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FUTURE(S) OF LANGUAGE USE AND POLICY IN SINGAPORE

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FUTURE(S) OF LANGUAGE USE AND POLICY IN SINGAPORE

MELISSA GAY

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

This paper discusses six drivers of language use and policies in Singapore: shifts in home language from heritage languages and official mother tongue Languages (MTLs) to English, increasing acceptance of Singlish as part of Singaporean identity, demographic changes including transnational marriages and new immigrants, changing Singaporean aspirations balancing pragmatism with personal fulfilment, technological advancements and geopolitical dynamics. These drivers were identified through comprehensive horizon scanning, literature reviews and consultations with subject matter experts.

Feedback and ideas from the people, public and private sectors were then incorporated through a series of roundtable discussions and a workshop. These interactions shed light on the nuanced interaction of the drivers and their implications, highlighting the complex interplay between language, identity and socio-economic factors in Singapore.

The ultimate aim of this project is not to predict the future of language use and policies in Singapore, but to provide a structured framework to envision different possible futures. By raising the level of awareness of potential trends and shifts, the study seeks to re-examine assumptions and identify opportunities and challenges that may arise, thus supporting innovative policy and strategy responses in a changing and complex environment.

Chapter 1

Introduction

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study builds on a rich body of scholarship that documents trends in language use in Singapore, including IPS's Survey on Race, Religion & Language (Mathews et al., 2020). These trends include but are not limited to the decline in self-professed proficiency in Singapore's official mother tongue languages (MTLs) and the rise of English as a dominant home language (see Chapter 2).

Such trends form the basis of policymaking and public discourse on language use in Singapore for a good reason — understanding these trends allows us to think about and plan for probable ("likely to happen") and sometimes even plausible ("could happen, based on current understanding") futures. For example, the language(s) that a person learn(s) in naturalistic contexts, e.g., the home, are experienced with more emotional valence than languages acquired in formal academic contexts (Dewaele, 2004). Accordingly, a rise in households where English is the dominant language may increase the proportion of Singaporean society that associates English with emotional interpersonal interactions and thus fuels an emotional affinity with the English language. This has implications in areas as diverse as inter-generational communication, the design and execution of language education in Singapore, as well as how Singaporeans conceive of their national identity.

On the foundation of probable futures of language use in Singapore, this project examines and imagines "possible" and "plausible" futures — futures that "might" happen, but for which we have less information or weaker signals — by probing implications of six drivers that undergird language use and policy in Singapore, especially implications that are currently less discussed in policy and public discourse in Singapore. (For a fuller discussion of drivers, see Chapter 3.)

By doing so, this project seeks to provoke more fundamental discussion that productively re-examines assumptions among the public and non-public sectors on areas as diverse as the future profile(s) of Singaporean identity, ethnic relations in Singapore, education needs, and potential economic opportunities and risks that arise from changing language proficiencies and affinities. Doing so lays the foundation for policy and public discourse that increases nimbleness and innovativeness in strategy and policy responses to a changing and complex environment.

Chapter 2

Singapore's Language Policies

CHAPTER 2: SINGAPORE'S LANGUAGE POLICIES

There is presently broad consensus in academic and public discourse on how language use in Singapore is shaped by, and in turn influences, the Singapore government's policies towards language. To manage a diverse population of different racial groups practising different religions and speaking different languages, the Singapore government adopts an umbrella policy of multiracialism, which operates on a "two-pronged strategy" (Tong & Pakir, 1996): the fostering of a national identity that transcends racial identity, under which different racial groups within the country are allowed to retain and develop their own cultures.[1] Within this multiracial space, the State plays a "neutral" role as a protector of each of the groups' rights in consideration of national interests (Chua, 1995).

The language policy of the Singapore government, i.e., multilingualism, operates within the framework of multiracialism. The four official languages — English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil — are treated as equal (Jain, 2021). English is the language of government administration, the medium of instruction in the education system, as well as a language viewed by the vast majority of Singaporeans as being "very important" or at least "somewhat important" to their identity (Mathews, Hou, et al., 2021). The other three languages are considered the Mother Tongue Languages (MTLs) of Singapore's three major racial groups (Ministry of Education, 2023a).

In addition to its MTL status, Malay is the designated national language of Singapore (Singapore Constitution, Article 13). The national anthem is in Malay, as are the national awards, and the insignias and drill commands for the uniformed groups. In 1993, the Singapore government introduced *Sebutan Baku* (Standard Pronunciation), a created model of pronunciation that is officially prescribed and taught as the preferred or more appropriate way of speaking "proper" Malay.[2] Historically, most local Malays spoke Malay with the Johor-Riau accent (*Sebutan Johor-Riau*) common in the region. In addition to the more standard or more formal versions of Malay, a pidgin form of Malay — known as bazaar Malay —was the main *lingua*

[1] The Singapore government tends to use "race" and "ethnicity" interchangeably. In this report, I use the terms "race" and "ethnicity" interchangeably, to align with the Singapore government's usage.

[2] *Sebutan Baku* was introduced as part of the state's support for the standardisation of the Malay language in the region. However, Malaysia returned to *Sebutan Johor-Riau* (Johor-Riau Pronunciation) in 2000 (Mukhlis & Wee, 2021); Sebutan Johor-Riau is the naturalised standard pronunciation based on the Johor-Riau accent. Some younger Singaporean Malay undergraduates speak a hybrid *Sebutan Baku* (Sakinah, 2019).

franca across ethnic and language communities in Singapore during the colonial period until independence in 1965, but it has since been replaced by English (Kuo & Chan, 2016, p.16).[3]

In the government's broader ideological framework of multiracialism and multilingualism in Singapore, the selection of the four official languages is based on the following assumptions: (a) "race" was defined by patriarchal descent, (b) a person's "race" defined his/her "culture", and (c) this person's "culture" was embedded in the language of the respective "race" (Chua, 1998). By extension, this meant that Mandarin for the Chinese community, Malay for the Malay community and Tamil for the Indian community were "emotionally acceptable… as a mother tongue" (Lee, 2012, p.50).

As such, the term "mother tongue language" (MTL) used by the Singapore government departs from the conventional understanding of this term in linguistics as the language first learnt by a child (Kuo, 1980, p.43; Pei & Gaynor, 1968, p.141). All students enrolled in Singapore's national schools must learn one of the three official MTLs as a second language.[4] As defined by the Ministry of Education (MOE), the MTL that a student has to study is based on one's race. The MOE has additional MTL policy provisions for the following four categories of students:

a) non-Tamil speaking students of the Indian race,
b) Eurasian students,
c) students registered with a double-barrelled race, and students who are not of Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian race, and whose MTL is not one of the official MTLs.

There are also policy provisions for exemption from MTL study, for:

a) children with special education needs who have severe difficulties in overall learning, and
b) children returning from overseas who had no opportunity to learn an official MTL, a non-Tamil Indian language (NTIL), or an MOE-approved foreign language or Asian language for a sustained period of time.[5]

[3] According to Kuo (1980), almost half (48%) of the overall population were proficient in "bazaar Malay" in 1957.
[4] The three official MTLs are Mandarin, Malay and Tamil.
[5] The approved foreign languages include French, German and Japanese, and the approved Asian languages include Arabic, Thai and Burmese. A student may only take an approved foreign language or approved Asian language in place of an official MTL if they have lived overseas for a long period of time, not kept up with the learning of their MTL, *and* had formal learning in the foreign language or Asian language. The foreign language and Asian language examinations are not offered

The Singapore government's MTL policy is underpinned by a strong commitment to bilingualism. Bilingualism is, as is oft-described, the "cornerstone" of Singapore's education system, with bilingualism "defined as proficiency in English and learning of one's 'ethnic mother tongue'" to "as high as a level they can'", "to the best of their ability and interest" (MOE, 2024).

The policy rationale for the bilingual education policy assumes that English facilitates Singaporeans' access to the global economy and to cutting-edge information in various professions including science and technology to support economic development (Lee, 2000), in addition to functioning as a "working language" for inter-ethnic communication (Pakir, 1991, p.168–9). In turn, the MTLs serve as vessels of cultural heritage and traditional values that counter "Western decadence" (Tan, 1997; Tan & Ng, 2011). Acting as a "cultural ballast", MTLs balance out or diminish the cultural influence associated with learning English and help individuals to stay rooted in their Asian identity (Chua, 2017, p.135). Behind this MTL policy principle lies the assumption or belief that a MTL inalienably and essentially embodies one's ethnically-defined culture (Wee & Bokhorst-Heng, 2005). However, the instrumentalist or pragmatist discourse of learning MTLs to access business opportunities in China, Southeast Asia and India has also entered official discourse in the past 30 years (MOE, 2021).

One of the biggest outcomes of the language policy in Singapore is a drop in the reported proficiencies in heritage languages over the years, albeit to varying degrees among the major ethnic groups, according to results from a 2018 study by IPS (Mathews et al., 2020).[6] This shift is most apparent in the Chinese community in Singapore: while 71 per cent of Chinese respondents reported that they could speak their parents' heritage language "well" or "very well" in 2013, this figure dropped to 57 per cent in 2018.

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at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) level. At the PSLE, students exempted from MTL or who offer an approved foreign language or Asian language are assigned an MTL score for the purpose of posting to secondary school. Parents have to make private study arrangements to prepare their children for the GCE O-Level examinations at the end of secondary school. Students who wish to progress to the next level of study after the GCE O-Level examination have to meet MTL requirements (MOE, 2023b).

[6] This report uses the same definition of "heritage languages" as the 2020 IPS report on the results of the IPS Survey on Race, Religion and Language: Heritage languages refer to a language spoken by a person as a result of their language, e.g., Hokkien, Teochew, Javanese, Boyanese, Hindi, Malayalam, Telugu and others (Mathews et al, 2020). A person may also consider one of the official MTLs their heritage language.

Correspondingly, the reported proficiency figure for English (among Chinese respondents) was 69 per cent in 2013 and rose to 74 per cent in 2018.

