Revisiting the past to understand the present: The impact of linguistic colonialism on the Singapore Deaf Community and the evolution of Singapore Sign Language (SgSL)

Phoebe Tay
Gallaudet University & Deaf Bible Society

Background

Singapore has a history of colonialism, in both Singapore society and the Singapore Deaf Community. This has influenced language ideologies and evolution of both signed and spoken signs. This research examines the impact of linguistic colonialism on the Singapore Deaf Community and how language ideologies of Singapore society influence those of the Deaf community. The factors contributing to historical change of sign language in Singapore will be explored. According to Fontana, et al. (2017, 363), “changes in language attitude have influenced new linguistic practices.” This is evident in changes in Deaf education and daily communication practices. Kusters and Sahasrabuddhe (2018, 44) share their findings on “academic and everyday perspectives on the differences between gesture and sign.” There seems to be a nexus between the researchers’ findings on language ideologies concerning sign and gesture, and the beliefs of what constitutes a language, sign and gesture (evident in primary historical sources from Peng, Lim, and Parsons).

Linguistic Landscape and Ecology

1965

Source: Amazon. (2019)

1979

Source: Geh, B. B. (2017)

2000

Source: Dng, T. (2017)

Methodology

General Research Findings

Language attitudes among Deaf and hard-of-hearing (48 interviews)

Support SgSL

Support SEE

Support SEE & SgSL for different purposes

Undecided

Don’t know

21% 27%

37.5% 6.2% 8.3%

Analysis

Data shows very active debate on which language should be used in the Deaf community and Singapore society.

Interviewees do not share a common view of SgSL as the natural language of Deaf people in Singapore, or even what constitutes SgSL or SEE—e.g. some view SgSL as an “indication of broken English,” “incomplete,” and/or view SEE as good for teaching English.

Data indicate that language, power, and identity are linked in some unexpected and surprising ways.

Some individuals appear to be conflicted about their dual / multicultural identities as Singaporeans and deaf individuals.

English is perceived as superior to sign language and other spoken languages.

Language attitudes appear to influence actual use in varying degrees depending on the context.

Commentary on Language Debate

Name: Ned (Pseudonym)
Gender: Male
Age: 37
Ethnicity: Chinese
Background: deaf family, native SSL user
Q: Do you think SEE benefits Deaf children?
A: Yes, SEE is a must! Sure, it benefits deaf children. As it enforces the sentence to be gestured out word by word in a proper flow. I see most of deafs normally writing in broken English so I believe SEE would help develop their writing skills.
Q: What about SSL or SgSL?
A: I used SSL to communicate with my family. I had no choice. For SgSL, I am not familiar with it, hence can’t comment on it.
Q: Do you value SSL?
A: Not really, SSL is similar to Native Sign Language (NSL) (gesturing only important words), i.e. if you want to go to toilet, you just gesture “go toilet”.

Participant Observation

“SEE is good for learning English because it includes all the grammatical aspects of English such as past tense. SgSL is broken English just like Singlish!”

“Not SEE is not a language but a system/code. SgSL is a true language” (Tay, 2018).

References


http://www.academia.edu/4090333/Discourses_Features_of_American_Indian_Sign_Languag e?


Acknowledgements

Mr Lim Chin Heng (Singapore) Dr Audrey Cooper (Gallaudet University)