents English as devoid of any culture value. Once again the possibilities of language for cultural integration are limited. For at what level can this communication occur, if English is for functional purposes alone? At what level can this communication occur if English cannot be seen as a “mother tongue”? Furthermore, English continues to be portrayed by the leaders as playing a vital role in exposing Singaporeans to the decadent values of Western societies, threatening the very viability of the nation. Thus, the limited discursive space given to English ultimately hinders the development of true cultural exchange. These limitations have been the subject of considerable debate in Singapore. Letters to the “Forum Page” often express the desire for English to be given the status of mother tongue. National authors struggle with the contradiction between the ideological construction of English and the use of English as a means of cultural expression and national literature (Talib 1998). And academics explore conceptual paradigms that would expand and broaden the role of the English language in Singapore (Ho and Alsagoff 1998).

Thus far the debate concerning SAP schools and about the creation of cultural elites seems to assume equilibrium among the three major ethnic communities—that there is an equal effort to develop an elite in all three communities. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, the voices of some in the debate suggest an even deeper concern than the threat to social cohesion is the perceived threat to social equity.

The SAP school debate and the question of social equity. The comments of one person writing to the “Forum Page” in *The Straits Times* capture the tone of this debate: “What is important is the need to maintain the sacredness of the commitment towards multiracialism and its ideals. To the minorities, the SAP schools represent a tiny breach.” (April 2, 1999). His voice was not alone, as is evident in the frequent speeches given by government leaders specifically addressing this concern. One such speech was that of Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong given to members of the Sikh community (*ST*, March 21, 1999):

Minority communities have no cause to worry about moves to develop a Chinese cultural elite and SAP schools, said DPM Lee Hsien Loong last night. He said he was aware that non-Chinese were concerned that these moves might reflect a shift away from the ideal of multiracialism. But they need not worry, he said. The Government remains committed to multiracialism and meritocracy with English remaining as the common working language. He also produced figures to allay fears that SAP students would form a communal elite, swipe top positions, and squeeze out other talented Singaporeans. The reality was that non-SAP students form the majority among the top Chinese

students at school, among Government scholarship holders and in the premier Administrative service. . . . This makes it impossible for SAP school students to form a communal elite, and squeeze out the other Singaporeans.

A column in *The Straits Times* by Assistant Professor (NIE) Goh Yeng Seng (*ST*, April 13, 1999) reiterated the same argument. When “comparing the source of students, future career opportunities, and the curricula of the SAP and non-SAP schools,” he argued, we find that in 1998, SAP schools comprised less than half of the top ten secondary schools. My analysis of President Scholarships recipients (1998) leads to the same conclusion: schools that have historically been the best schools in Singapore (and which today are non-SAP independent schools) continue to produce the mainstream elite leadership in Singapore.

This actually points to yet another issue embedded in this debate, namely that within the Chinese community, it is the English-speaking elites that dominate the center, while the Chinese-speaking intellectuals remain on the periphery. For these “minorities,” SAP schools represent a “need to assert political muscle in a milieu in which English-speakers seem to form the majority in circles of influence” (*ST*, March 2, 1999). It is important to note that the implementation of the SAP school program was initially very much a way to appease the growing dissatisfaction of the Chinese-educated members of the Chinese community who saw themselves increasingly as a marginalized underclass. And so in some ways, the SAP schools and the debate are a smoke screen for the continued dominance of English in Singapore, and for the socioeconomic and political benefits that proficiency in English brings.

However, this is not to suggest that then the non-Chinese communities have no cause for concern. The SAP schools do not exist in isolation. Significantly, their inception was also part of a larger effort by the Singaporean government to consolidate the Chinese community around Mandarin, and thereby strengthen the dominant position of the Chinese (Bokhorst-Heng 1999b). It is the context of this larger effort that has produced such unease within the minority communities. In her analysis of language policies as they relate to the South Asian community in Singapore, Tan Su Hwi notes that “although Singapore is a multi-ethnic nation, the real power base . . . must be retained at the ethnic center” (1998: 98). She quotes Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as saying: “The government’s overall policies are to ensure that there is succession of and mass support for the English-knowing bilingual Chinese elite in the important spheres of power and privilege” (*ST*, September 4, 1997). In his 1997 National Day rally speech, the Prime Minister said, “We need Chinese scholars for the Government and business, the media and the arts.” Thus, while they might not produce the nation’s top elite, the SAP schools nonetheless continue to be part of this story, existing as visible evidence to the minorities of the government’s breach in its commitment to multiculturalism.

Conclusion. In this paper, I examined the relationship between bilingual education and national integration in Singapore as it has been played out in one instance: the controversy over Chinese SAP schools. The debate is embedded in two contested areas: the cultural and national nexus, where the demands of two sets of identities pose a threat to social cohesion, and the struggle to maintain social equity within an ethnically disproportioned population. While Singapore's bilingual policy has eased the tensions in some areas, it has paradoxically increased the tension in others. I argued that these paradoxes could only be understood when the various language ideologies and their relation to the imagining of the nation are taken into account. This focus on ideology reveals how, as Heller (1999) says of the Canadian context, language is the "terrain on which [such] tensions are neutralized, ambiguities constructed, contradictions masked." And so it is only when we see the ideological construction of the mother tongue languages in the "a race = a culture = a language" equation that we can understand how the bilingual policy can reinforce ethnic walls rather than open doors of cultural exchange. It is only when we consider the ideological construction of the English language that we can understand its dominant yet limited role in bringing about true cultural exchange and social equity. The relationship between bilingual education and national integration therefore is ultimately a dialectical one, played out against the wider sociopolitical horizon of imagining the Singapore nation.

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