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Multilingualism and the Role of English in the United Arab Emirates, with views from Singapore and Hong Kong

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1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has witnessed remarkable growth since its foundation in 1971. Initially fueled by the discovery of oil, the economic development of the past decades has come hand in hand with significant foreign labor and investment, resulting in a resident population comprised of no less than 85 percent of foreign citizens. These highly transient migrant workers exert a strong impact on the local linguistic ecology, with many languages present in the public sphere. English holds the position of the unchallenged *lingua franca*, being used as a first, second, additional, and foreign language by speakers from a multitude of linguistic backgrounds. In this context, English exists in its British and American forms, but also in several others, mainly South Asian varieties. The official language of the UAE is Arabic, but there is an ongoing language shift towards English.

Much as in Singapore and Hong Kong, the present high-tech belt of conurbations in the UAE, which stretches from Abu Dhabi in the West to Ras al-Khaimah in the East, was forged out of small settlements that primarily engaged in agriculture, fishing, and pearling. Today's UAE territory is divided between seven sheikdoms (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al Quwain) that entered a political alliance in 1971, thus giving rise to a new country (Hawley 1971: 129). However, while the development from an agrarian to a modern high-tech society took more than one hundred years in Singapore and Hong Kong, the UAE achieved this change within just a few decades. Singapore came under British control in 1819 and Hong Kong started its colonial history in 1842. Although British interest in the Gulf Region can similarly be traced back to the early nineteenth century, Britain's prime concern in the region were local tribes that impacted their shipping routes to India (Pacione 2005: 255). Rapid urbanization in the UAE only started in the 1960s with the discovery of oil whose revenues were channelled into far-sighted infrastructure projects.

The current multilingual texture and also the history of multilingualism are quite different in the three territories compared here. Before colonization, Singapore was a

sparsely populated island of primarily indigenous Malays speaking at best a few related Malayo-Polynesian varieties (Siemund and Li 2020). After it was turned into a British trading post, it quickly attracted Chinese immigrants from Southern China and colonial possessions further north (Malacca, Penang). Moreover, the British relocated sizeable numbers of Indians to Singapore, especially from Tamil speaking Southern India. As of today, Malay, Mandarin and various Chinese dialects, as well as Tamil define the linguistic landscape of Singapore.

In a similar way, Hong Kong used to be an island with low population density before colonization where different forms of Chinese co-existed. During colonial times, it was officially English-speaking in spite of the fact that the vast majority of its population spoke Cantonese (who were attracted from the neighboring Guangdong province). This lasted until 1979 when Chinese (meaning Cantonese) was made a co-official language on a par with English. After the handover to mainland China in 1997, Mandarin or Putonghua has gained prominence in conjunction with a policy that promotes trilingualism (Cantonese, Putonghua, English) and biliteracy (English, Chinese).

2. Dubai and the UAE

The discovery of oil in the late 1960s, requiring an expanded workforce, led to a major immigration initiative in Dubai and the entire UAE, which continues to this day. Even though oil is not the main source of revenue anymore, the need for personnel continues. The main income for Dubai today is real estate and tourism, both of which bring in vast quantities of currency and people. Statistics today show that only about 10 percent of the residents of Dubai are Emirati (Adomaitis 2014; Government of Dubai 2019; Kennetz and Carroll 2018; Piller 2018; Solloway 2019); the remainder are all immigrants from many different countries. Beyond the oil industry, workers, particularly from Asia, can easily find jobs in construction, hospitality, and retail, while managerial and teaching positions are often offered to Americans, Britons, other Westerners, and Arabs from various countries. Dubai is extremely diverse in terms of the languages, cultures, and traditions mixed together as the influx of immigrants from all over the world continues to descend on the emirate, as workers, tourists, students, and more. While Arabic is the official language of the UAE, there are more than one hundred languages spoken in the country, some of those include Bengali, Farsi, Hindi, Malayalam, Pashto, Singalese, Tagalog, and Urdu (Habboush 2009; Baker 2017).

Due to the diverse population in Dubai, a common language was needed to help people communicate. Although Arabic is spoken by the Emiratis and other Arabs who work and reside in Dubai, English has become the lingua franca. While Arabic is the official language of the UAE, English is widely used in business, education, tourism, and government offices. In both the public and private sector, English is spoken in banks, hospitals, universities, shops, and transportation. Indeed, English is almost required in the UAE, especially in higher education. Due to the large expatriate population of the nation, many with some understanding of English, the UAE has essentially offered English a central role. Immigrants who move to the UAE have no

need to speak or comprehend Arabic, and it is presumed that most expatriates working in the country will be able to use English for all types of communication (Al-Issa and Dahan 2011). This has had the effect of Arabic being consigned to a lower status among the population. The relationship between the two languages in the UAE is unequal and there are undertones of uncertainty about what the role of English actually is (see Al Hussein and Gitsaki 2018; Findlow 2006; Troudi and Jendli 2011). As Al Hussein and Gitsaki (2018: 106) point out, "It is often unclear whether the status of English in the UAE is one of an official second language or that of a foreign language whose learners could easily do without."