The 2020 Census of Population by the Department of Statistics Singapore also showed that an increase in English as the language most frequently spoken at home was observed across the major ethnic groups (Department of Statistics [DOS], 2021b). For 48 per cent of the Chinese ethnic group, English was the language most frequently spoken at home in 2020, compared to 33 per cent in 2010 (DOS, 2021b). Similarly, among the Indian community, 59 per cent now speak English most frequently at home, compared to 42 per cent in 2010 (DOS, 2021b). The Malay community has also started using more English alongside Malay; even as Malay remains the language most frequently spoken in 61 per cent of Malay households, there has been an increase in the proportion of families with English as the most frequently spoken language at home, from 17 per cent in 2010 to 39 per cent in 2020 (DOS, 2021b).

On the ground, the use of the English language is also associated with higher socio-economic status, while use of MTL, especially Mandarin, has historically tended to be associated with lower socio-economic status in Singapore (Kuo, 1985; Kuo & Chan, 2016; Tupas, 2011; Zhao & Liu, 2007).

For instrumentalist reasons, Singapore's English language policy prioritises "exo-normative standards" based on traditional British or American native speaker norms, often referred to as "standard English", to facilitate effective communication with English speakers in international business and social settings (Wee, 2018).[7] However, English as it is spoken and used in Singapore is not simply a single standardised variety of the English language. Instead, there is a continuum between the "notional standardised Singapore variety" — "standard English", which is also sometimes referred to as "standard Singapore English" — and a non-standardised colloquial variety of English (typically referred to as "Singlish" or "colloquial Singapore English").[8] The interplay between these varieties of English in Singapore "does not typically involve a switch from one code to another, but instead, the complex interplay and intermeshing of available 'feature pools' at various levels of society"; in addition, there is also language mixing across and within ethnic groups in Singapore society (Bolton & Botha, 2021, p.17).
Across the various language groups, there is widespread use of Singlish. Singlish has a "lexicon that mixes English with loan words from Hokkien and

[7] Exo-normative standards here refer to standards with traditional native speaker norms as the target (Wee, 2018).
[8] Without denying the complexity in the term "standard English", I use "Standard English" and "English" interchangeably in this report.

Malay, and a sentence structure that is heavily influenced by Chinese" (Kuo & Chan, 2016; Leimgruber, 2013). The government perceives the use of Singlish as an obstacle to the learning of standard English, while it recognises it as a cultural marker for most Singaporeans (Mathews et al., 2020; Rubdy, 2001).

Some Singaporeans are of the view that the use of Singlish has a negative impact on Singaporean identity, but others see it as a marker of the Singaporean identity and a form of speech that can foster a sense of national unity and social cohesion among Singaporeans (Bokhorst-Heng, 2005). The continued presence of Singlish in cultural forms such as film, television advertising, print, and social media has fostered some familiarity and affection for Singlish, which has in turn maintained its presence amongst well-educated Singaporeans who can code-switch between Singlish and standard English or Mandarin, "where appropriate and desired" (Goh, 2016, p.748). However, there is still a segment of the population, predominantly from the working class, that does not have the English proficiency to switch between Singlish and English. Their proficiency in other languages notwithstanding, their reliance on Singlish excludes them from almost all the high-income domains, e.g., higher management positions in private and public sectors, that require proficiency in standard English (Alsagoff, 2010).

Chapter 3

Study Objectives

CHAPTER 3: STUDY OBJECTIVES

Given the significant role of language policies, including MTL and bilingualism policies in Singapore's education system and social integration, it is important to understand and explore how existing and future language-use trends may evolve and probe the implications of these changing trends. By systematically examining the different scenarios of how language use may evolve and their attendant implications and outcomes, policymakers will be better prepared to develop a range of appropriate strategies, even for situations that may seem less obvious or probable for now.

This research project explored critical trends to develop possible scenarios of language use and policy in Singapore, especially implications that are currently less discussed in policy and public discourse in Singapore. Driving forces of change were identified to provide a deep-level framework for understanding changes can take place in the short to medium term (Smith & Ashby, 2020, p.75).

The aim of doing so is not to predict the future of language use and policies in Singapore, but to provide a structured way of devising different pictures of the future, to raise an awareness of potential trends and shifts, and to productively re-examine assumptions, opportunities and challenges that arise from different future conditions (Grant, 2003; Schwartz, 1991; Wack, 1985).

This was achieved in two phases:

a) Phase One: Using the approach of horizon scanning, relevant and important factors, known as "drivers" (also known as "driving forces") that are likely to bring change in language use and policy in Singapore were identified and catalogued.
b) Phase Two: "Testing", different groups of people from different segments of Singapore society who have deep experience and interest in various language use and trends in Singapore met to discuss the drivers. Insights from these were used to refine the drivers and their implications.

The final deliverable of this report is presented in Chapters 4 and 5 on the drivers and their implications, as well as scenarios from the drivers, and how to use them. These deliverables are aimed at the public, people and private sectors, as the drivers and scenarios have relevant implications for policy makers and practitioners (e.g., educators and language promotion organisations).

Chapter 4

Methodology

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 PHASE ONE: DESKTOP RESEARCH INVOLVING INITIAL DRIVERS

Horizon scanning is a "mainstay process" of futures/foresight work and is defined as "the process of looking across the landscape to detect, identify and catalogue weak signals, trends and driving forces embedded in information and activities in the world around us" (Smith & Ashby, 2020, p.64). The value of horizon scanning is in "using it to change mindsets, challenge assumptions and provide more options" (Carney, 2018). This is the process that was used to identify and develop drivers in this study.

Drivers, also called "driving forces", are the longest-term dynamics of change. These key forces of change are often described as the "glaciers" of the futures or foresight because they progress very slowly and last a long time, usually decades, with demographics (e.g., longer-term patterns of population, age) being a textbook example of a driver (Smith & Ashby, 2020, p.75–7). Smaller units of change are known as "trends" and "signals", defined respectively as "an emerging or ongoing pattern of change" (Smith & Ashby, 2020, p.72) and "the basic particle of information" in futures work (Smith & Ashby, p.70). These three elements of drivers, trends and signals dynamically feed off and support each other.

The first phase of horizon-scanning was based on literature review of secondary sources, specifically, academic publications (e.g., books and journal articles), media reports, commentary articles and readers' letters published in *The Straits Times*, CNA, and Mothership, and the most active and/or most popular discussion threads on language use in local parent forums, in the five-year period from 2019 to 2023.[9] While there is no strict standard timeframe for the historical breadth of literature to review, this five-year period helped to provide historical context to current trends.

In the literature review, the drivers, trends and signals were sorted using the well-known broad categorisation framework STEEP (Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental and Political) used not only in futures/foresight work, but also business and strategy (Smith & Ashby, 2020, p.96). This was

[9] According to the Digital News Report 2023 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *The Straits Times* and CNA were the top two most popular offline news sources, and Mothership was the most used online news source in 2022 in Singapore (Newman et al, 2023).

a structured way in which to ensure that the research was holistic in its approach (Smith & Ashby, 2020, p.99).

In the second part of the horizon scanning, the information collection was augmented with conversations with a small group of subject matter experts in the relevant ministries and statutory boards (e.g., the Ministry of Education, the National Heritage Board, and the then-Ministry of Communications and Information now known as the Ministry of Digital Development and Information). Such conversations or interviews with subject matter experts provided useful signals in the form of opinions, views, observations, and experiences to frame and test assumptions around the key research questions (Smith & Ashby, 2020, p.82).

Six key drivers emerged from the horizon scanning: (1) the rising dominance of English as a home language in Singapore; (2) the increasing acceptance of Singlish as part of Singaporean identity; (3) demographic changes, such as increased transnational marriages, and new immigrants from China and India; (4) changing Singaporean aspirations; (5) technological changes, such as the development of AI; and (6) geopolitical dynamics.

To develop the implications of these, a timeline of a decade—from 2025 to 2035—was selected as drivers typically take that span of time, if not multiple decades, to play out. The six drivers and their implications formed the basis for the discussion primer and questions for all the roundtable discussions and workshop in Phase Two.

4.2 PHASE TWO: ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS AND WORKSHOP WITH PEOPLE, PRIVATE, AND PUBLIC SECTOR DISCUSSANTS

In Phase Two, the drivers and their implications were tested on four groups of stakeholders through three roundtable discussions and one workshop in July and August 2024. The aim of the three roundtable discussions was to test if the proposed drivers and their implications resonated with the lived and work experiences of the participants, and to get a sense of how participants from different sectors prioritised and assessed the relative uncertainty and impact of the drivers and their implications.

The roundtables were followed by a bigger workshop-cum-discussion session solely with public service officers who had some experience and/or interest in in foresight work in September 2024, hosted by the Centre for Strategic Futures. The first half of the workshop covered the same ground as the roundtable discussions, but the second half of the workshop was a worldbuilding activity in which participants chose three drivers and brainstormed a simple scenario 10 to 15 years into the future in which one

implication ("something that could happen") from each driver happened simultaneously. This sort of worldbuilding activity can create space to consider alternative courses of action and identify new opportunities (Sandford, 2016).

4.2.1 Sampling strategy

Each of the first three roundtables were conducted with a mix of public, private, and people sector stakeholders. For a more robust and wide-ranging discussion, roundtable participants were chosen consciously in purposive/judgement sampling, for their knowledge and understanding of the issues at hand, as well as for diversity in backgrounds in terms of gender, ethnicity, language(s) spoken, and professions (e.g., English language and MTL education, academia, media, publishing) as well as life stage (e.g., age group, parent/non-parent). They were chosen because they would be most directly affected by changes in language use and policies in Singapore. The languages under discussion were English, the official MTL (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil), Singlish and heritage languages. Topics covered in the discussions included themes of identity, the learning and teaching of languages in Singapore, as well as the talent pipeline and audiences in media and entertainment and cultural industries.

The roundtable discussions included a few participants from the public sector, but the workshop was limited to public sector participants with some background in futures/foresight work. The objective of holding a separate workshop was to elicit more candid insights about the drivers and their implications, as participants might have felt more comfortable expressing their views within a group of fellow public servants. It was also to check if there were significant differences between the views expressed in the roundtable discussions and the workshop.

