Acts of Identity in Singapore

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**Introduction**

This paper attempts to ascertain the degree of focussing on a stereotype of national identity through a local variety of English amongst a sample from one group of Singaporeans. "Focussing" refers to the consensus amongst members of a community on the rules and regulations which constitute their linguistic code. The greater the degree of consensus the more focussed the community will be.

Chiew (1980: 246) has argued that in spite of low miscegenation rates:

> "...national identity in Singapore is likely to be fairly high. Survey data show that (1) 90 per cent of the 990 respondents of various ethnic groups in 1969/70 called themselves Singaporean, (2) 74 per cent preferred to be called Singaporeans rather than being called Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians or Europeans."

This essay attempts to examine one specific way in which national identity of Singaporeans is manifested. A group of people may identify with each other by the act of speaking an indigenised form of language X; i.e. those who speak a variety of English known as Singapore English (henceforth SE) make a collective act of identity by wishing to be "Singaporean".

We note that there is an emerging supra-ethnic sense of national identity whose linguistic medium is English particularly SE. Symptomatic of this are the way Singaporeans recognise and perceive what constitutes SE and their efforts to embody the national life in local drama productions, popular songs and other linguistic artefacts in SE. Thus reinforcing this variety's status as the naturalistic speech of Singaporeans. This phenomenon was tested empirically in a small pilot survey, as reported in this article summarising a larger work by the author (Lee, 1987). However, since it was a small sample the findings cannot be conclusive nor extrapolations made to apply to the general populace. Nevertheless, they may show a relationship between national identity and awareness of Singapore English (SE) which is worth further investigation.
Questionnaire Survey

In the survey a composite stereotype of "Singaporean-ness" was projected by means of a closed questionnaire which covered the following influences on national identity, e.g. ethnicity, patriotism and linguistic awareness of a local variety of English, which may be regarded by some as an indigenised form of English through which they may express their conceptions of national identity. The group chosen consisted of a sample of National University students who grew up with Independent Singapore (both they and the nation are 22 years old). This group was also chosen partly because of compatibility with an earlier work on lexical items (Shields, 1977). The selected elements which would constitute a national identity was based on an earlier study (Chiew, 1980), which in turn was based on the stereotype of "a good Singaporean" citizen propagated by a government which has been incumbent for the 22 years since Independence. This stereotype was used as a convenient yardstick by which to evaluate the degree of focussing among the respondents and is by no means meant to represent the only form of national identity in Singapore. Indeed those respondents who had low scores on the national identity group of questions may have had very different stereotypes of what being a Singaporean included. (See Appendix I for details of Questionnaire design and administering of the questionnaire).

Before commenting on the results of the survey it would be useful to have an overview of language planning and the use of English in Singapore over the years to provide a context for the survey data.

Since post-independence Singapore is already 22 years old, it seems probable that a sense of national identity amongst people committed to the nation may eventually emerge, perhaps overtaking the "faute de mieux" national identity among the ethnic Chinese reported by Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985: 176). It is further possible that then a national identity does emerge its linguistic medium will be English. The use of English is a centripetal force in the relationship between language and national cohesion in two ways, one of which is through "spiritus movens" and the other through the "state idea" (See Knight, 1982: 522). The former describes a spontaneous conception of national identity on the part of the people which may be amorphous and a-political, whereas the latter refers to a political ideal generated by the political elite, i.e. the government.

English as "State Idea"

Language planning has been part of the state idea of the government from the start. English was not only retained as one of the official languages but was also selected as the language to advance economic, technical and political progress,