The UAE's language policy and planning have been at the center of helping English proliferate in the country. As the nation continually seeks to modernize and expand, English has become the lingua franca in many, if not all, domains. This has given English a place of prestige, leading Emiratis to view the language as necessary in order to advance economically (see Abendroth-Timmer and Hennig 2014; Randall and Samimi 2010). The push to ensure English as the language of instruction in higher education comes from the country's desire to prepare Emiratis for building a knowledge-based economy and be more competitive regionally and worldwide.

In order to achieve the UAE's education and economic goals, English is taught very early in the curriculum and English is now the medium of instruction (EMI) in higher education. English has an elevated status in the UAE, and this has marginalized Arabic. English is connected to modernity including education, business, and globalization, while Arabic, on the other hand, has a lower status and is considered the language of traditions, family, home, and religion (Al-Issa 2017; Al-Issa and Dahan 2011; Findlow 2006; Kazim 2000). Since English is considered more important for global success and is prestigious, many UAE families send their children to private schools to study in English (Kenaid 2011; Nazzal 2014; Pennington 2015). Emirati children hear English from the time they are very young through personal nannies, tutors, and the television. Despite the fact that public schools, available only to Emirati nationals, are supposed to teach in Arabic, they have nevertheless begun implementing a bilingual curriculum. In fact, nearly 45 percent of weekly instruction in government schools is communicated in English (Carroll and Combs 2016). This is done in order to help Emirati nationals have a chance to compete with their fellow Emiratis who attend private English medium schools.

Emirati high school graduates must take a federal English exam in order to apply to college or university. Without the proper score (180+ on the Common Educational Proficiency Assessment) (Farah and Ridge 2009), they are unable to matriculate into the higher education institutions, which are free. The graduates that fail on this threshold are instead forced to take intensive English language classes to improve their scores. However, many young Emiratis are still unable to improve to the required levels. This is due to the poor English instruction they often receive in the public high schools. For those who cannot improve, this burden causes them to drop out. The position of English at government institutions of higher education has a negative impact on young Emiratis' desire for higher education. Overall, Emirati students have very low marks on local and international standardized tests (Fox 2007). This seems counterintuitive to all

the English they are supposedly learning in public schools; however, these low scores usually result from the standards and practices received at the secondary level (Moore-Jones 2015). Furthermore, without an option to study higher education in Arabic, these young Emiratis lose the potential to study at university in their own country in their native language. Three recent studies carried out in the UAE showed that Emirati youth would prefer the option of studying in Arabic or in a bilingual curriculum (Belhiah and Elhami 2015; Kennetz and Carroll 2018; Solloway 2019). These studies reveal that Emirati youth want the ability to choose what language they will study in, and some have now been demanding that option.

There are concerns among many in the UAE that English is becoming an imposition in higher education. Their worries mirror those of scholars in the field of linguistics who point out that language is not neutral and is always attached to its culture and politics (see Block 2007; Findlow 2006; Pennycook 1994; Phillipson 2001). The UAE's language policy is one of "linguistic dualism." This is most apparent in higher education, but its effect has been to lead Emirati youth to look at English as a language superior to their native Arabic. English is used in the UAE for all things modern, such as business, engineering, and sciences, while on the other hand, Arabic becomes less powerful outside of its role in the home and for religious and traditional uses.

To understand the complex sociolinguistic situation in the UAE, it is important to be aware of the role of Arabic, not only in the UAE but in all Arabic-speaking nations. Arabic holds a central role in the history of the Arab world, and many view it as the main marker of a true Arab identity (see Ahmed 2010; Al-Issa 2011; Al Mutawa 2008; Eisele 2017). As the UAE continues to support and expand the role of English within its borders, the place of Arabic continues to diminish. Another factor that has emerged from this dichotomy is a decline in Arabic literacy. While the school curricula continue to increase English classes, Arabic has not been protected or promoted. In addition to its historical role, Arabic in the United Arab Emirates, and in all Arab nations, is a diglossic language. This refers to the different varieties of Arabic used, depending on the situation. There is a "high" language, which is formal and used in writing, and there is a "low" version, which includes vernaculars (Ferguson 1959). In the UAE there have been scholars who claim that the country is actually triglossic (Carroll, Al Kahwaji and Litz 2017). Emiratis speak an Arabic dialect at home, known as *khaleeji* or Gulf Arabic. They also use Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the "high" version of Arabic when they write, at conferences, and in Arabic classes. Finally, English has entered the mix as a third language in the Emirates.