Specifically, the workshop participants were chosen from a scoped pool, namely, of public service officers already in the Centre for Strategic Futures' mailing list of junior to middle management-level officers who had exposure to futures/foresight work or training. The officers were informed via email of the scheduled workshop and asked to sign up if they were interested. This approach was adopted as the participants would be relatively more familiar with the futures thinking and this would reduce the time needed to familiarise them with the worldbuilding exercise and get into the thick of the discussion more quickly. To hear from a wider set of perspectives, e.g., from the economic development agencies, the workshop group was open to all agencies, instead of being restricted only to agencies in the social sector and/or with a direct relationship between their work and language policy in Singapore, e.g., MOE or the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

(More details on the profile of the roundtable and workshop participants are in section 4.2.2 below.)

4.2.2 Discussant profiles

To facilitate candid and in-depth discussions, all four discussions were closed-door sessions, and the discussions were conducted under the Chatham House rule. Each roundtable discussion consisted of 11 to 13 participants. Due to time and logistical constraints, it was only possible to hold just one workshop with the public service officers so 50 participants were recruited who were then divided into six to seven smaller groups. After attrition, the workshop-cum-discussion session consisted of 31 participants, divided into six groups with a mix of agency type (e.g., economic, social) in each group for a more wide-ranging discussion. All the discussions lasted for approximately two hours.

Table 1 shows a summary profile of the respondents who took part in the roundtables.

Table 1: Profile of roundtable discussants by gender, race, languages spoken, professional background and life stage (e.g., parent/non-parent).

Demographics		**Number of discussants**
Gender	Male	21
	Female	14
Race	Chinese	18
	Malay	5
	Indian and Others	12
Languages(s) spoken	English	35 (of whom three participants self-identified as being effectively monolingual in English)
	Mandarin	16
	Malay	8
	Tamil	6
	Other Indian languages, including the NTILs, e.g., Hindi, Punjabi, Malayalam,	5

Demographics		**Number of discussants**
	Telugu, Sinhalese, Nepali	
	Others, e.g., Chinese dialects, Kristang, Bahasa Indonesia, Boyanese, Tagalog, Baba Malay, Japanese, Arabic	12
Professional background	Public sector	4
	Private sector, e.g., media, publishing, private education	9 (of whom 6 were from the media industry)
	People sector	8
	Academia	14
Life stage	Parent	19 (of whom four were grandparents)
	Non-parent	16

Table 2 shows a summary profile of the respondents who took part in the workshop discussion. It does not include the comprehensive overview of the race, languages spoken, or life stage of the participants as this was not the basis on which they were selected to participate in it. While participants were asked to share the language(s) that they spoke with their smaller discussion group, the participants were not required to share the information with the larger group, due to time constraints. Based on what the participants shared of their team discussions, there were speakers of Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, Chinese dialects in the workshop. Some participants identified as being more comfortable speaking in English. There was also a mix of parents and non-parents in the workshop.

Table 2: Profile of workshop participants by gender, seniority, and public sector agency type.

Demographics		**Number of participants**
Gender	Male	17
	Female	14
Seniority	Individual contributor	17
	Management	14
Public sector agency type	Social	13
	Economic development	3

Demographics		Number of participants
	Infrastructure and environment	4
	Central administration	1
	Security	2
	Information and communications technology and smart systems	6
	Organs of state	2

4.2.3 Themes identified from the discussions

Analysis of the roundtable discussion and workshop transcripts yielded the following six meta-themes and various sub-themes as presented in Table 3 and Table 4, respectively. These themes were used to refine the eventual drivers, implications, and scenarios in this report (Chapters 4 and 5).

Table 3: Meta-themes and sub-themes identified from the roundtable discussions.

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
1.	Meta-theme: Background that we need to be aware of when we talk about language use in Singapore. Sub-themes: ➢ Languages are a social construct, and they change over time. We cannot expect the English, official MTL, or even the Singlish in Singapore today or of the future to be the same as what was spoken and written in the past. ➢ Languages will always be used to signal in-group and out-group status, and that is one reason why language will keep evolving. e.g., youth slang becomes “uncool” when adults start to use it. ➢ Language policy will continue to serve various policy needs, e.g., community-bonding, economic development. ➢ Singapore is at the outer circle of English users, with the inner circle being what we traditionally think of as English-speaking countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, America, Australia), so our use of English will change less quickly. ➢ There needs to be a social need for a person to use and learn a language, i.e., the person must need or want to communicate with someone else in that language.

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	➢ A language needs to be used to survive. More precisely, a language needs to be the language that you speak with your friends and with your family, for it to continue to be transmitted. ➢ Different linguistic communities face different kinds of pressures in Singapore. The pressures or difficulties faced by one MTL community cannot be assumed to be the same for the other MTL communities. ➢ The bilingual education policy and its execution (e.g., MTL teachers in all schools) are the bulwark against losing our MTLs, but it is easy to take them for granted. We may not know or value what we have until it is gone. ➢ Our language and culture policies have encouraged the continuation of four language civilisations/cultures living in close proximity in the same country, which in itself is rare and to be appreciated. ➢ Exposure to a foreign environment, in which we are the minority and foreigner, can help us to appreciate the languages which help us to express our identity. Sending young Singaporeans out into the world helps them realise how their heritage language allows them to express themselves more fully overseas. ➢ It may be more accurate to say that there is a shift away from using MTL in the Mandarin-speaking and Malay-speaking communities, but the shift is less prominent for the Indian community and its languages, because the English language has historically been more prominent or predominant in the Indian community since at least Singapore's independence. It may be the case that historically, the Indian community gave up their Indian languages for the English language (and Malay language); among the newer Indian citizen families. The Tamil-speaking and Hindi-speaking Indian new citizen community might use more MTL, but the rest of the new Indian citizens who speak a NTIL find it very hard. ➢ There is already a lot of private effort within individual families to keep MTLs alive. [10] Leverage to keep MTLs alive comes at the

[10] Such private efforts to keep MTLs alive are deliberate parental choices about choosing to speak only MTL with their children, reading MTL books with their children, or bringing their children for family activities conducted in MTL etc. While such efforts may look like they contradict the data on the decline in the use of MTLs at home, one way of understanding the contradiction is that parents may be making a conscious effort in response to such data. In general, the themes and points made

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	policy and regulation level, not so much the private individual level.
2.	Meta-theme: Pragmatism is an important part of how Singaporeans view language choices, but it plays out in different ways. Sub-themes: ➢ Many respondents characterised Singaporeans as "pragmatic" in their life choices, including their choice of language(s) to speak, use and prioritise. ➢ There is a hierarchy of languages in Singapore; historically, English has been at the top of the hierarchy for many reasons (government policy, geopolitical reasons, perceived correlation between speaking English well and academic success and being of higher socio-economic status) and will remain the most important language. ➢ When we talk about pragmatism in language learning, we usually mean focusing on learning and using a language for academic success and economic advantages (employment and career prospects, business profits) ➢ Parents are pragmatic and will focus on languages that their children will be examined in, i.e. English and their official MTL. For families whose heritage language(s) is/are not an official MTL, this reduces the time spent on using the heritage language(s), which in turn reduces the probability and strength of the intergenerational transmission of such languages. ➢ What we want to see in language proficiency and the languages we speak is linked to our definition of Singaporean identity and our understanding of ethnic categories, including our own. However, how we define ourselves ethnically in turn is also a pragmatic reaction to existing ethnic-based policies in place, if any, and whether we do and can benefit from identifying on paper as one race rather than another. ➢ The languages that we use out of affinity and out of pragmatism differ from family to family. Some families will use English to communicate, so that their children can practise it for school. Other families associate using MTL at home with pragmatism for the same reason, namely, practising for academic performance. Similarly, the languages used for argument/disagreement, for child discipline, and to express

in the discussions are the participants' thoughts and impressions, and are reflected as they are, as; they can be held in tension with existing trends and data.

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	affection differ from family to family. Some families use MTL to express affection, and some use English. ➢ Pragmatism plays out in how some interracial/transnational couples choose Chinese or Malay as their child's MTL in school; they believe that learning these languages will help their child's future career prospects. ➢ Pragmatism is apparent in how many Singaporean students are exam-oriented when they learn a language (English and/or MTL) in school, studying with the primary goal of passing the language exam instead of the harder and more nebulous task of learning to use a language in a way that will be practical/useful outside of exams and/or to help them develop an affinity for the language. Hard to see how MTL exams support the development of affinity for a language. ➢ There is emergent interest in learning heritage languages not taught in school (e.g., Chinese dialects, Kristang), including among learners not born into the language community; this interest has nothing to do with economic or academic success. ➢ Narratives of language and the assumptions of race on which they are based are under pressure, as there is also interest in rethinking how we understand Singaporean identity, beyond the current CMIO containers, to be more inclusive and reflective of diversity that already exists in Singapore. ➢ It is pragmatic to want Singaporeans to speak more languages, for the economic advantage it may bring, but the average student or man on the street believes that that does not apply to them, either because they think they do not have the linguistic/intellectual ability to do so, or that they will not benefit from learning more languages. ➢ Pragmatism can be a positive force, in the sense that it provides a motivation to use or learn a language that one might otherwise not have learnt. ➢ The use of English is sometimes a way for speakers to negotiate traditional ethnic or cultural community dynamics. ➢ A few participants perceived pragmatism to be at work in the design of the MTL curriculum because the latest curriculum supposedly focuses more on the functional use of language, with a corresponding reduction in the cultural/literary content (e.g., a reduction in the number of idioms), across Mandarin, Malay and Tamil ➢ Geopolitics: Singaporeans might need to become trilingual or multilingual because of changing global dynamics, especially economic power

