

# Metrolingual multitasking and differential inclusion: Singapore's Chinese languages in shared spaces

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## Abstract

Arrival cities are defined through migration-led diversification that structures integration, notably through everyday language practices. In Singapore's multilingual landscape, we find hints of historical waves of migrants from Southern China speaking Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien and Teochew and the recent contributions of new migrants from Mainland China. In light of the work of Pennycook and Otsuji, this article explores how the norms of metrolingual multitasking – of adaptation through language – structure differential inclusion in Singapore through banal and commonplace interactions in shared spaces, such as markets. By focusing on historically situated linguistic scripts of inclusion and exclusion in the city-state, we contrast the linguistic adaptations of older and newer arrivals to show how integration is continuously constituted through the differential inclusion of new arrivals. Based on a series of interviews, we shed light on how metrolingual multitasking, as praxis of differential inclusion, sets up the normative framework for the coexistence of various linguistic forms and resources, whether recognised officially or not, and their use in creative ways for pragmatic communication in completing daily tasks. In this context, the norms of metrolingual multitasking reveal an overall sense of ordinary coexistence in living with such diversity as a requirement for successful integration, despite necessary instances of differential treatment and exclusionary practices, including a refusal to engage with difference.

## Keywords

Chinese languages, differential inclusion, integration, metrolingual multitasking, migration, Singapore

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## 摘要

目的地城市是通过移民主导的多样化来定义的，这种多样化构建了融合，特别是通过日常语言实践。在新加坡的多语言景观中，我们发现了华南地区说粤语、客家话、闽南语和潮州话的移民潮的历史线索，以及中国大陆新移民的最新贡献。借鉴佩尼库克 (Pennycook) 和尾辻 (Otsuji) 的研究，本文探讨都市语言多任务处理的规范（通过语言进行适应）如何通过市场等共享空间中的平凡而司空见惯的互动来构建新加坡的差异性包容。通过关注该城市国家历史上包容和排斥的语言文字，我们对比了老移民和新移民的语言适应情况，以展示如何通过对新移民的差异性包容持续构建融合。基于一系列访谈，我们阐明了作为差异性包容实践的都市语言多任务处理如何为各种语言形式和资源的共存建立规范框架（无论官方是否认可），并被以创造性的方式用于语用沟通以完成日常任务。在这种背景下，都市语言多任务处理规范揭示了生活中总体的普通共存感，这种多样性是成功融合的必要条件，尽管也必然存在差别待遇和排斥性做法的例子，包括拒绝接受差异。

## 关键词

汉语、差异性包容、融合、都市语言多任务处理、移民、新加坡

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## Introduction

Arrival cities – urban centres towards which migrants are moving – are coming to terms with increasingly complex mobility flows that are characterised by migrants from a growing array of class and educational backgrounds, ethnicities and legal statuses (Saunders, 2010; Vertovec, 2007). These closely related processes of migration and diversification have prompted analyses of how contemporary cities incorporate increasingly heterogeneous groups of new arrivals. These changes in European and North American cities, where living with difference is a pressing and relatively recent concern, have been well documented (Amin, 2012; Hiebert, 2008; Valentine, 2008). Yet, these are also cities where the notion of integration is premised upon longer-term settlement and a national script on how social cohesion defines the successful incorporation of newcomers. In many other cities, such as Singapore, where coexisting with people of diverse backgrounds has been part of a

historical reality pre-dating the inception of modern nation-states, the terms of integration may well differ owing to historical and context-specific features that have changed over time. Whereas the literature on urban diversity has mostly focused on the role of space in encounters with difference in arrival cities (Watson, 2009; Wilson, 2011; Ye, 2016), one important branch of work that is emerging in understanding difference and coexistence is the linguistic nature of integration – its conditions and terms – within these socio-spatial transformations in the arrival city (Blommaert, 2013; Pennycook and Otsuji, 2014). In this article, we argue that differences and commonalities in patterns of linguistic diversity reflect how ‘integration’ is constituted through the differential inclusion of new arrivals.

Understanding integration at the intersection of migration and language in an urban setting like that of Singapore leads to a study of metrolingualism, because ‘everyday language practices and their relations to urban space’ are linked to the necessity of

conducting basic everyday interactions for citizens and newcomers alike, such as buying produce in a market (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2014: 161). In reflecting upon the linguistic landscape of Singapore, where change, motion and sharing of space with people who speak various languages are commonplace, we argue that the norms of metrolingual multitasking – of adaptation through language – in Singapore reproduce specific scripts of exclusion and inclusion in shared spaces. We adopt the lens of metrolingual multitasking to highlight how differential inclusion works in practice through language, because there is a linguistic angle to the ‘spatial grammar of coexisting with diversity’ (Ye, 2019: 487).<sup>1</sup> That is, linguistic norms structuring differential inclusion are seen through banal and commonplace interactions that occur amongst yet rise above differences where encounters are shaped by the everyday and wider structuring forces. Linguistic norms of adaptation also show how new arrivals re-create selective inclusions themselves by not consistently seeking belonging or marginalisation from mainstream society. The resulting linguistic diversity in Singapore is part of the messy process of integration, which is constituted through everyday, non-remarkable forms of differential inclusion. Recognising this mess, the daily linguistic norms and improvising that people carry out open up the idea of what it means to adapt, rather than trying to fit integration into a stable mould.