This mix of languages, used in various situations within the UAE, has had a negative effect on young people and students. They are confronted with Modern Standard Arabic upon entering school. Prior to that they only used their *khaleeji* dialect. Therefore, children in the UAE learn a language which is rather foreign to them when they begin school. This is further confused by the addition of English early in their curriculum. Due to how difficult it is to learn MSA, it is important that it plays a central role in young Emiratis' lives. However, this does not occur on a consistent basis and there are signs that Emiratis are having difficulties with their Arabic literacy skills (Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky 2014).

In the long term, it is incumbent upon the UAE government to determine how they wish to proceed with their language policies. The decision to make English the medium of instruction in all institutions of higher education has not necessarily been beneficial for all. Certainly, there are students who are quite capable in English, but, even for them, it can be rather difficult to study in a second language. According to several scholars, there can certainly be negative consequences when using exclusionary practices with language policies, and some even question if these exclusions are ethical or legitimate (see Hewson 1998; Markee 2002; Williams and Cooke 2002). Additionally, many Emirati students are unable to enrol in universities when their English levels are low. This will affect their ability to find jobs in the future, especially in the private sector. Furthermore, the consistent focus on English will have negative implications for Arabic literacy and on Emiratis' feelings towards their native language.

3. Language Attitudes and Repertoires in the UAE

Existing research on the linguistic situation in the UAE has focused on the complex multilingualism extant in the country and in the Gulf as a whole (Randall and Samimi 2010; Boyle 2011; O'Neill 2014; Thomas 2017; Cook 2017; Drodz 2017; Piller 2018). Most of these studies, however, have focused on Emirati nationals who, as noted above, are in fact a minority in their own country. The premise of our study is to supplement the promising sociolinguistic studies of Drodz (2017) and Piller (2018) with an investigation of language repertoires, attitudes, and usages among people of the Emirates.

The multilingualism of the UAE, we argue, can be illustrated by looking at residents' language repertoires as well as the attitudes they hold towards the languages in the local ecology. In order to do so, we conducted a study in March and April 2019 among students of the American University of Sharjah. This is a private university which draws its student population from a wide range of local backgrounds: both Emiratis and non-citizens attend, the latter being mostly resident aliens. The study consisted of two major components: an online questionnaire on language use and face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The online questionnaire was disseminated among the entire student body by the second author and further advertised on social media. Of the 692 students that took part in the questionnaire, 119 were interviewed face-to-face. The description of the survey, as well as the analysis of language repertoires in this section are based on the descriptions in Siemund, Al-Issa and Leimgruber (2020).

Four sections were included in the questionnaire: (i) a demographic background section, (ii) a language use section, (iii) an educational and socio-economic section, and (iv) a language attitude section. The first section collected basic information such as the year and country of birth, citizenship, and gender. It also queried participants' migration history, in that they could list all countries in which they had lived for more than twelve months (a particularly relevant item in the UAE, a globalized society with high rates of transnational migration). The section on language use records the languages that the informants acquired or came into contact with over their lifetime: this includes language use with family members and peers, languages learnt at school,

as well as language use in daily activities (reading, watching television, dreaming, counting, etc.). It also asked participants to self-assess their proficiency in their languages in the four skills (passive reading and listening, and active reading and speaking). The third section attempts to ascertain socioeconomic background by querying the occupation of the participants' parents; it further documents their educational journey from kindergarten to university. Finally, attitudes towards both English and Arabic are gathered in the form of nine statements for each language, drawing on the common dimensions of status and solidarity. In what follows, after a description of the demographic background, we will concentrate on the language repertoires as well as the language attitudes of our informants.

To a large extent, the online questionnaire was inspired by those used in Siemund, Schulz and Schweinberger (2014) and Leimgruber, Siemund and Terassa (2018) in the context of Singapore. Specifically, Leimgruber, Siemund and Terassa's use of the online tool SoSci Survey (SoSci Survey GmbH, 2016) was replicated here because of the powerful customization made possible by the system: among other things, dynamic capabilities prevent participants from being presented with questions that do not apply to them (filtering). Also, language choices selected as part of their repertoires early on in the questionnaire could then be fed back into subsequent questions (e.g., those on proficiency). The average completion time was 15.6 minutes, which was similar to the estimated length given in the invitation e-mail.