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	➢ Geopolitics: At the same time, the need for bilingual Singaporean talent may hold less weight among Singaporean youths as more Southeast Asian and Asian governments may increase investment in education (e.g. in infrastructure and teacher training) to increase economic competitiveness and meet the demands for better education and better jobs from a growing middle class. There are also now more bilingual (English-local language) speakers in Asia. This may decrease pragmatism-based interest in MTL learning in Singapore, as students and workers assume that they will be able to get by with using English.
3.	Meta-theme: Family, emotions and language use Sub-themes: ➢ English is now the dominant language of parenting in Singapore, and MTL the language that requires a conscious effort and strategy to use. For some families, English is also the language of familial connection, i.e., the language with which they express affection. ➢ Negative emotions are associated with official MTLs: stress, reluctance, shame, hatred, feeling a sense of "duty" to learn the language, especially in relation to Mandarin, even at the pre-school level. There is a decline in willingness to converse in Mandarin as the children/grandchildren in question grew older. ➢ For MTL intelligentsia/intellectuals, the MTL teaching pipeline, including pre-school teaching, remains a concern, as is the pipeline of Singaporeans who want and are able to enter the MTL media and arts and culture talent pipelines. ➢ Positive emotions associated with official MTLs: Connection, especially family connection and connection with one's heritage and cultural community, is a key reason for using MTL. ➢ There seems to be some interest among Singaporean youths in keeping in touch with their MTL by consuming content in their MTL (e.g., listening to music in their MTL) after formal education when it is no longer an examinable subject. They may do so for enjoyment, and as an exploration of the identity of their community identity, but not necessarily out of a desire to maintain or improve increase their MTL proficiency. ➢ There is some continued desire among Singaporeans in general to cultivate/nurture/preserve space for MTLs and heritage languages, and for MTLs to be learnt as languages to be used and spoken rather than as a subject. ➢ Social connection can go both ways, as a motivation for language learning. If children are more comfortable speaking

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	English because it is the common language among their friends, their grandparents may end up trying to speak in English to connect with them. However, when the children are older, they may end up wanting to learn and use the language spoken by their grandparents for the same reason of wanting to connect with their grandparents. ➢ Parents find MTL education stressful. The stress was attributed to having to help their child learn and improve their official MTL to meet exam standards, i.e., formal education. At the same time, they also want their children to access relationship-building with their family and cultural heritage through MTL. ➢ For parents in bicultural/multicultural families, they felt a desire and a sense of duty to be the touchpoint for their child to learn their heritage language/MTL, so that the child could also understand that parent's culture. ➢ Some parents also expressed a desire to raise children who valued and enjoyed the diversity of languages in Singapore. ➢ Enjoyment, entertainment and interest: There is a gap between what younger Singaporeans find interesting or fun, and what policymakers and politicians find interesting or doable in MTL learning and its promotion. ➢ Not all parents are aware of the history, policy reasons and/or political significance of Singapore's MTL policy and its current form (e.g., the political debate over the existence and weightage of MTL in the PSLE score). ➢ In some families, parents and/or grandparents may have retained dialects/heritage languages as a private language for gossip and private conversation. This would have made their children/grandchildren associate these languages with the home and with informal conversation
4.	Meta-theme: Language, diversity, plurality and identity in Singapore Sub-themes: ➢ Not every parent feels an affinity for their official MTL and/or their child's official MTL. ➢ Immigrants who do not speak Chinese, Malay, Tamil or a NTIL only have English as their common language with Singaporeans (at least, unless/until they learn Singlish). ➢ Protecting the multicultural nature of Singaporean society requires protecting the continued use of our MTLs. Yet, ironically, Singaporeans default to English in order to protect our

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	multicultural society, as it is seen as the one common language. This occurs at the expense of our MTLs and heritage languages, because it reduces the space for them to be spoken and heard. Perhaps this practice can be reframed this way: instead of trying to insist that as many people as possible communicate in English, how about providing more space for the languages that still exist, with their speakers using them if they are more comfortable doing so, with translation into English? This would allow those languages to be used without alienating non-speakers of those languages. ➢ Singlish has become a unifier and equaliser among the increasing heterogeneity of Singapore. In particular, for new immigrants and minorities, Singlish is a quick and effective way of signalling in-group identity with Singaporeans. ➢ Singlish is part of the Singaporean identity, but English also plays a differentiating role between Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans for whom English is not a first language. ➢ One way, though not the only way, of thinking about Singaporean identity and languages is to think of Singaporean identity as consisting of multiple layers of equally valid identities, e.g., 100% Singaporean, 100% Indian, nesting in each other like matryoshka dolls. This would mean that there is a possibility of comfortable co-existence of language identities, within a person, without one existing at the expense of the other. As an extension of this, someone may not speak their heritage language, but they may still consider it salient to their identity and celebrate it. ➢ In reality, the provision of MTL classes in pre-schools, even pre-schools that bill themselves as “bilingual pre-schools”, is usually limited to Mandarin, and focused on preparation for Primary 1 Mandarin. There is Malay and Tamil language provision in some, but not all, pre-schools. This may lead to children who are not from Mandarin-speaking families feeling excluded. An alternate framing of this might be for pre-school MTL learning to be the start for children to learn about Singapore’s multicultural identity and to learn a little conversational Mandarin, Malay and Tamil — instead of focusing on preparation for their eventual MTL class in Primary 1. ➢ There has been a decline in the use of the national language, Malay. Malay used to be more commonly spoken among Singaporeans of an earlier generation than it is now. ➢ The bell curve for NTIL examinations disadvantages non-Hindi speakers, as the NTIL students are graded on the same bell curve and Hindi-learning students tend to be new immigrants

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	fluent in the language. On top of that, non-Hindi NTIL communities are smaller and have fewer learning resources. ➢ Singaporean literature written in the MTLs will evolve with a decline in MTL use: 1) There will be a drop in the number of local readers who can and want to read in their MTL, which lead to a decline in the number of local readers, borrowers, and purchasers of MTL books. 2) There will also be a decline in the number of Singaporeans who can and want to write in their MTL, which may decrease the pool of Singaporean MTL writers. 3) The pool of local MTL writers may be augmented by new citizens who write and publish in their MTLs; these writers may have a different sensibility from writers who grew up in Singapore. 4) Singaporean MTL writers may aim to write for a wider readership beyond Singapore, to reach a wider audience. In these ways, Singaporean literature is evolving and can be understood as transnational. ➢ Translation of local MTL books into English as well as into the other MTLs is important as it helps to increase readership and knowledge of Singaporean literature locally and beyond Singapore. ➢ Readership of MTL books will decrease, with a declining pipeline of readers and writers., even with new citizens who write in those languages Singapore literature is evolving and could be/be understood as/become transnational, as more writers write for a wider readership beyond Singapore. Translation of local MTL books into English as well as into the other MTLs is important. ➢ Declining affinity with a language has a knock-on effect on religious attendance for religions whose texts and prayers are conducted in that language.
5.	Meta-theme: Language standards Sub-themes: ➢ Declining quality/standard of higher order communication skills in English language among some younger Singaporeans, e.g., lack of precision and clarity in their writing ➢ There is more jargon and less clarity in government communications now. ➢ We have to be clear what we mean when we talk about language standards. What does it mean to speak and write well? Being clear? Being precise? Using a standard grammatical form of the language without making any mistakes?

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	➢ Exposure to AI is exposure to stilted, artificial sounding but grammatically correct sentences. ➢ Emotional affinity for the use of Singlish is a cause of worry for some parents, because they think it will affect their children's ability to use standard English well, and global competitiveness. ➢ Language standards are man-made constructs, but Singaporeans are likely to be disadvantaged in non-Singaporean settings if we are unable to or choose not to use a form of English that is comprehensible and grammatical. ➢ In a way, new immigrants who speak one of the official MTLs and NTILs are the superstrate of our MTLs; they are reminders of the standards of language and even dialects as used currently in China and India etc. ➢ Perhaps we should rethink and come to a new consensus on what language standards we want to reach, e.g., do we want to encourage people to be open to learning more languages, even if they reach lower "peaks" of achievement in them? What is the level of proficiency in English and our heritage language that we want, as Singaporeans? What sort of relationship with these languages do we want? ➢ Language codes for local public broadcast programmes are strict and careful about the use of Singlish and slang, but if the language on our screen do not feel representative or authentic, local audiences will and can just turn to the internet for entertainment and media. ➢ At the same time, at least some parents expect local public broadcast family programmes in English to model a form of Standard English and to exclude Singlish. ➢ Local frustration with service staff who cannot speak English or Singlish, due to both the inconvenience of not being able to communicate, as well as the expectation that English should be a common language for communication in Singapore. ➢ Language standards in school can hinder or hamper learning and even communication in that language in the home or community, because the language learnt in school feels artificial and alienating. Similarly, the "standard" form of the language learnt in school can be alienating when used in writing or media that is intended to be entertaining or trendy, as it is associated with public announcements and oral examinations. This point was raised by Tamil, NTIL and Malay speakers. ➢ Parents expect the school to play a major role in preparing children to have the right foundation in their languages.

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	➢ Some parents shared the perception that MTL in pre-school is pitched at preparing children for primary school MTL, which may be too difficult and stressful for some children and parents. This leads the students to dislike and resent the MTL in question. Some parents also shared the opinion that the policy of requiring a certain MTL score to enter secondary school creates similar pressure, and does not lead to a love for a language. ➢ Singlish is viewed as being for informal, lower-prestige communication that carries less cognitive load. The assumption is that we need more sophisticated vocabulary (whether in English or another language) for precision, nuance and depth in higher-order thinking. ➢ A society needs a class of people who can think deeply and rigorously in at least one language, for good governance and effective problem-solving at a societal level.
6.	Meta-theme: Technology can enable or hinder language use. Sub-themes: ➢ Technology is a platform for greater exposure to many languages, as well as to ideas about language, identity, and diversity; such access would have been unavailable 10 to 20 years ago. ➢ Every generation complains about its young, but technology has raised the exposure current youths have to new languages and ideas exponentially. ➢ Enabling exposure and access to different languages changes affinities and creates new affinities, e.g., increased access to Korean pop culture and dramas arguably enabled more interest in learning the language. ➢ Technology enables increased exposure to British and American accents (more access to overseas dramas, programmes, online content), which has led to an increase in Singaporean children and youths adopting a British/American accent, with varying degrees of success, even if they have not studied in the United Kingdom or America. ➢ Technology could help with language preservation and development of heritage languages and script, e.g., Jawi. ➢ Technology creates language and cultural bubbles, for instance, new immigrants might stay within their own language and cultural circles via texting apps, and never feel they need to learn English to integrate into broader society.