By showing how integration is itself constituted through everyday linguistic scripts of inclusion and exclusion, we are interested in examining how linguistic adaptations of new arrivals remain a constant marker of differential inclusion in migration-led<sup>2</sup> urban settings like that of Singapore. With the expressed intent of ‘getting things done’ in daily life (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015: 3), the metrolingual multitasking of Chinese Singaporeans and new migrants from

Mainland China exemplifies continuous patterns of friction and fluidity in Singapore’s migration-led urban diversification. Our analysis focuses on these two groups. The first group comprises older waves of migrants to Singapore, that is, Chinese Singaporeans and their families who immigrated to Singapore before it became an independent republic, whereas the second group is made up of new migrants from Mainland China, having arrived in the city-state since the early 2000s. Despite a more stratified mode of entry and differentiated access to the city-state for newer arrivals, structured through a sophisticated visa and permit system, the current everyday workings of linguistic diversity bear strong similarities to how earlier groups of migrants were integrated into the metropolis through differential inclusion. Even as new Chinese migrants originate from more different parts of Mainland China than earlier groups of Chinese migrants and even as Singapore’s multilingual environment has changed, linguistic adaptation practices remain similar. Such socio-linguistic patterns of adapting, we would argue, reflect the ordinariness of living through diversity.

## Methodological note

This article derives from two projects. The first is a comparative study examining the current state of Chinese languages other than Mandarin in Singapore and Vancouver. We focus here on insights from interviews conducted mostly in English and from participant observations held in Singapore between June 2019 and September 2019. Insights used in this article are from Chinese Singaporeans with citizenship from birth, living in no specific neighbourhood of the city-state. These men and women of various age groups and sub-ethnic backgrounds were selected because of their involvement in community initiatives to preserve, study or

revitalise specific Chinese languages. The second project analyses interactions in shared spaces between new Mainland Chinese arrivals and Singaporeans. The fieldwork for this project was carried out at a church with a Chinese service by a research assistant. Interviews and participant observations were conducted between September 2019 and February 2020 in Mandarin and in English. New arrivals interviewed have been in Singapore for at least nine years. Amongst these men and women from Mainland China, their visas range from the Dependant's Pass (Ministry of Manpower, 2022a), to a Long Term Visit Pass (Ministry of Manpower, 2022b), to being Permanent Residents. All of them are living with their spouses and children in Singapore's residential heartlands in either public housing flats or privately owned condominiums. For both populations, we note the importance of English in conducting most of the interviews, which tends to reflect a bias towards a middle- to upper-class status and a clear parameter in defining their views towards metrolingual multitasking. As Chua (2003: 73) has noted before, metrolingual multitasking for Chinese Singaporeans who are English educated represents a specific marker of cultural distinction and a related view on what integration and differential inclusion mean.

Most of the findings for this article come out of interviews with participants, which helps us focus on how participants perceive and feel about language use. Although we put their insights into perspective with documentary and secondary sources, we do not present recorded interactions of language use in specific contexts, and we are limited by the nature of the interviewing process in reporting and reflecting on such language use. This approach highlights points of continuity and rupture for two different generations of Chinese migrants to Singapore, notably by relying on insights from various

fields interested in questions of migrant integration in urban contexts. More importantly, it gives voice to how participants give meaning themselves to their praxis of language use through recounting and making observations on encounters of differential inclusion. There is, of course, a tension in using an approach focused on praxis to language use to inform other scholarly debates, but this is meant to enrich the literature in various fields of Urban Studies, while building on new approaches emerging from metrolinguistics and translanguistics, notably through studies focusing on the ordinariness of multilingualism (Lee and Dovchin, 2020).

### **Migration-driven diversification in Singapore**

By developing the multiracial framework of the 'Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other' (CMIO) system, Singaporean post-colonial state authorities enshrined the use of colonial racial categories in their management of cultural diversity and as the predominant mode of sorting difference amongst migrants to the city-state (Goh et al., 2009). With the 1965 Language Policy Act, four official languages were recognised, namely English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil (Starr and Hiramoto, 2019; Tan and Goh, 2011). Singapore's CMIO framework led to a 'pragmatic multilingualism' in which the ethnic 'mother tongue' of each Asian founding race was recognised and institutionalised, while English became the primary working language (Lim, 2009). Singaporean Chinese communities were divided across 13 different languages such as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka. Mandarin was selected by the government to integrate these communities around 'a relatively neutral linguistic idiom', even if it was 'spoken only by 0.1 per cent of the population' as per the 1957 census data (Tan and Goh, 2011: 614, 615).