3.1 Demographics

Our database consists of 692 unique participants, of which 440 (64%) were women and 252 (36%) men. These participants were between the ages of 19 and 37, with a mean and median of 21 ($SD = 1.3$). The students were primarily undergraduates, with only thirteen enrolled in Master-level degrees. All top-level divisions of the university are represented in the sample: the Achievement Academy (7 participants), the College of Architecture, Art and Design (55), the College of Arts and Sciences (195), the College of Engineering (274), and the School of Business Administration (161). Students also self-reported their Grade Point Average (GPA), with the following distribution across our four categories: 3.5–4 (23%), 3–3.49 (28%), 2.5–2.99 (32%), and below 2.5 (17%).¹

In terms of migration background, our participants are citizens of forty-nine different countries. In this chapter, we use this measure as a factor to differentiate between Emiratis (30% of our sample) and non-Emiratis. Table 6.1 shows the distribution across citizenship and gender.

Table 6.1 Citizenship and Gender

	Emirati	Non-Emirati
Female	141	299
Male	67	185

3.2 Language Repertoires

The participants in our sample reported knowledge of an average of 2.8 languages. Several of them, however, indicated more (see Figure 6.1), including 53 informants who claimed to know five languages or more. There are only seven monolinguals in the sample. Non-Emiratis appear consistently more multilingual than Emiratis, a difference that was confirmed to be statistically significant ($t = -3.2059$, $df = 450.15$, $p\text{-value} = 0.001442$).

As shown in Figure 6.2, English and Arabic were the languages reported most often. All students reported knowledge of English—an unsurprising result, as the questionnaire was administered in English at an English-medium university. In second place comes Arabic, with differences observed between Emiratis (of whom only two said they did not know Arabic) and non-Emiratis (among whom 345 out of 484 (71%) reported knowledge of Arabic). This high proportion among non-Emiratis, while significantly lower than among Emiratis, warrants closer investigation in future research. Following English and Arabic, the next most frequent languages in our sample are, in decreasing order, Hindi, Urdu, and French.

Participants also self-reported their proficiency in their highest-ranked languages, along a Likert scale with the choices “beginner,” “elementary,” “intermediate,” “upper intermediate,” “advanced,” and “mastery,” in line with the scale of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR 2020). As shown in Figure 6.3, the proficiencies in both English and Arabic are generally quite high. Overall, there is a higher proficiency in English, as well as a narrower range than in the case of Arabic. We interpret this wider range of proficiencies in Arabic as a result of its status as an additional language for many students in our sample.

Figure 6.1 Number of languages declared, by citizenship

Figure 6.2 Languages used by citizenship

Figure 6.3 Mean proficiency rating for English and Arabic

In our analysis of the self-reported proficiencies, a more nuanced picture emerges when discriminating between Emiratis and non-Emiratis. Further, given the high demographic weight of South Asian citizens in the UAE, we now consider them a separate category in our interpretation. As can be seen in Figure 6.4, for instance, this distinction is warranted, as there is quite a dramatic difference in Arabic proficiency: while Emiratis and non-South Asian non-Emiratis show a very similar mean proficiency of 4.8 and 4.7 respectively, South Asians rate themselves much lower with a mean proficiency of 3.5. The opposite is true with regard to English: here the South Asians rate themselves more proficient than our other citizenship groups, with more of them estimating their proficiency at “mastery” level than, especially, the Emiratis (see Section 2 above). These differences reveal something about the status of the English language within the countries our participants hail from; it certainly is the case that English enjoys wide currency as a *lingua franca*, a medium of education, and a language of upward social mobility in South Asia, and has done so for a considerably longer time than in the Arab World. By contrast, Arabic plays a minor role in South Asia, where it is likely restricted in use to its role as a religious language in Muslim communities.

More information can be gleaned from the individual language combinations used by the informants in our sample. The profile Arabic + English, as shown in Figure 6.5, is the most widespread by far, with 302 out of 692 (44%) reporting knowledge of these two languages. This most common profile is followed by the combination Arabic + English + French, which is reported by a mere 63 (9%). The third-most used profile is Arabic + English + Other, which was chosen by 58 (8%) of the respondents. These three most widely reported combinations amount to 61 percent of the sample. All of them contain both English and Arabic, highlighting the crucial role of these two languages in the Emirates.

Figure 6.4 Self-reported proficiency in English and Arabic, by citizenship

Figure 6.5 Most frequent language combinations, by citizenship (Ara = Arabic, Eng = English, Fre = French, Urd = Urdu, Hin = Hindi, Mal = Malayalam, Oth = Other)

Citizenship is not a good predictor of repertoire. The first three profiles in Figure 6.5 remain the same among Emiratis and non-Emiratis. Some differences can, however, be observed in the less common profiles: for instance, the combination English + Hindi + Urdu is used by 27 non-Emiratis, whereas it is not used at all by Emiratis. The other profiles too are mostly found among non-Emiratis. We note that among the named languages in Figure 6.5 there are, besides Arabic and English, primarily South Asian languages (Hindi, Malayalam, Urdu), as well as French. This presence of French is probably due to its widespread use as a foreign language in the education system in many private schools of the UAE, as well as to the presence in the country of migrants from former French colonial polities in the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Francophone Africa, and Lebanon.