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	➢ Translation apps also reduce the need and desire to study a language before overseas travel or to understand media in a foreign language. ➢ Technology has led to a shrinking attention span and a shrinking audience for the written word (research papers, books, newspaper articles) because people want information and entertainment quickly and in visual form. ➢ The ease of getting an answer (of sorts) to one's questions with AI feeds that desire for immediacy. ➢ There is a danger of using AI to generate language and text without thinking through what is being said, grappling with use of the language, and not learning to use language as a tool. ➢ The increased use of technology for communication decreases comfort in communicating face-to-face with another human ➢ We need to develop our large language models (LLM) for AI that are trained on data sets which reflect how Singaporeans actually speak and write. ➢ The language/slang used on internet forums and social media platforms like TikTok, as well as online communication norms, may be more familiar and relatable to youths than Singlish. ➢ Computing language is a kind of language, but feels different from "human" language. It would be interesting to think about the way subsequent generations of young Singaporeans think about languages, for instance, if they have to be "trilingual" in English, their MTL, and a computing language.

As the workshop group was also asked to spend more time on a worldbuilding activity using the drivers, the list of sub-themes that emerged in the discussion there is shorter than that from the roundtables.

Table 4: Meta-themes and sub-themes identified from the workshop.

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
1.	Meta-theme: Background that we need to be aware of when we talk about language use in Singapore. Sub-themes: ➢ Languages will always be used to signal in-group and out-group status, and that is one reason why language will keep evolving. e.g., youth slang becoming "uncool" when adults start to use it. ➢ Need for better inter-generational communication.

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
2.	Meta-theme: Pragmatism remains an important part of how Singaporeans view language choices, but it plays out in different ways. Sub-themes: ➢ "Past performance is no indicator of future returns": Singaporeans will continue to be pragmatic in their choice of language to use and learn. Even English might not remain the dominant language if it is no longer economically advantageous. ➢ There has been an increase in interest in Chinese cultural products (e.g., computer games, dramas, music related to these games and dramas). ➢ Among new immigrants and expats, pragmatism drives the choice of Chinese as official MTL, and to a lesser extent, Malay. ➢ There is a perceived pragmatism behind the design of the Tamil language curriculum and its emphasis on more practical, functional, spoken language. The impression was that the curriculum was moving away from prioritising students' relationship with the cultural aspect of the language. ➢ Pragmatism can be a positive force that drives people to adopt another language for career/business/economic advantage. Pragmatism should be welcomed and not completely denounced.
3.	Meta-theme: Language, diversity, plurality, and identity in Singapore Sub-themes: ➢ There is interest in learning more about our local and personal heritage (e.g., Chinese dialects), and incorporating it into our lives. ➢ There could be a day when Singlish becomes so celebrated and standardised that it ossifies and Singaporeans or Singaporean youths feel that it no longer adequately or authentically represents their experience, which in turn may lead to its rejection. ➢ Singlish may further evolve to include words from language communities there were historically very much minorities in Singapore, e.g., Vietnamese, Tagalog, but which now have more of a presence due to cross-cultural

No.	Meta-themes and sub-themes
	marriages. However, this may result in a Singlish that feels more alien to some Singaporeans.
4.	Meta-theme: Technology Sub-themes: ➢ Social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin have their own language community in Chinese. ➢ Technological advancements in translation may enable communication and consumption of foreign language media to such an extent that people do not see the need to study a foreign language.
5.	Meta-theme: Opportunities Sub-themes: ➢ Potential for export of Singlish as a cultural product ➢ Being able to learn or speak at least a few languages quickly may become our unique selling point as a country
6.	Meta-theme: Policies to better support language-learning Sub-themes: ➢ Policy should consider language learning as something that takes place across a person's life, not just during the foundational period in one's formal schooling years. Maybe SkillsFuture policies should make sure there is/are porous entry point(s) into learning a new language, beyond the current offerings.

4.2.4 Discussion

In general, participants in the roundtables and the workshop engaged with all the drivers in their discussion. There was some overlap in the substance of the meta-themes that emerged. This was not surprising, as all four discussions were given the same set of drivers and implications to reflect on, as well as the same broad guiding questions on how the drivers and implications made them feel, what they agreed and disagreed with, and what opportunities or challenges they could identify. However, the workshop group was more optimistic about the opportunities in the language landscape.

Another difference between the roundtables and the workshop groups were the latter's choice of drivers had the highest level of uncertainty but also the greatest impact on language use and policy in Singapore if they came to pass. The most frequently picked drivers by workshop participants were (1)

changing Singaporean aspirations/values (pragmatism, personal fulfilment) and (2) geopolitical dynamics. In contrast, the choice of drivers were more diffused among the six drivers in the responses of roundtable participants. This could have been because the roundtable group was more diverse in terms of their professional and demographic backgrounds, and age.

Chapter 5

Drivers and Their Implications

CHAPTER 5: DRIVERS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

The following list of drivers was identified based on recurrent themes and emergent signals that were picked up in the literature review and refined through the roundtable discussions. Rather than a comprehensive list of the drivers of change, the following sections present a selection of key forces and selected *non-mutually exclusive* implications that will more directly shape the language landscape in Singapore in the next ten years. The implications have been divided into three categories: the probable ("what is likely to happen"), the plausible ("what could happen, based on current understanding"), and the possible ("what might happen"). The three categories are *not* meant to flow into each other in a chronological sequence.

There are many potential implications for each driver, under each category of uncertainty. What follows is a discussion of those that the participants at the roundtables and workshop felt strongly about.

5.1 SHIFTS IN HOME LANGUAGE FROM OFFICIAL MOTHER TONGUE LANGUAGES TO ENGLISH

"Whenever a language is used as a medium of education, it is likely to become someone's best language" (Gupta, 2008, p.106). English has become the dominant home language in Singapore (Kuo & Chan, 2016). Within the Singaporean Chinese community, there has been a significant decline in the use of Chinese dialects, and then Mandarin, at home. Such a shift can be attributed to the education policy in Singapore and the government-sponsored Speak Mandarin Campaign which started in 1979 (Kuo & Jernudd, 1993; Lim, 2009). Similar shifts to English as the home language have also occurred in the Malay and Tamil-speaking communities (Mathews et al., 2020).

Part of this shift towards English is driven by the Singapore government's bilingual education policy and parents' response to it. Parents who wish to give their children an academic edge often prioritise the mastery of English as it is the language of instruction in the national education system. Even some grandparents who might be more comfortable speaking an official MTL or heritage language encourage the use of English in their family, whether by speaking it or encouraging their children to speak English to their grandchildren (Xie et al., 2022).

Over time, the space to use MTLs has shrunk, and MTLs are becoming learnt languages spoken for functional purposes, and not naturally acquired languages. Faced with declining use of official MTLs by younger

Singaporeans after they leave the formal education system, and worries about declining proficiency from lack of use, the policy discourse positions the situation in this way: the bilingual education system lays a strong foundation in MTL skills, which remain a latent ability to be tapped on when we need them (An, 2024).[11]

Driver 1:
English is the dominant language in Singapore. In absolute terms, there is less exposure for official MTLs which are "taught" in school (and tuition classes) rather than "caught" and used spontaneously in real life, whether at home or outside of MTL classes.

What could happen:
Probable: Increase in Singaporeans who are passive bilinguals.
While Singaporeans are not monolingual, most Singaporeans lose competence in their MTL once they leave the formal education system as their work and social environments do not require them to use MTLs at a high level. There is an increase in Singaporeans who are passive bilinguals, i.e., bilinguals who are gradually losing competence or who experience deteriorating proficiency in one language, usually because of disuse (Ng & Wigglesworth, 2007).

When these passively bilingual Singaporeans become parents, their expectations for their children's MTL proficiency are relatively modest: they hope their children will know enough MTL to connect with their cultural identity and heritage. Singaporean offspring of transnational and interracial marriages feel more affinity for the English language and their home language(s), which may not coincide with their official MTL in school. They advocate for greater awareness of their home language(s). Being proficient enough at MTL to be fluent, or for MTL to be useful in their children's career is seen as a bonus or stretch goal.

Plausible: English as the language of emotional affinity, and more monolingual-plus Singaporeans
Singaporeans, especially younger Singaporeans, not only view English as an important part of their national identity but embrace English as the language with which they feel a greater emotional affinity. More Singaporeans view English as the language in which they feel the most

[11] This argument is not without scientific merit; the nerve cells in human brains make new connections when we learn something. Scientists at the Max Planck Institute of Neurobiology have shown that these connections remain intact even when they are no longer needed. When we have to relearn a skill or ability, the reactivation of these connections makes the relearning easier and faster (Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, 2008).

comfortable expressing personal emotions (e.g., romantic affection, disgust, anger) and talking about their personal worries. Questioning the definition or nomenclature of MTLs as the language for which they should feel an emotional affinity becomes mainstream.

The vast majority of younger Singaporeans end up being extremely passive bilinguals, or even "(English-)monolingual-plus", that is, they use English and a smattering of their MTL/heritage language. Given the fact that languages can be understood as repositories of culture, "monolingual-plus" Singaporeans also end up with a narrower "monocultural-plus" worldview. The Singaporean audience for local MTL artistic/cultural works and media content shrinks significantly, due to the lack of interest and a decline in reading/listening ability. Thus, overseas audiences/readership/consumers become as important, if not more important than, local audiences for the bottom line of these individuals and companies.