In this section, we explore the features of migration-led diversification in Singapore to better frame current instances of differential inclusion (Ang, 2017). Focusing on the use of linguistic forms and resources, rather than languages themselves, it is of note that Chinese languages were and remain key in understanding daily interactions in Singapore, because they provide unique features to the local urban social landscape (Goh and Tan, 2007: 396–397). Differential inclusion can notably be examined through the uses of such linguistic forms and resources, even if the use of Chinese languages other than Mandarin has significantly declined over the years. They were not only historically significant in organising society in colonial times but have an enduring role and institutional importance in post-colonial Singaporean society.

### *Migrant labour and diversity*

Singapore's current multilingual environment has been shaped by migration-led diversity, markedly through the linguistic abilities of Chinese labour migrants, well before the inception of the Republic of Singapore in 1965 (Yen, 1986: 116–120; Yeoh and Lin, 2013: 33–34). The history of Singapore is one of migration-led diversity, starting with 'a Malay milieu into which there were Thai, Javanese, Portuguese, Dutch, and British intrusions', with sustained influence from 'Chinese, Arab and Persian merchants, as well as traders from the Indian subcontinent' (Lim Joo-Jock, 1991: 13–14). Developed under British colonialism for most of the 19th century, Singapore was the first free port in the region, which attracted traders from East, South and South-east Asia, as well as from Europe, to form a multi-ethnic society composed notably of Cantonese, Hokkien, Bugis, Indian, Armenian, Arab and European migrant groups (Turnbull, 1977:

13–15). Since the 18th century, systematic Chinese migration to the region has resulted in the development of a complex migratory, economic and social infrastructure of Chinese organisations to support the integration of Chinese newcomers, including dialect-based Chinese clan associations monopolising particular occupations (Yen, 1986: 1–4, 116–120). Under British colonialism, Singapore evolved as a multi-ethnic and multilingual society, markedly owing to the labour of Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Foo-Chow, Hainanese and Hakka migrants (Goh and Tan, 2007: 395).

With post-colonial state authorities encouraging the development of a bilingual society within the parameters of its CMIO framework, the linguistic terms of integration have been officially set for new arrivals, while migration-driven diversification became more stratified based on skills and occupations. Foreigners currently make up 33% of the total workforce in Singapore, numbering 1,427,500 in total in December 2019 (Ministry of Manpower, 2019). This modern diversification process is based on sustained migration-led demographic growth and produces increasingly diffuse geographies of new arrivals (Lai et al., 2013). There is social and economic stratification amongst these newcomers between low-waged male and female transient labour migrants (NPTD, 2019) – who form the majority of newcomers – and high-status economic migrants, transnational marriage migrants and university students. Differentiated inclusion is institutionalised by the issuance of a range of work passes, permits and social visit passes that determine economic migrants' access to rights and entitlements. These passes are mainly differentiated by skills status, by income and by the perceived desirability of these skills for the achievement of national goals (Ye, 2016; Yeoh and Lin, 2013). The uneven incorporation of foreigners is highly monitored and structured

according to the perceived needs of the economy. The growing complexity in Singaporean society is constituted through the continued salience of racial categories, alongside an increasing hierarchy of skills-based organisation of society. The resulting linguistic landscape is not only structured by Singapore's official language policy, but also reflects and follows this growing diversification of the city. Singapore's current multilingual environment symbolises the non-remarkable ways in which new arrivals – in particular, new Chinese migrants – adapt to everyday shared spaces through language at the intersection of their background and collective expectations, be they state or society driven.

### *Differential inclusion and Chinese linguistic forms*

These state-contoured, migration-led diversification patterns in Singapore have led to an evolving interplay between inclusion, exclusion and belonging (Ye, 2019). Measures of inclusion carry out the political work of management that structures what form belonging takes and, consequently, stratify who belongs and who does not. In other words, measures of inclusion shape what form integration takes and who has access to integration. Rather than being intrinsically open or opposed to exclusion, the aggregate processes of 'incorporation' subject people to particular imaginaries of diversity and situate how different migrants 'ought' to be. This perspective builds on Ye's (2016) emphasis on 'modes of civility and incivility' to differentiate migrants and locals, as well as who is seen as the 'integrated migrant' and who has yet to be integrated. Understood as 'broad, overarching principles that guide – rather than coerce – everyday encounters in public through practices of inclusion and exclusion', these norms serve as implicit rules by which migrant

incorporation is shaped (Ye, 2019: 489). Integrating into shared spaces in the city is hence premised upon one's ability to adapt to locally accepted norms of behaviour (Ye, 2016). It is the violation, the transgression of these norms that highlights the non-integration of the transgressor, rather than when rules are followed. In this view, integration can be understood as a stratified continuum of belonging, specific to the norms and expectations of the context in which the incorporation takes place. Many have pointed out the challenges of defining integration in practice (Gilmartin and Migge, 2015; Olwig, 2011; Wills et al., 2009). Much of this work, however, speaks from and to European contexts that privilege long-term migration. New arrivals to Singapore are mainly short-term workers, hence constituting a different milieu of diversification. Both longer-term (as are many of the respondents included here) and shorter-term migrants are a part of this milieu. The meaning and conceptualisation of integration are therefore different when taking our data into consideration.