3.3 Language Attitudes

Language attitudes were queried along the common status and solidarity dimensions, with statements about English and Arabic presented to participants. The Likert scale offered seven levels of agreement or disagreement, including a “neutral” option. For both languages, five statements from each dimension were presented. Our focus here will be on three of these statements. As can be gleaned from Figure 6.6 and Figure 6.7, the first statement, “Knowing Arabic/English will increase my opportunities to find employment” found high levels of agreement in both languages. While English scores

Figure 6.6 Selected attitudes towards Arabic

Figure 6.7 Selected attitudes towards English

were slightly higher than Arabic, participants consider knowledge of both languages valuable in terms of status, particularly when it comes to employability. Interesting differences, however, emerge in answers to the statement “I feel confident and secure when speaking Arabic/English”: 90 percent agreed that they did so for English, whereas only 58 percent did so for Arabic. This is perhaps not an unsurprising distribution in view of the self-reported proficiencies discussed above, where English consistently ranked higher than Arabic. Conversely, the statement “Knowing Arabic/English is a significant part of my cultural heritage” received 78 percent agreement in the case of Arabic, but only 31 percent (and 41 percent disagreement) in the case of English. This suggests that while English is preferred over Arabic for day-to-day communication, Arabic retains a certain prestige as a heritage language in a way that English does not. The prevalence of Arabic as a marker of cultural identity is due to the fact that while Emiratis and several migrants have Arabic as a traditional cultural language, this is only partly the case for English.

3.4 Gulf English

While the sociolinguistic functions of English in the Emirates (as a *lingua franca*, a medium of education, and, increasingly, as a second language) are perhaps better understood, the *form* of the English or the Englishes used in the country is less than clear. Previous research has proposed the terms “UAE English” (Boyle 2012) and “Gulf English” (Fussell 2011), both of which suggest a higher degree of homogeneity than can be found empirically. Among the features commonly ascribed to a putative Gulf English are lexical borrowings from Arabic such as those in Boyle (2012: 321): *jebel* ‘mountain’, *souk* ‘market’, *guthra* ‘traditional male headgear’, *abayah* ‘black outer garment for females’, and the phrase *Inshallah* ‘hopefully, lit. God willing’; one might add *wasta* ‘social connections’. Grammatical features listed in Boyle (2011: 150–57) include non-finite complement clauses in which the *-to* form is preferred over the *-ing* form (see (1) below), flexibility in verbal transitivity (see (2)), and uncountable as countable nouns (exemplified in (3)).

- (1) Do you envisage to carry out this major project in phases? (Boyle 2011: 151)
- (2) He appealed not to panic and assured that the authorities were keeping a close vigil on the progress of the depression. (Boyle 2011: 153)
- (3) The duo exchanged verbal abuses. (Boyle 2011: 155)

More recent research on less acrolectal speech by Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021) finds many more non-standard forms used in *lingua franca* situations. The morpho-syntactic features they analyzed include omissions (of auxiliary *DO*, auxiliary or copular *BE*, adverbial particles, determiners) illustrated in examples (4) to (7), non-standard tense (present simple instead of progressive, perfect, or future, *V-ing* for stative verbs, one example shown in (8)), left-dislocation, negation without *DO*-support (9), as well as non-standard plural marking and 3rd-person singular inflections (all examples from Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne 2021).

- (4) What [do] you call that?
- (5) This madam [is] now going, car also [is] selling.
- (6) This one you want me to switch [off]?
- (7) [A] Shukran card you have?
- (8) For how long are you [have you been] here?
- (9) Plastic no have. [We do not have plastic ones.]

The features of the putative Gulf English variety, therefore, are not surprisingly different from other Englishes found in ELF or even outer-circle settings. It can be assumed that the linguistic and geographical origin of migrants in the UAE plays a central role in the resulting variety. The extent to which these various Englishes coalesce into a single variety, perhaps through a modified form of dialect levelling, are not yet fully clear. Presently available data suggests a range of different ethnolinguistic forms of English co-existing in near isolation, with convergent accommodation towards out-group norms taking place in inter-cultural communication. The extent of this convergence remains unclear and is left for future research.

4. Singapore and Hong Kong

This section evaluates the situation in Dubai and the UAE from the perspectives of Singapore and Hong Kong. There are many similarities, though also important differences, in relation to the multilingual texture and the role of English therein, language policy and planning, as well as language change and shift. We will address these areas below.