Possible: Parental pressure to lower MTL examination standards
Given the amount of resources required to support MTL proficiency in an English-dominant environment, especially if parents are English-speaking themselves, parents demand lower MTL examination standards. These parents have different reasons for doing so — some parents wish to reduce what they see as unnecessary stress on their children and their family in the face of competing academic and extra-curricular demands on their children's time and attention. Also, some parents believe that the true way for their children to experience the joy of learning MTL in school is to remove exam stress from the picture.

5.2 INCREASING ACCEPTANCE OF THE USE OF SINGLISH AS PART OF SINGAPOREAN IDENTITY

Approximately half of the respondents in IPS's latest Survey on Race, Religion & Language in 2018 "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that Singlish gave Singaporeans a sense of identity; the younger the participants, the greater their self-reported proficiency in Singlish (Mathews et al., 2020). There are signs of more public celebration of Singlish as an important cultural marker of Singaporean identity, from its use in local art and culture and in tourist souvenirs, to positive reactions to the extremely positive reaction to American pop star Taylor Swift having one of her dancers use a different Singlish expression each day as part of her 2024 Eras Tour concert set in Singapore (Tan, 2024).

At the same time, vocal advocates of Singlish in Singapore are usually well-educated and literate (and literary) figures who are proficient in English and who are able to code-switch when interacting with family and friends (Kuo &

Chan, 2016). While Bokhorst-Heng (2005) asked the question, "In fighting for Singlish, are [advocates of Singlish] promoting elitism, preventing others from improving their proficiency in English?", there appears to be less focus now on the socio-economic repercussions of the promotion or use of Singlish. The Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) has shifted from discouraging the use of Singlish (in the early 2000s) to being a resource for Singaporeans who wish to improve their Standard English, and champions the importance of honing one's ability to code-switch effectively between Standard English and Singlish.[12] At the same time, employers have also noticed a drop in new employees' English language standards, though not in job competence (Wan et al., 2024).

Driver 2:
Singlish is increasingly embraced as part of Singaporean identity. It acts as a unifier across racial lines, and its use also helps minority race Singaporeans and new immigrants to signal their belonging to Singapore.

What could happen:
Probable: Singlish embraced as part of Singaporean identity, but not at the expense of English
An overwhelming majority of Singaporeans agree that Singlish gives them a sense of identity, and the effective use of Singlish is celebrated in Singaporean art and culture. There is no significant consequent decline in English proficiency standards, due to efforts by the formal education system as well as Singaporeans' high level of awareness of the need to stay relevant and understood by the world.

Plausible: Positive messaging around the use of Singlish creates a Singlish-speaking underclass
Younger Singaporeans who have less exposure to standard English have fewer opportunities to develop their higher-order communication skills in English. At the same time, they do not feel social pressure to use grammatical English. They fail to develop the ability to code-switch effectively between standard English and Singlish, which in turn retards their career opportunities and social mobility. The divide evolves from an English-speaker/Mother Tongue-speaker divide into the two following groups: (a) Singaporeans of higher socio-economic status who have historically been capable of code-switching effectively between Singlish and English, and (b) Singaporeans of lower socio-economic status who can only speak Singlish and have a poor grasp of standard English, along with lesser exposure to their MTL (see Driver 1).

[12] The SGEM's 2022 TikTok campaign, "#CanYouCodeSwitch", focused on encouraging the ability to code-switch between Singlish and Standard English.

Possible: Singlish becomes codified but plateaus in popularity
Singlish has the potential to evolve, like all other social constructs and languages in the world. It evolves from a mostly oral language to a more codified language as it is captured digitally and physically, e.g., in works of literature, movies, on internet forum and social media posts. However, the growth in the use of Singlish eventually plateaus and even reverses course among young tech-savvy Singaporeans. This group accepts Singlish as part of the Singaporean identity but are more inclined to use and respond to the newest English language internet slang and neologisms they encounter on social media.

5.3 DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES: INCREASED TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES, AND NEW IMMIGRANTS FROM CHINA AND INDIA

While inter-ethnic and transnational marriages are not a new feature to Singapore society, the proportion of transnational marriages among Singapore citizen marriages has risen over the past 20 years. In recent years, one in three citizen marriages involved a non-Singaporean citizen spouse (Khattar & Baker, 2024). With the caveat that a significant proportion of these marriages may still be between Singaporeans and citizens of countries that speak one of the official MTLs, the rise in transnational marriages would raise the number of Singaporean children whose second language is not an official MTL. Children from such marriages will have to be assigned and study a “mother tongue” that they are not exposed to at home, e.g., a Southeast Asian student whose home language is Vietnamese, Thai or Tagalog might be placed in a Mandarin MTL class, which increases the pedagogical complexity for the Mandarin teacher (Zhang et. Al., 2023, p.246).

At the micro-sociological level, there are distinct differences in language habits and proficiency between local-born Singaporeans and first-generation Singaporeans who speak the same language. This is most salient for Mandarin and the Indian languages. For example, in terms of language habits, local-born Chinese and new Chinese immigrants differ in their use of common words, such as “air-conditioning”, “bus”, “potato” and “market”, etc. (Kuo, 2016). A study also found that Singapore Mandarin words that originated from Chinese dialects (e.g., 人客 “guest”, 三层肉 “pork belly”) and classical Chinese (清道夫 “cleaner”, 车夫 “driver”) are more prone to being replaced by *Putonghua* words (the form of Mandarin spoken in the People’s Republic of China) (Lin & Teo, 2023). There have been efforts to emphasise the uniqueness of Singapore Mandarin. In 2019, the Promote Mandarin Council launched an online Singaporean Mandarin Database to develop a

lexicon for Singapore Mandarin and strengthen an understanding of Singapore's local Chinese culture.

In terms of proficiency, children of new immigrants from mainland China tend to do well in Mandarin in school, which in turn might discourage locals who feel that the competition is unfair. A similar language proficiency gap between local-born and new citizen Singaporeans exists among the Tamil community (Kuo & Chan, 2016).[13]

Driver 3:
Demographic changes in Singapore will result in a more complicated language landscape that exerts pressure on current official MTL categories, education provision, and the way the MTLs themselves are spoken.

What could happen:
Probable: First-generation and second-generation MTL talent on the rise
Separately, first-generation and second-generation Singaporeans who have a home environment which uses one of the official MTLs are proficient speakers of their MTLs. These first and second-generation Singaporeans become the main employee and leadership pipeline for fields that require high MTL proficiency, such as education, journalism and entertainment. Thanks to effective civics and citizenship education in the formal school system, these first- and second-generation Singaporeans are culturally assimilated and sensitive to Singapore's interests, which reduces resentment about their cultural and professional presence.

However, the vast majority of younger Singaporean students whose home environments cannot provide the same MTL support are defeatist about their ability to learn the language well and to excel in it, let alone to take up the aforementioned professions.

Plausible: More support for delinking official MTLs from discourse of emotional affinity
More younger Singaporeans will be from interracial/transnational families, and/or have more friends and peers with such backgrounds. Singaporean offspring of transnational and interracial marriages feel more affinity for the

[13] Previous generations of "new" Chinese immigrants may have taken a position of authenticating themselves as better speakers of Mandarin than local-born citizens and positioning themselves as outsiders from the Singaporean Chinese community (Lee, 2007). However, some of the current generation of middle-class new Chinese immigrants to Singapore may regard themselves and the local Chinese as equal speakers of Mandarin, and believe that language is a communication tool that should not be loaded with external assumptions about nationality and social class (Li, 2024).

English language and their home language(s), which may not coincide with their official MTL in school. Due to this mismatch, they may feel that a significant part of their identity and lived experience are not acknowledged or valued in school or public life. They advocate for greater awareness and public recognition of their home language(s) and their multilingual status, not just for personal validation, but for society as a whole to better appreciate Singapore's growing diversity.

At the same time, due to increased exposure and interaction, there is more nuanced understanding of racial and linguistic diversity, and greater appreciation of "minority" and/or heritage languages in Singapore as part of the language landscape. As the term "MTL" becomes less representative of linguistic reality, younger Singaporeans express support for delinking the official MTLs from the discourse of "emotional affinity"; or at the very least, downplaying the angle of "emotional affinity" in MTL discourse.

Possible: More support to delink MTLs from ethnic categories, to rename MTLs as "Second Languages", and reinforce the recognition of English and Singlish as markers of local identity
As an extension of the "plausible" implication above, more Singaporeans express support for delinking the official MTLs from one's race, and the MTLs are renamed "Second Languages" in the formal education system. There is less opposition towards treating the learning of all languages besides English as foreign language learning, in the school system.

If there is unhappiness with immigration or foreign labour policies, local-born Singaporeans cite an increasingly alien language landscape as part of their pushback against the government's immigration policies. They double down on English and Singlish as a marker of local versus foreigner.

5.4 CHANGING SINGAPOREAN ASPIRATIONS: PRAGMATISM VERSUS CHANGING SINGAPOREAN MOTIVATIONS FOR USING/LEARNING A LANGUAGE

Singaporeans tend to value their material wellbeing and stable economic growth for the nation, but with "an avid eye on incrementally pursuing post-materialist values such as citizen participation and engagement" (Mathews, Teo, et al., 2021, p.183; see also Tambyah et al., 2009a). This attitude extends to parental views on education and language learning. While Singaporean parents view character-building as important, many parents continue to invest in their children's education and place substantial weight on academic performance (Karuppiah & Poon, 2022). Despite the stress that they report feeling when they help their children with preparation for tests

and exams, they are driven by the perception that academic performance and learning are key to future career success (Mathews et al., 2017).

Functionality and economic goals of advancement drive language learning goals. For example, as English is the medium of instruction in the education system, parents view English proficiency as key, even if they appreciate the role of MTLs in connecting their children with their cultural heritage. After younger Singaporeans graduate from the official education system, many of them only use their official MTL (if they are not able to use English in its place) for very functional purposes (e.g.,when buying food, shopping, for work, or to connect with MTL speakers in their family).