In the Singaporean context, integration can be understood through the linguistic dimension of differential inclusion, which emerges through the complex relationships between the local coexistence and use of Chinese linguistic forms and a national context in which post-colonial state authorities have used Mandarin as a language management tool for integration and social cohesion purposes. The state designs in the institutionalising of Mandarin since 1965 are fraught with scripts of inclusion and exclusion. Whereas it was first used until 1979 to reduce and simplify intra-ethnic differences domestically, Mandarin then became a tool to re-ethnicise the local Chinese community in opposition to a perceived threat of Westernisation and, starting in 1990, state authorities promoted Mandarin to benefit from its increasing role as a global language

(Ang, 2017: 108–109; Montsion, 2014: 1492). In this context, differential inclusion has constantly involved state directives limiting the use of Chinese languages other than Mandarin, because they were not considered languages that would help Chinese Singaporeans economically and culturally (Chong, 2011: 888–889; Tan and Goh, 2011: 614). With measures prohibiting the use of these languages in television and in schools (Tan and Goh, 2011: 615), Singapore's language policy resulted in the steady decline of dialect use: from 64% in 1980 to approximately 50% in 1990 and approximately 30% in 2000 (Montsion, 2014: 1492). In contrast, '[t]he percentage of Singaporean Chinese who reported speaking Mandarin in the home environment jumped from 10.2 per cent in 1980 to 45.1 per cent in 2000' (Goh and Tan, 2007: 396). The decline has continued since then, with only 14.3% of people speaking a dialect at home in 2010 and 12.2% in 2015 (Department of Statistics of Singapore, 2016: 5). This is the result of state-driven initiatives and related social norms guiding Chinese Singaporeans and new migrants alike to participate in 'a particular and politicized logic of diversification' (Ye, 2019: 490).

However, Chinese languages other than Mandarin are still part of the fabric of multiracial Singaporean society today and have re-emerged periodically as markers of differential inclusion, notably during shifts in migration-driven diversification patterns. For instance, throughout the 2000s, films have used Chinese languages other than Mandarin and celebrated the 'heartlander' figure, a stereotypical working-class Chinese Singaporean speaking Chinese languages other than Mandarin. In this view, these languages became associated in local imaginary with local forms of authenticity, often in contrast to the celebration of cosmopolitan Chinese Singaporeans or in reaction to increasing numbers of new Mainland

Chinese arrivals (Chong, 2011; Tan and Goh, 2011). During the SARS and COVID-19 public health crises, state-sponsored media also started to use Chinese languages other than Mandarin to communicate key public service announcements and health measures to all Chinese Singaporeans (Goh and Tan, 2007; Koon, 2020). As with other facets of daily life where Chinese languages other than Mandarin are heard, their presence and cultural distinctiveness became more tolerated by state authorities, along with a carefully designed strategy of differential inclusion that layers and structures Singapore's multilingual diversity (Goh and Tan, 2007; Montsion, 2014). Their enduring use and existence in specific locales of the city-state highlight well how 'urban inhabitants are themselves organizing and normalizing particular contours of differentiation' (Ye, 2019: 491). This reveals how integration occurs in everyday life.

## Multitasking in multilingual Singapore

The diversity of linguistic forms and resources in Singapore is seen through a myriad of everyday acts of metrolingual multitasking (Lee and Dovchin, 2020; Lim, 2009). Based on the interview responses and participant observations of these two studies, there is a clear indication that Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien and Teochew have provided and still provide everyday linguistic resources alongside Mandarin to complete particular activities in spaces as diverse as hawker centres, wet markets, churches and eldercare homes; during recurring city moments such as festivals, musical performances or electoral campaigns; or for specific occupations, as with medical professionals, janitors and social workers. In this section, we highlight how the norms of metrolingual multitasking operate in Singapore's shared spaces. We focus on

three facets of this praxis of differential inclusion to shed light on the potentials and problems of migration-led urban diversification. Insights from interviews with Chinese Singaporeans and new Chinese migrants are analysed to present the similarly dynamic ways in which these diverse groups of people employ strategies that reproduce the norms of metrolingual multitasking.

### *Recognising and using local linguistic scripts*

Adapting to the multilingual environment of Singapore's everyday life is seen as a norm against which people of various backgrounds, personal histories and encounters have to position themselves. One participant represents well the perspective of notably middle-class, English-educated Chinese Singaporeans on multilingualism (Chua, 2003: 73):

When I was growing up, I could speak my own Teochew, I could speak Hokkien because it is widely spoken. I speak Cantonese as well. And then you pick up Malay as well, so it's very common to speak these dialects well. But if you belong to the minorities, like Hainanese or Hakka, you pick up even more, because you'll hear the other dominant ones more.

In this view, by focusing on how shared spaces, linguistic practices and activities intersect in daily interactions, the need to adapt to a multilingual environment does not emerge from an individual decision, the mastery of specific languages or the ability to code-switch from one language to another; it is more about the necessity to recognise how linguistic practices occur daily and about a will to participate (Blommaert et al., 2005). As one younger Chinese Singaporean explains, Singapore's multilingual environment is more about people defining

each other based on language groups than about being fluent in these languages:

In the bigger environment, we have all the different groups of people, dialects speaking group of people, Cantonese, Hokkien and we mix with that, very naturally from young to the old. I have friends who are in all different dialect groups, we mingle, and we make fun of each other's dialect and we try to sing in each other's dialect. I think it's about the environment that you are being exposed to that helps to accept each other's culture and respect each other's culture.