4.1 Multilingualism and the Role of English

The economic logic behind the multiculturalism and multilingualism in the UAE can be contrasted to that in Singapore, where the nation as a whole defines itself as composed of three main ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese, and Indians). The representation of these groups is ensured by governmental decree in different domains such as housing, education, and politics. According to the 2019 Census of Population (Singapore Department of Statistics), the Chinese form the biggest group with 76.0 percent of the population, while Malays and Indians are significantly smaller contributing 15.0 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively. The remaining 1.5 percent are formed by various other groups, mainly Eurasians, Europeans, Japanese, and Arabs. This ethnic distribution has been surprisingly stable for many decades. The three main ethnic groups of Singapore are assigned official “mother tongues,” namely Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays, and Tamil for Indians. In principle, each member

of these ethnic groups is expected to speak these languages, but there are considerably more complex individual language repertoires (Siemund, Schulz and Schweinberger 2014; Leimgruber, Siemund and Terassa 2018). Besides Mandarin, the Chinese speak a host of other Chinese languages (“dialects” in the official parlance), especially Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka, Hokkien, and Teochew. The Indian population speaks various other Indian languages besides Tamil (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu; see Cavallaro and Ng 2021).

Although Hong Kong is predominantly Chinese regarding the ethnic background of its population, there are many smaller immigrant groups, including Indians, Nepalis, Filipinos, Indonesians, and Westerners. In 2016, 94.6 percent of the Hong Kong population reported proficiency in Cantonese and 48.6 percent in Putonghua or Mandarin (Bolton, Bacon-Shone and Lee 2021: 162). The most widespread mother tongue or first language is Cantonese.

The Chinese population in both Singapore and Hong Kong is undergoing language shift, though for different reasons and in different directions (see Section 4.3). Both Singapore and Hong Kong are cities in which we find pervasive bilingualism of English and another language. However, the two cities differ in relation to the knowledge, proficiency, and use of English. Moreover, the extent to which English has been localized or nativized clearly diverges. As of today, English is widely used as one or the only home language by many Singaporean families. Recent estimates report home language use of English of around 40 percent (Leimgruber, Siemund and Terassa 2018: 283). By comparison, the status of English in Hong Kong is more aptly described as that of a foreign or second language, contingent on the population group considered. Its use as a home language is very low (below 5%; Fuchs 2021: 293) and there are even fewer speakers who learnt it as their mother tongue (0.6%; Bacon-Shone, Bolton and Luke 2015: 18). An important source of English home language use in Hong Kong are English-speaking nannies from the Philippines. Accordingly, proficiency in English, especially academic proficiency, is higher in Singapore than Hong Kong.

Regarding nativization, it has generally been easier to make a convincing case for Singapore English than Hong Kong English, even though the literature knows both terms. English in Singapore is subject to considerable register differences, ranging from Colloquial Singapore English (Singlish) to Standard Singapore English. Colloquial Singapore English is a contact language with strong influences from especially Chinese (Cantonese) and Malay. There can be no doubt that Colloquial Singapore English has far advanced on the trajectory assumed in Schneider’s Dynamic Model (2007), currently being positioned at stage three (nativization) or four (endonormative stabilization), and perhaps even five (internal differentiation; see Buschfeld 2021 for data suggesting such an interpretation). During the early colonial decades, the status of English must have been that of a *lingua franca*, much as it is today in the UAE. A reliable indicator of the nativization of Colloquial Singapore English is that it is generally imbued with positive connotations and regarded as a symbol of national identity by many Singaporeans (Ortmann 2009: 36). Given the political developments in Hong Kong since the handover to China in 1997, it is not plausible to assume increasing degrees in the nativization of English there. It may be more plausible to use verbalizations like “English in Hong Kong” rather than “Hong Kong English,” and to

whatever extent English had nativized in Hong Kong, it may currently rather be de-nativizing. Having said that, English is without doubt the most important foreign language in Hong Kong and carries extensive overt prestige.

4.2 Language Policy and Planning

As we saw above, language policy measures in the UAE nearly exclusively pertain to the educational sector and concern—perhaps not even intentionally—what is known as “status planning” (Goundar 2017: 85). The main issue is the selection of the medium of instruction in the education system with English typically being the first choice. Determining the medium of instruction has also been a prominent topic in Singapore and Hong Kong, but, in these cities, several additional policy measures have been implemented.

A remarkable decision of far-reaching consequences was taken in Singapore in 1987 when the language of instruction was determined to be English for primary, secondary, and tertiary education. This ended a system in which education in Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English coexisted, usually looked after by the respective ethnic groups. An important consequence of this decision was that the so-called “mother tongues” now came to be learnt as second languages in the education system, producing a devaluation of Chinese, Malay, and Tamil quite similar to that of Arabic currently observable in the UAE.