However, a theme that constantly emerged from the Forward Singapore national public consultation exercise which engaged over 200,000 Singaporeans and stakeholders was about living the "good life" in Singapore. The "Singapore Dream" has expanded beyond material success to meaning, fulfilment, and purpose, especially among youths (Forward Singapore Workgroup, 2023). Part of this desire for a life of meaning and purpose has manifested itself in interest in tracing one's roots and learning about Singapore's history, connecting with family members and older speakers in one's language community, and learning heritage languages. Such efforts can include organising and taking classes outside of the formal education system, joining student interest groups, and producing and consuming content on the Internet (e.g., videos, blog posts) (Bokhorst-Heng & Silver, 2017; Chin, 2022; Goh, 2024; Hoo, 2024; Kassim, 2015/2024, Ng, 2017). This "uptick in interest and uptake of interest in heritage languages… qualitatively observed in the past few years… [does come] on the back of a sustained decline of heritage language use soon after independence" (Mathews et al, 2020). That said, the increase in interest might not lead to significant increases in the number of people learning heritage languages, especially if their learners do not have social connections to sustain their use, or easily-accessible pop culture as a learning resource.

Another manifestation of this desire for more meaningful lives is in the increased number of Singaporeans learning languages for pleasure and personal fulfilment (e.g., to consume/watch/experience pop culture and/or high culture, or for social interaction), even if those languages are not one's official MTL or heritage language, and have no bearing on one's career development.

Driver 4:
Personal fulfilment joins pragmatism as a driver of language-learning behaviour.

What could happen:
Probable: A greater balance between pragmatism and heritage/identity/community connection as reasons for language learning.

Singaporeans continue to cite academic achievement and eventual career advantage and achievements as the most important or foremost reason for learning any language. For some, this may be English, and for others, it may be Mandarin or another MTL. In order to get an edge in their career, more Singaporeans are interested in continuing formal learning of their MTL or other languages closely relevant to their current or target company/sector and using their SkillsFuture funding for such classes.

At the same time, more Singaporeans are interested in exploring their official MTL and/or heritage language on a self-directed basis after they graduate from the formal education system, even if doing so does not give them a career advantage. Their exploration takes the form of sampling music and media in these languages, taking conversational or refresher classes, and seeking out opportunities to converse with other speakers in the community, e.g., self-study/language interest groups online and offline. Their focus is on deepening their knowledge of their identity and connecting with others who speak the same language(s).

Plausible: Exploring one's national identity (as contrasted with ethnic/linguistic community identity) and personal fulfilment/enjoyment become more important or popular as reasons for language learning.
There is more ground-up interest in learning Malay among non-Malay speakers, due to its status as the national language. Kuo and Chan (2016) have also suggested that MOE's revamped history curriculum for secondary school students (introduced in 2014), which situates Singapore's history in the region "…in relation to the Srivijaya empire based in Sumatra, as well as the Malay kingdoms surrounding ancient Singapore", may generate more interest in Malay history and culture (Kuo & Chan, 2016, p.89). However, there is a clear difference of opinion between Malay teachers who think that non-Malays should focus on learning bazaar Malay for ease of communication, and those who think that the focus for non-Malay speakers should be on mastering the "proper" form of Bahasa Baku from the start.

There is also greater knowledge of and support for public representation of languages/dialects viewed as being representative of Singapore's history and diversity, not just the official MTLs, but also Singlish, NTILs and other Indian languages, Chinese dialects, Javanese, Boyanese, etc. Part of the increased support is from Singaporeans who do not come from these linguistic communities, e.g., a Mandarin-speaker who does not speak

Kristang signing up for a basic course to learn more about a Singaporean heritage language that is not his/hers.

At the same time, more people learn languages for personal fulfilment/enjoyment, including languages that are not considered heritage languages in Singapore, e.g., European languages.

Possible: More Singaporeans question the need to conceptualise Singaporeans as being "bilingual", and there is greater interest in the concept of what it means to be a multilingual Singaporean.
Looking to the past when Singaporeans could speak more languages, albeit to a lower level of proficiency, some Singaporeans suggest or argue for a return to Singapore's original multilingual identity and its multiple peaks of lower linguistic proficiency (in which people were more open to learning to speak multiple languages, with less regard for maximising their proficiency), instead of the current policy objective of achieving one to two peaks of bilingual proficiency (to the best of the students' ability). It is not the languages we know, but our ability and willingness to try learning new languages that becomes a more salient part of the professional and national Singaporean identity.

Individuals who fit less neatly into current ethno-linguistic "CMIO" and "official MTL" categories promote the languages that they feel better reflect their lived experience and which they feel more emotionally connected to. This increases the diversity of local cultural life and artistic expression.

5.5 TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS

Due to the reach of the Internet and the spread of social media platforms, private messaging apps and livestreaming platforms, languages are no longer confined to their physical or even their diasporic communities. For the same reason, people in most parts of the world, including Singapore, now have access to tools and platforms to share their perspectives and access the perspectives of others. Human augmentation technologies have also been redefined to extend one's experiences and reality across both the physical and virtual world, such as augmented and virtual reality (AR and VR), which are moving from niche to commercial (Centre for Strategic Futures, 2022).

High-speed internet and constantly-upgraded hardware have increased the ease of creating and accessing audio-visual content, thereby increasing the pool of resources for language learners. At the same time, with easy access to the Internet and international streaming services like Netflix, Singaporeans are more exposed to different accents, e.g., American and

British English accents, and some younger Singaporeans pick up features of speech, including accent(s) in a random fashion (Tan, 2018).

Driver 5:
Technological advancements make language learning easier, but also less necessary. At the same time, these technological advancements also allow for the increasing influence of accents and language features of language communities that are the most dominant on media programmes and platforms (e.g., "American" English, mainland Chinese Mandarin), due to the sheer size of their population and their ability to invest in creating attractive cultural and media products for consumption.

What could happen:
Probable: Some younger and middle-aged Singaporeans are negatively affected by over-reliance on AI to generate their writing in English.
For Singaporeans with less exposure to higher order communication, AI is not an enabler for language-learning, especially in English. Instead, these Singaporeans fail to develop the ability to tell if the language generated by AI is unnatural or unsuitable, and they are unable to appreciate the subtlety of variations in human language. By relying on AI to generate their writing, they fail to engage in the practice of language learning, e.g., writing and editing, they lose out on the benefits of developing their communication skills. Compared to Singaporeans 10 or 20 years before, the general population is less proficient in English and are less polished communicators.

Plausible: Technological advances enable the stress associated with learning languages to decrease.
The number of AI conversation partners and tutors has increased as the technology improves. Language learners have a wealth of natural language input outside the classroom, and receive instant feedback on their language output, which increases motivation and proficiency. Language learning becomes significantly easier, and the stress associated with language learning in Singapore falls. Everyone with a smartphone has a personalised AI tutor in their phone. The AI tutor can instantly calibrate the difficulty of a text or language practice exercise for a user's unique needs, provide instant feedback, and is able to create a persona that appeals to the user. To ensure that poorer students do not fall behind if they cannot afford AI tutoring, there are subsidies/grants/bursaries available from the community (e.g., ethnic self-help groups) for AI conversation partners and AI language tutors.

Possible: Technology hampers language learning motivation and practice, which in turn affects the local arts scene
Advancements in text-to-speech technology and automatic translation reduce Singaporeans' motivation to learn and practice language, and to

appreciate the nuances in different languages. Not only does the facility in general English and MTL atrophy, the motivation to learn and use a second language also falls. This leads to a shrinking pool of Singaporeans who have the curiosity, patience, appreciation and willingness to support Singaporean literature.

5.6 Geopolitical dynamics

The political and economic status of the US and China, as well as the relationship between them, will continue to shape the geopolitical environment in which Singapore has to operate.

US, China, India and countries in Southeast Asia invest in their economic and human capital development, while navigating structural trends and evolving political demands. Their companies, driven by market demand, continue to invest in the quality of their domestic cultural and media products, as well as to export them abroad, e.g., dramas, movies, variety and reality programmes, music, and games.

Driver 6:
Geopolitical dynamics influence how Singaporeans view the desirability of learning languages.

What could happen:
Probable: Need to engage the region creates a substantial/significant new bicultural elite class
Due to the gravity of China's economic and political presence in the global system, and especially in Southeast Asia, the economic premium of being English-Chinese bilingual and bicultural professional talent continues to increase. At the same time, a similar pull from Malaysia and Indonesia is felt in the Malay-speaking community. A local bilingual, bicultural elite class grows, and rivals or eclipses that of the monolingual English-speaking elite in Singapore.

Plausible: Some Western countries implement more restrictive immigration policies, and Singapore attracts more highly-skilled bilingual or multilingual professional talent.
Driven by a rise in xenophobic sentiments and/or the influence of extremist right-wing political parties, some Western countries implement more restrictive immigration policies. Singapore attracts more highly-skilled bilingual or multilingual professional talent from Asia who might previously have wanted to work and live in the West. This group of expatriates and/or new citizens has the English proficiency to work and live in the West, but rethinks the move for reasons of personal safety. While some Singaporeans

point again to English as the most common working language, the increased presence of bilingual/multilingual cosmopolitan talent normalises being effectively bilingual or multilingual, and makes it attractive among young Singaporeans to be effectively bilingual/multilingual.

Possible: Outnumbered and outclassed

Singaporeans working in overseas markets and multinational companies feel the heat of competition from the growing bilingual or multilingual middle-class professional, managerial, executive, and technical (PMET) talent in China, India and Indonesia, etc., who are proficient in English as well as the local language(s). Some Singaporeans point to the increased competition as a reason for doubling down on using English instead of working harder on their MTL/a second language, since it is the common working language.