Even if this awareness of Singapore's multilingualism is well recognised, not all can speak the different Chinese languages fluently and Singapore's de facto bilingual requirement for integrating society remains significant, notably amongst new Chinese migrants. As this participant says,

At home, we will be more insistent in speaking Mandarin. Because [we] hope that [our] children will have a good foundation for Mandarin. So, basically [we] use Mandarin to communicate at home. Then when at school, besides [my] lessons, because I teach Chinese classes, so I will also use Mandarin. But, in other school settings [I will] use English... when I go out, it depends on the situation, I guess. But, [it] seems like [I am] more used to using English. It seems like when others [see] me, the first instinct for them is to speak to me in English. They may feel that I look more like a Malay. So, if they used English first, then I would use English already.

Whether it is for multilingual or bilingual individuals, metrolingual multitasking relates here to how diversity-in-practice is lived by both Chinese Singaporeans and new Mainland Chinese arrivals, while Singapore's multilingual environment serves as the framework through which the use of linguistic resources as spatial practices is



legitimised. In light of Thrift's (2007) associational view of space, metrolingual multitasking shows how individuals, objects and languages intersect to form the communicative activity within spaces. Singapore's local multilingual environment sets the stage for revealing these spatial practices and the everyday encounters 'shaping and remaking the linguistic landscapes of shared places, using an array of linguistic resources' (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2014: 168).

Whereas new Chinese migrants at first adapt to the linguistic environment by speaking English in recognition of Singapore's diversity, which includes non-Chinese Singaporeans, Chinese Singaporeans have a firmer grasp of the linguistic scripts used to navigate particular everyday activities of specific shared spaces. Speaking of Singapore's food stalls and traditional food courts known as hawker centres, one local participant explains,

So the general situation is, to be safe, you use Mandarin, but you look at the store and if they sell Teochew food, so you should speak to them in Teochew, and they would be very happy ... So you go into the hawker centres and you see 'Hokkien Fried Prawn Mee', and if you talk about the roast meats, mostly the Cantonese, and the Teochew fishballs, mostly the Teochews.

In line with previous research on the socio-economic and linguistic profile of Chinese Singaporeans as being able to make such observations, notably English-educated middle-class populations, linguistic clues exist in shared spaces but are not necessarily visible, known or useful to all (Chua, 2003: 73). A new migrant from Jiangsu indicates,

I am now working at the kindergarten, I know how to speak a little. Because [I have been there] for long. I worked for three to four years, ah slightly more than four years, [so I] know how to speak a little of Singapore

English ... Beyond my work, I cannot communicate. Only know how to listen. Listen also not entirely [comprehensible], you know, but still ok. I mostly speak Jiangsu dialect at home.

Highlighting well the inner workings of differential inclusion, some new arrivals cannot at first engage. Integration here results in new Chinese migrants drawing upon their linguistic resources and skills to learn about and navigate difference, hence reproducing the polyglot repertoire of diversifying shared spaces.

Differential inclusion is notably seen through the rewards that come with the uses of these scripts, hence reflecting how metrolingual multitasking is socially reproduced. As one Chinese Singaporean youth who speaks Teochew fluently mentions,

So when you speak to a coffee shop [worker in 'dialect'], [the] auntie<sup>3</sup> gives you discounts, you get more food that kind of thing ... I love my *kuih* [a Malaysian-style breakfast pastry], so me and my friend, so we went down. The auntie knows that I like *kuih* a lot, so my friend goes down before me and the auntie asked my friend, so what do you want? He said the *kuih*, then she said 'there's no more *kuih*, you take the bread set'. Then I came and she gave me the *kuih*, and he felt so cheated and angry. He doesn't speak Teochew and the auntie wasn't even Teochew. But she understands Teochew, so I guess, as long as you speak a dialect, you will feel it.

For this participant, his metrolingual multitasking is recognised and rewarded by people able or not to use the same linguistic forms and resources, hence indicating how such a practice is elevated in the collective social imaginary.

The valuing of these local linguistic scripts highlights how Singapore's urban shared spaces are constructed as sites of conviviality where people are 'enjoying and

engaging in casual diversities' and 'celebrating the diverse environments in which they work' (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015: 89–90). Building on the works of Gilroy (2004) and Wise (2009), metrolingual multitasking sheds light on the need and desire to accommodate, connect and interact across cultural lines in dense urban settings where diversity is driven by migration. As one participant notes,

I had a Hong Kong colleague who came about say six years ago, and we had an exchange and she told me one day 'do you speak Cantonese at all?' I said 'no, I don't' and she said 'you teach me Teochew and I can teach you Cantonese' and I said 'fair deal!' so we did ... I think many Singaporeans go through the same thing.