Hong Kong to this day has English-medium and Chinese-medium schools working side-by-side obliging parents to decide what they consider best for their offspring besides the problem of what they can afford. Another pertinent problem in Hong Kong lies in the moniker “Chinese,” as this can mean either Cantonese or Putonghua. This, again, forces parents to take an important decision as to which strand their children should follow. The official backbone upholding English, Cantonese, and Putonghua is the biliterate/trilingual (BT) policy.

Besides selecting the language of instruction for the education system, the Singaporean government has for a long time been concerned with funneling the original migration-induced language diversity into a system of individual bilingualism involving one of the mother tongues and English. This preoccupation primarily concerns the Chinese community and entailed a profound language shift from various southern Chinese languages (or dialects) towards Mandarin (see next section). The main policy measure to achieve this is the Speak Mandarin Campaign (initiated in 1979) that needs to be conceptualized as an annual campaign placed under captivating slogans comprising a host of status planning and language learning activities.

Hong Kong currently faces a similar tension between what the Beijing government considers a dialect (Cantonese) and Putonghua, there being an increasing devaluation of Cantonese and a concomitant valorization of Putonghua. Interestingly enough, the Singaporean population has always been quite pragmatic regarding this prescribed shift towards Mandarin whereas Hong Kong has maneuvered itself into a veritable identity crisis. Hong Kong is currently entangled in a double divide where Eastern and Western values are forcefully being renegotiated, but also Northern and Southern China oppose one another within the city bounds.

Another important language policy initiative in Singapore is the Speak Good English Movement whose target is Colloquial Singapore English (Singlish), which the government views as “broken English” in need of rectification (see Wee 2011). Again, this campaign is placed under captivating slogans that especially address the younger generations, contending that only Standard English is appropriate for international communication. Curiously, the Speak Good English Movement has been much less successful than the Speak Mandarin Campaign, as Singaporeans have developed strong affection for Colloquial Singapore English and embrace it as a local solidarity code that conveys their Singaporean identity (Leimgruber, Siemund and Terassa 2018: 286). In Hong Kong, English is not really used as a local identity symbol with Cantonese essentially assuming this function. As Bolton, Bacon-Shone and Lee (2021: 179) explain, Hong Kongers typically “have a strong attachment to Cantonese, and the language also serves as a crucial marker of Hong Kong identity.”

Singapore and Hong Kong also differ in the extent to which English is used or even prescribed for official documentation. The language choice for the relevant functional domains in Singapore is unanimously English, which is consistently used in institutions of the government, including ministries, schools, the armed forces, government-linked companies, and grassroots organizations. Government websites are typically English-only, and so is policy-making, public communication, and the drafting of bills. Hong Kong is different here in that such official communication is usually available in both English and Chinese. Bolton, Bacon-Shone and Lee (2021) report a certain stratification with English being preferred at the top governmental layers, while the amount of Chinese, especially Cantonese, increases for the regulation of more local affairs.

4.3 Language Change and Language Shift

At least since the founding of Singapore in 1965, its three main ethnic groups have experienced a situation of continuous language shift whose target is individual bilingualism in one of the mother tongues (Malay, Mandarin, Tamil) and English. The Chinese community has been going through the most severe shift, as the original Chinese immigrant languages (“dialects”) have been replaced by Mandarin. The reasons are clearly political, and regarding the language shift of the Chinese community, they can be immediately recovered in the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, in a televised debate in 1980, left no doubt about the government’s language policy:

We must not burden our children with dialects. Drop dialects, don’t let children speak dialects. In fact, dialects have no economic value in Singapore. Their cultural value is also very low. English has economic value. Mandarin has cultural value and will also have economic value 20 years later.

Tan, November 17, 1980

As a consequence, home language use of the vernaculars (Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka, Hokkien, and Teochew) has dropped below 20 percent from originally well over 70 percent (see Figure 6.8). During the same period, (dominant) home language use of

Figure 6.8 Home language use in Singapore, in percent (data from Wong 2011; Siemund et al. 2014; Leimgruber et al. 2018; Cavallaro and Ng 2021; Singapore Department of Statistics 2020)

English and Mandarin increased to levels between 30 and 40 percent. Interestingly, home language use of Malay and Tamil have been more or less constant, but more detailed recent studies also indicate a shift towards English in these communities.

Although Hong Kong has witnessed a strong increase in the ability of its population to speak Mandarin as a second language, from under 10 percent in 1991 to more than 30 percent in 2016 (Fuchs 2020: 293), the share of the respective first or usual spoken languages has remained practically constant. Figure 6.9 illustrates a moderate decrease in the use of other Chinese dialects and some increase in the use of English and Putonghua (Mandarin). The trend as such mirrors that of Singapore, but the language spoken by the vast majority of the population remains Cantonese.