Chapter 6

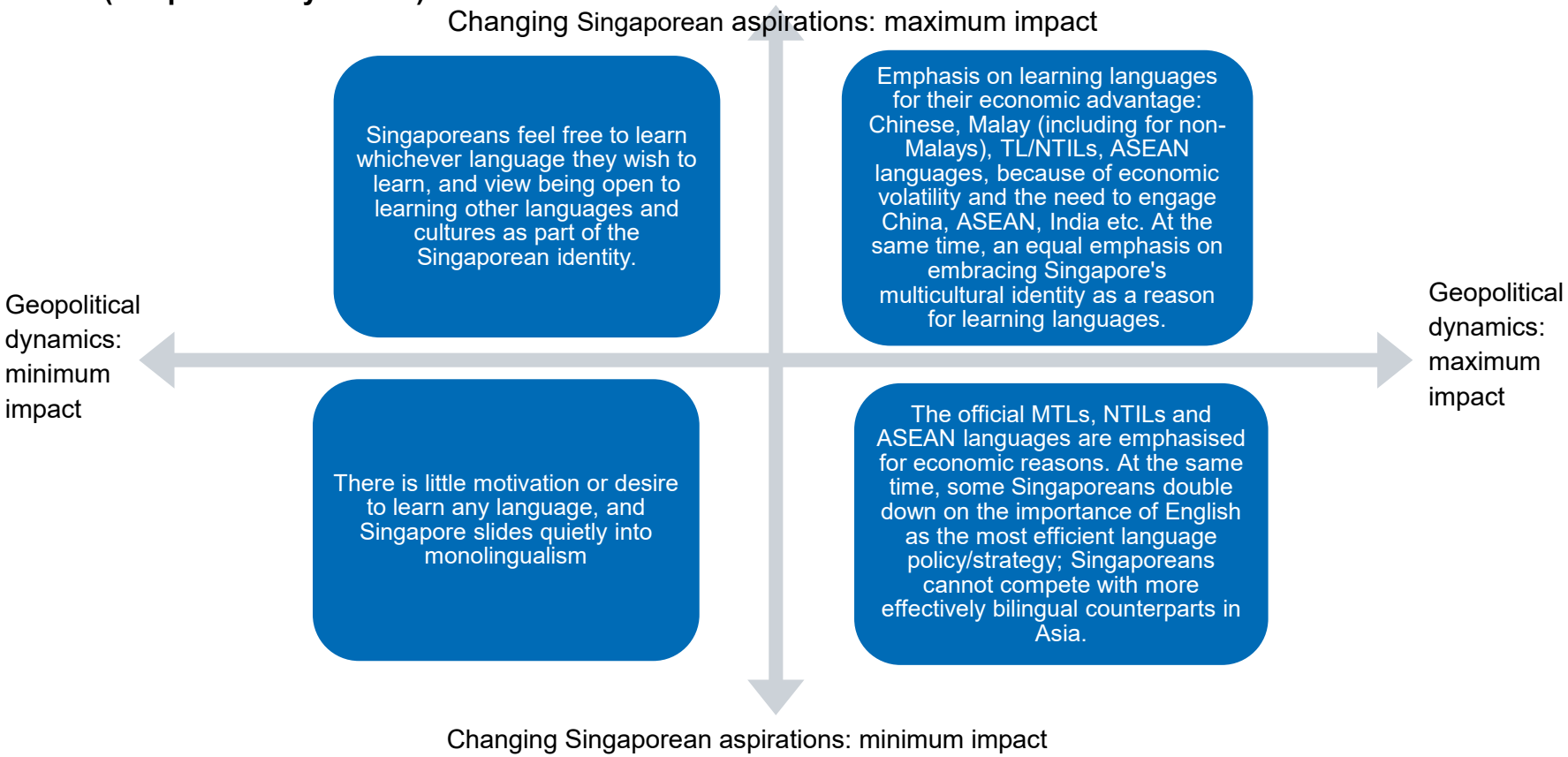
An Example of How to Use the Drivers

CHAPTER 6: AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO USE THE DRIVERS

As one example of how to use the drivers in thinking about the future, Figure 1 illustrates the use of a 2x2 matrix for scenario building to create some plausible alternative stories about the future of language use and policy in Singapore.

The 2x2 matrix is a scenario-building methodology to draft four different scenarios based on two key drivers or uncertainties (UN Global Pulse, 2023a). The matrix is populated by identifying the most uncertain and impactful drivers and thinking of two opposite outcomes for each of the drivers. In this example, the most uncertain and impactful drivers identified at the workshop, namely geopolitical dynamics and the changing values/aspirations of Singaporeans have been applied (see Chapter 3.2.3). These scenarios *are not predictions or projections*, but are stories meant to concretise the drivers and their implications, and to spark conversation about the assumptions, biases, and blind spots that we may have of language use and policy in Singapore.

Figure 1: 2x2 Scenario Matrix Based on Driver 4 (Changing Singaporean Aspirations) and Driver 6 (Geopolitical Dynamics).



Chapter 7

Concluding Reflections

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Based on the discussions and consultations, these were a few broad ideas that would benefit from further exploration.

First, further discussion and research needs to take place regarding the assumption that Singaporeans' English proficiency remains adequate throughout one's career and life. Currently, the government's public messaging assumes that the bilingual formal education system in its current form provides a strong foundation for a "high level of English" (NEXUS, 2025) [14]. This assumption was also expressed by many, though not all, of the roundtable participants for this project, either directly or indirectly. While this may hold true for young Singaporean students, a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) showed substantial age-related skill loss in literacy in English among adults, with decline in literacy skills recorded even among the cohort of adults aged 27-34 during the survey (OECD, 2024).

A drop in adult literacy would impact the ability of working Singaporeans to acquire new and more complex knowledge and skills, as well as to communicate clearly and professionally in the workplace. Thus, a drop in Singapore's adult literacy in English has implications for the economic competitiveness of Singapore's workforce and economy (Ho, 2024). Besides employability, a decline in adult literacy impacts an individual's ability to make informed decisions about their healthcare and financial matters, as well as to grow as empathetic individuals, and to engage with civic matters and with the world as informed citizens (Sng, 2025).

MOE has suggested several possible factors behind this trend, including skills atrophy as adults use or practise acquired skills less frequently after their formal education years, the obsolescence effect where certain skills become less relevant due to market and technological changes, and the impact of technology on how people consume and process information (MOE, 2025). In light of these factors, MOE has emphasised the need for

[14] SG101 publishes content developed by NEXUS that brings out National Education lessons on Total Defence, National Service, racial harmony and other issues deemed to be of national importance. NEXUS was previously known as the Central National Education Office in the Defence Policy Group of MINDEF.

Singaporeans to continuously upskill and reskill throughout life, for individuals to take ownership of their learning journeys, and for employers to invest in their employees (MOE, 2025). Given the observations from the OECD study, and assuming that access to education has increased over generations, it would be useful to not only emphasise reskilling, but riding on that, reinforcement of earlier efforts to improve literacy in English, as well as an emphasis on maintaining literacy in English as a gateway to new skills and technology.

Second, there is scope to excavate internal narratives that Singaporeans hold about the languages that they use—or choose not to use—throughout their lives, to better understand the emotional and intuitive dimensions of language use and learning in Singapore. Tools such as the Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) sensemaking approach to creating new futures may be very useful in doing so. (CLA takes participants beneath four layers of analysis, beneath the surface understanding of an issue to its causes, the different perspectives shaping it, and the stories or internal narratives underlying such perspectives (UN Global Pulse, 2023b)).

A better understanding of Singaporeans' internal narratives about language use and learning would help to inform language promotion efforts, whether in English literacy or standard English, the official MTLs, dialects and heritage languages, etc. The foundation for encouraging self-directed interest-led learning has been laid in MOE's structural reforms to nurture the joy of learning in students. This is through, for example, the implementation of Full Subject-Based Banding (SBB) to secondary schools, increasing flexibility and access for students who have the interest and aptitude to study a third language through the Modular Third Language Programme, and providing support with SkillsFuture Singapore for mid-career workers. The narrative of encouraging and nurturing "joy of learning for a lifetime" is also a clear part of MOE's public messaging (MOE, 2023c). There are promising signs such as more Generation Z youths tapping on technology to learn and teach themselves foreign languages and dialects, and to share their experiences online (Chin & Loke, 2023). However, older generations of Singaporeans may not have been as affected by such policy and messaging initiatives, and may hold different attitudes towards self-directed language use and learning. Understanding their perspectives and internal narratives is therefore a next step that could lead to more directed policies, initiatives, and/or promotion efforts. The objective is to increase the sense of agency and enjoyment in language use and learning, and by extension, greater use and better use of languages, for instrumental purposes but affective and emotional purposes also.

Third, as a provocation, it may be time to reimagine or update one of the metaphors is often applied to the use of language in Singapore to foster social inclusivity. This point expands upon an idea mentioned during a roundtable, the summary of which is reproduced below:

> "Protecting the multicultural nature of Singaporean society requires protecting the continued use of our MTLs. Yet, ironically, Singaporeans default to English in order to protect our multicultural society, as it is seen as the one common language. This occurs at the expense of our MTLs and heritage languages, because it reduces the space for them to be spoken and heard. Perhaps this practice can be reframed this way: instead of trying to insist that as many people as possible communicate in English, how about providing more space for the languages that still exist, with their speakers speaking them if they are more comfortable doing so, with translation into English? This would allow those languages to be used without alienating non-speakers of those languages." (Meta-theme 4: Language, diversity, plurality and identity in Singapore)

Language is spoken of as a bridge that connects people in our multiracial society and the world; the MTLs connects them to their heritage.

What of those who are unable to cross the metaphorical bridge? Would they be left out of conversations at different levels, from the personal to the national? It is imperative to reinforce the notion that Singaporeans themselves are the bridges and not the languages. It is the ability *and* willingness to be that bridge for others when needed, *and* patience for a longer but more inclusive conversation that matters. Singaporeans must themselves facilitate understanding and connection the diversity in society. This would provide context for the inclusion of new citizens, new tongues, new cultures that add to the multiracial, multicultural Singaporean identity.

In conclusion, the issues and possibilities raised in this paper here underscore the importance of taking an inclusive and holistic approach to language policy and practice in Singapore, anticipating trends and considering strategies for the future. The languages that we speak, hear, read, and write shape our thinking. It is imperative that our public and policy discourse around language (our language about language) continue to evolve to keep pace with Singapore's evolving linguistic landscape.

Annex 1

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ANNEX 1: REFERENCES

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Annex 2

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Annex 3

About the Author

ANNEX 3: ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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