No matter if one completely masters such a Chinese language or not, the common willingness to utilise various linguistic forms and resources as an act of getting closer to someone in such a diverse urban locale speaks to Wise's notion of quotidian transversality, which describes 'how individuals in everyday spaces use particular modes of sociality to produce or smooth inter-relations across cultural difference, whether or not this difference is a conscious one' (2009: 23).

Consistent with older waves of migrants to Singapore, new Chinese migrants are also learning how metrolingual multitasking becomes a way of life linked to an ethos of accommodating others from different backgrounds and a continuous practice of language learning while sharing the same urban space. As one indicates,

[In] China we don't have such an environment so we only study English for the sake of studying. Then, when I came to Singapore then I realized, this is a language that I have to continuously improve on. Like when I am selling clothes [and] I meet Malay or Indian [customers], minimally you should know the basics

from your line of work, like colour, size, or pattern [... I used to experience] language barriers, but after [I] kept using it, it became natural. And I am also from Fujian, then the Fookian is actually similar to our dialect. If you listen closely, it is just that our dialect is stronger, the Hokkien in Singapore is lighter. So, I also know how to speak a little of Singaporean Hokkien now.

This awareness of multiple linguistic forms and resources, the willingness of newcomers to learn various linguistic scripts and the normalising of living in a multilingual urban environment are all steps towards the socialisation and integration of new Chinese migrants into an ever-diversifying city. This highlights the continuity of integration parameters that take place in banal ways, even if older and newer waves of new arrivals were administered differently in Singapore.

### *Being linguistically competent in the city*

Linguistic competence is the ability to navigate urban diversity by using situational knowledge to succeed at achieving specific daily tasks. Based on their backgrounds and positionality, Singaporean multilingual speakers use vocabulary creatively and other linguistic resources pragmatically – without necessarily being fluent in these languages – to achieve specific tasks and fulfil societal functions such as selling or buying food items. As one participant who studies Singapore languages notes, linguistic competence in Singapore is complex and contextually situated, as it is defined in relation to broad structural and historical trends:

We have what we call a really multilingual generation in a way, is not that old, an example of this, where older Singaporeans will know English at this particular moment, the famous Ai-mee-Singh, her father is Indian, her mother is Chinese, therefore she speaks English, Hindi, Cantonese, and now she says she speaks

Mandarin ... If we go one or two generations down, we have bilingual class generation, where in your 30s, you have to be fluent in English to be able to function in Singapore, job-wise especially, but they still know some of the vernaculars, they are also now fluent in Mandarin. If we jump into the next generation, which are sort of these young people in university at the moment, we see different Chinese Singaporeans where their best language is English, they know Mandarin. I cross out the vernaculars completely but maybe I should dot the lines instead cross it out, because there is still people who learn some, enough to get by for proficiency.

The contours of one's linguistic competence are generally linked to one's social position and relationship to others in the city.

For new arrivals, not only are the linguistic profiles different, they have distinct goals in their integration into Singaporean society. This is reflected in the position taken by a new migrant from Shandong:

I feel that definitely, in terms of communication [using English] or finding a job, it is a huge help. I feel that [in] Singapore's society, Mandarin is very important [... At] my work, there are some parents [whose] English is not that good, or some seniors who came to pick up or send their kids. It is very convenient for us to communicate [using Mandarin], but of course [being proficient in] English is way better, the school mainly uses English as its primary language of communication. During our meeting, regardless if you are a Mandarin teacher or an English teacher, you still have to use English to join in the meeting and discussions. So, I feel that for [work] it is more convenient.

Partially owing to the evolution of state language policy, the choice of linguistic resources will vary between Chinese Singaporeans and new Chinese migrants, to the extent that the historical variety of Chinese languages other than Mandarin is less visible and even less significant for

younger generations. Complementing the official status given to Mandarin and English in structuring the city-state linguistically, our data highlight how daily activities in Singapore's shared spaces reveal metrolingual multitasking as a praxis that builds on the enduring legacies of migration-driven diversity. This is unfolding through the ongoing coexistence of various Chinese language forms and resources, used in combination with one another by Chinese Singaporeans and new Chinese arrivals alike, when conducting similar daily tasks in unremarkable ways.

Achieving daily pragmatic communications is one of the norms of metrolingual multitasking, because it highlights the value given to the banality of negotiating, changing and adjusting the use of linguistic resources. A local student shared a recent encounter while sharing a taxi ride with a friend:

We got in a cab, and we were surprised because we were speaking in English first, and then changed to Mandarin, and then the driver was like, 'you know how to speak Mandarin?' Then, later, we changed to speaking Teochew, and the driver was like, 'you also know how to speak Teochew?' He asked us why we knew how to speak all these languages, and we said because we are Teochew Singaporeans. So then he charged us cheaper for the cab fare. That kind of thing. I guess there's a certain value with that.