Whereas the official bilingual policy entailed stronger English learning efforts for the Indian and Malay communities in Singapore, the Chinese speakers have been going through a situation of double language shift, namely from the Chinese vernaculars to both English and Mandarin. The temporal developments shown in Figure 6.8 are also reflected in the language use of different age cohorts. Again, focusing on the Chinese community, the age-related data in Figure 6.10 demonstrate a strong use of the vernaculars in the oldest cohorts and a very strong dominance of English and Mandarin in the youngest cohorts. The use of Malay and Tamil practically do not differ across the age groups distinguished.

The above governmental figures are quite revealing but do not reflect the entire language repertoires of Singaporean speakers. Focusing on three diverse student samples collected at Nanyang Technological University, various polytechnics, and the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), Siemund, Schulz and Schweinberger (2014) as well as Leimgruber, Siemund and Terassa (2018) record substantial, socially and

Figure 6.9 Usual spoken language, in percent (population aged 5 or older), without Cantonese (Census and Statistics Department, 2018: Items A107, censuses and by-censuses 1991–2016; reproduced and adapted from Fuchs 2021: 293)

Figure 6.10 Differences in home language use according to age, in thousand (Singapore Department of Statistics 2020, General Household Survey 2015)

Figure 6.11 Language combinations among university, polytechnic, and vocational training (ITE) students that occur at least five times (Leimgruber, Siemund and Terassa 2018: 293) (Can = Cantonese, Eng = English, Hok = Hokkien Chinese, Mal = Malay, Man = Mandarin Chinese, Tam = Tamil, Teo = Teochew Chinese)

ethnically dependent language diversity amongst students. Figure 6.11 shows that the Chinese vernaculars are still present in this age group, but they are mostly used as spoken languages. Bilingualism of Mandarin and English is strongest amongst university students.

The same survey also offers data on the language use in different generations and with diverse social interactants (mother, father, siblings, etc.). While the students' parents speak a mix of languages, the students themselves vastly prefer English when talking to their siblings. Chinese dialects are still found in the communication of the students with their parents, but the preferred languages clearly are English and Mandarin. The Malays appear quite consistent in their use of Malay, while Tamil does not figure prominently, pointing to the widespread use of English in this community (see Figure 6.12).

In sum, Singapore is well on its way from an originally multilingual society to one that embraces individual bilingualism of English and one of the mother tongues. Since English is the unanimous language of the education system and many other sectors of society, the mother tongues have been practically relegated to second languages mainly used in non-official and spoken contexts. In Hong Kong, Cantonese remains firmly entrenched in the population, but Mandarin becomes increasingly used as a second language besides English.

Figure 6.12 Differences in home language use (own data, total, in percent)

5. Conclusion and Outlook

We conclude this chapter by considering Dubai, Singapore, and Hong Kong in the context of Kachru's (1985) well-known Circle Model as well as Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model. Both the Englishes in Singapore and Hong Kong have often been analyzed as so-called "outer circle" varieties where English is widely used as a second language and shows signs of nativization and endonormative stabilization. Should the current increase of English as a home language in Singapore continue, the city-state is bound to join the "inner circle" countries in the long run. However, the situation will be different from Great Britain, North America, Australia, and New Zealand inasmuch as Singapore's population can be expected to maintain its bilingualism and multilingualism which, in turn, ensures a situation of sustained language contact with the other languages spoken in the area. Current tentative signs of internal differentiation (Schneider's stage five) are likely to become more noticeable in the future.

Regarding Dubai, we are currently witnessing a move from the expanding circle into the outer circle that—depending on the population group considered—may already be complete. In spite of the fact that there are some modest signs of localization, we consider it unlikely that what is here referred to as "Gulf English" will nativize and endonormatively stabilize to the extent that Singapore English has. For that to happen, the currently highly transient population of the UAE would need to settle and English would need to become part of the UAE identity. Having said that, the UAE has developed into a global dialect laboratory replicating on a global scale what could be

observed some decades ago in artificial cities like Milton Keynes in the context of British dialects.

Hong Kong, as argued here, is presently perhaps best viewed as moving in the opposite direction. Even though English is considered of high instrumental value there, its importance in the local context—measured in terms of usage domains—is decreasing. Whichever stage English in Hong Kong ever reached in Schneider's model, for the great majority of the Hong Kong population it is moving towards being a foreign language under exonormative pressure.

Notes

- 1 A GPA of 4.0 is the highest category in the US university system of grading; it is comparable to a letter grade A or 95–100%. A GPA of 3.5 equals 87.5% or a high B grade.

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