One normative facet of metrolingual multitasking is found in the value given to maintaining an environment that enables 'creative linguistic conditions' for everyday interactions and activities to be conducted (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2014: 163). As one participant well versed in the history of languages in Singapore explains further,

So what is really interesting is ... how easy Singaporeans find it to switch, whether you're

speaking English, Mandarin Chinese, they switch ... it's a kind of key feature of very bilingual, or highly bilingual, multilingual place, where it's seamless, people just move, and when you have shared, neutral languages, so people would move sort of seamlessly from one language to another, some linguists don't even call it code-switching, they call it translanguaging.

Although framed as a negotiation between Singapore's official languages, a similar effort to find common linguistic resources to communicate pragmatically is found with new migrants from Mainland China, as the following exchange shows:

- Q:** So, you use mainly Mandarin to communicate?
- A:** Yes. Sometimes you still have to use English, because in public spaces, when you meet some foreigners or non-Chinese people... (like) Malays. Yes... Some Singaporeans do not know how to speak Mandarin. [They] still mainly use English.
- Q:** What would you do if the other party does not understand you? For example, if there is a Chinese who doesn't know how to speak Mandarin and his English is too difficult to understand, what would you do?
- A:** Maybe we will [keep it] simple. Maybe [I] will use body language.

The context of daily exchanges may require creativity in 'getting things done' beyond words, with metrolingual multitasking including non-verbal gestures (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015: 3). Participants in such exchanges have grown accustomed to combining verbal and non-verbal gestures to communicate in a diversifying urban setting and, through their actions, they highlight how differential inclusion is practised. As Goodwin argues, 'gesture is not simply a way to display meaning but an activity with

distinctive temporal, spatial, and social properties that participants not only recognise but actively use in the organisation of their interaction' (1986/2009: 47). In this view, metrolingual multitasking as urban and linguistic competence is not about the perfect communicative practice, as often assumed in language policy, but about finding creative ways to have pragmatic interactions. In migration-led diverse settings, metrolingual multitasking does not solely rely on shared linguistic resources to enable interactions. In spaces such as markets, social semiotic codes supporting pragmatic communication are used creatively. They include non-linguistic resources combined and deployed amid a multi-sensory, multi-modal and multi-functional environment (Hua et al., 2017). These are part of the tactics of everyday integration, where linguistic forms and resources are used for pragmatic, unromantic reasons, amongst other aspects of the environment where the interactions occur.

### *The downside to migration-led linguistic diversity*

Such coexistence with difference comes with moments of struggle, compromise and frustration, especially for shop keepers and customers who choose how to deploy it, or not, to fit the goal of their interaction. The lived experience of multilingualism can also bring about tension between people who are ethnically proximate to each other, especially in a diverse society historically shaped by various waves of migration. One Singaporean participant explains,

So I was going vegetable shopping in a market, and the vegetable seller was speaking Teochew to two women who were speaking Teochew in return and they were having a lively conversation, really great fun. The two women end up getting a lot of free deals like free chilis and recipes on how to cook them ... So I went up

to that guy and I started my conversation by speaking Teochew to him ... So he went on and gave me the cold shoulder and didn't want to respond to me in Teochew at all, and then decided that he had to do my business, so he switched and he used Mandarin, so I stood there really confused ... So I spoke Mandarin to him because I didn't want to be rude since he responded in Mandarin so I spoke Mandarin to him, and he upped the game by then not responding in Mandarin to my response in Mandarin, but spoke in English. So we exchanged a deal, I paid him and he didn't give me free chilis nor free recipes but we ended the conversation in English.

The choice of whether or not to engage with someone and the refusal to adapt linguistically to find the best way to communicate for various reasons is the flip side of metrolingual multitasking as a normative framework for everyday integration.

This everyday exclusionary script is experienced by both Chinese Singaporeans and new migrants from Mainland China. As one new arrival explains,

[With] Singaporean Chinese [who ...] only learns English and only speaks English, if they stop to speak to you in Chinese, after a sentence or two, [I realize I] don't want to [interact] with them ... Because of the pride in their hearts, they don't want to speak Chinese. If you talk to them, if you think they are Chinese and you speak Chinese with them, they will feel 'oh no, I don't speak Chinese'. I don't want to talk to people like them. I have met such a person once [... They] just didn't want to talk to me.

As much as metrolingual multitasking enables people to engage across difference, linguistic forms also function as markers of distinction and boundaries. Differential inclusion is found in the effort not to force the assimilation of newcomers into specific forms but rather to find common ground to communicate with others across cultural

differences. The limits of inclusion are not only reproduced by long-time residents but can be enacted by new Chinese migrants as well. Indeed, integration also entails learning and practising boundary-making work. This is especially significant to ground everyday negotiations of citizenship towards newcomers in a migration-led diversifying city and 'to locate the faint possibilities of cosmopolitan solidarity and "quotidian transversality" between and among citizens and non-citizens' (Khoo, 2014: 792).

It is important to note that such exclusionary practices are not necessarily the result of ill will. Metrolingual multitasking can be disorienting, because it builds on communicative practices that are found on a spectrum of compatibility and disconnect between parties amid shifting migration-led urban diversity. With a priority given to 'creating spaces for language-making, where rules and boundaries are crossed and changed' come various feelings of being inadequate or of it being simply wrong for people using various linguistic resources and combinations to engage in creative communication (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015: 16). As one participant explains,

For those of us who are not very good in Hokkien or very good in Mandarin, so many they use two languages to express certain things, so some of the essence of that dialect, or meaning or Mandarin is lost. The struggle is about not being able to articulate our feelings sometimes ... I guess when we say half-baked: I can understand Hokkien when someone speaks it or uses the language, but for me to actually speak fully in Hokkien, I can't do it. I will have different vocabulary to help express, use that in English or Mandarin. So half-baked is talking about that language that all of us employs for our daily usage, so it has become another language on its own. Just like how you feel about Singlish, I think Singlish has become another language actually. For the Chinese ethnic group in Singapore,

this ‘half-baked’ there is no negative or positive connotation, but it describes how we use the language and what we are actually.

Whether it is codified as Singlish or just a random combination of linguistic resources from different languages to best describe one’s thoughts, metrolingual multitasking privileges the local conditions in which linguistic resources are deployed over broader international linguistic standards, in order for all – including newcomers – to have a chance to communicate pragmatically (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2014).

Some new migrants from Mainland China have realised this praxis, if only in their effort to adapt to the local ways of speaking, even if they do not make sense based on linguistic standards. As one notes,

For example, [there are expressions] we don’t use, but here [when people speak] Mandarin, [they might mix in English words such as] ‘but’, or ‘so’. Maybe we might get influenced: ‘Eh I tell you ah’ then when speaking [midway], then [they add] ‘but’, or ‘so’, then [we react:] what is this? Maybe we will mix some into Mandarin ... some basic Singaporean-English.

Accepting these local linguistic idiosyncrasies is intertwined with ongoing language improvisation. As migration-led diversification increases combinations of linguistic resources, it also comes with an awareness of international standards for specific languages, an increased proximity to difference in speaking a shared linguistic form and a self-conscious sense of not being up to par; hence making this tension a key facet to understanding how metrolingual multitasking operates. Integrating into a new society is marked by these tensions. Rather than discounting how integrated or not a new arrival is based on such international standards, the tension found here in improvising

communications demonstrates that integration cannot be easily quantified and must be understood as a highly dynamic, heterogeneous process.

## Conclusion

Shared linguistic forms and resources hold significance as mediators that shape and generate social relationships (Canagarajah, 2017). In contexts of social flux in cities, the uses of specific linguistic forms and resources become a practice of differential inclusion, because norms helping navigate diversity in shared spaces are ‘micro-tones of place-based, locally-contingent modes of civility and codes of conduct’ (Ye, 2019: 485). The analysis of linguistic praxis gives us insight into the tools urban dwellers are developing and employing to live with migration-driven social difference, and how they did so for decades. Such a study does not assume that the ethos of shared places is to be found in the development of or reconciliation towards a shared sense of identity or collective bond (Ye, 2019: 485). Rather, drawing upon our interview data, this article is meant to highlight how interactions in shared spaces such as markets are a part of the messy linguistic landscape of integration.

Further, we show how norms serve as a ‘subtle yet prevalent form of power through the mundane in which urban diversity is encountered and governed’ (Ye, 2019: 486). In this article, we explored how the norms of metrolingual multitasking in Singapore reproduce specific scripts of exclusion and inclusion as experienced and enacted by Chinese Singaporeans and new Chinese migrants alike. Although Singapore’s diversification has been continuously led by migration, particularly labour migration, older and newer waves of Chinese arrivals have fuelled this multilingual and multi-ethnic environment. Norms of metrolingual

multitasking reveal a praxis of differential inclusion based on the coexistence of various linguistic forms and resources that exceed official language policy. The daily uses of language scripts, effective in ‘getting things done’, lead to an environment characterised by an overall sense of ordinary conviviality in living with such diversity, despite necessary instances of differential treatment and exclusionary practices (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015: 3). In a historically diverse city such as Singapore, multilingualism and metrolingual multitasking are neither novel nor remarkable realities. Highlighting their role in understanding the making of such cities is also meant to ground the foundational and dynamic contribution of migration-driven diversification in structuring differential inclusion and in defining integration in everyday life.

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### Notes

1. As noted by one of the anonymous reviewers, sociolinguists have long studied language use

in a multilingual context, including that of immigrants. Sociolinguists have documented how the learning of a new language or language system is linked to the positionality of new comers and related structural parameters of interaction, including national language requirements, multilingual context and English as the lingua franca (see Beiler, 2020; Canagarajah, 2007; Gulliver, 2010; Seargeant et al., 2017). The emphasis is put on examining the praxis as detached from linguistic systems, rather than focusing on why and how specific linguistic forms are used. This is notably helpful to show the fluidity of language practices in differential inclusion in an urban context such as Singapore (Canagarajah, 2007; Lee and Dovchin, 2020).

2. By ‘migration-led diversification’, we refer to how processes of diversity-making result from an increase in and complexification of migrant backgrounds and how they are administered in the arrival city.
3. ‘Auntie’, in Singapore, colloquially refers to an older woman.

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