

Study: One in five ethnic minorities surveyed in Singapore reported greater language prejudice now than five years ago

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SINGAPORE, June 16 — More than 20 per cent of ethnic minorities in Singapore believe that there is more language prejudice here today compared with five years ago, a study here has found.

Language prejudice happens when people have negative attitudes towards, or implicit biases against, people who use a particular language, Mathew Mathews, one of the study's authors, said in response to TODAY's queries.

Overall, about 30 per cent of the respondents across all ethnicities felt that there has been "less" or "much less" prejudice based on language today than five years ago, while close to half of the respondents said that language prejudice has remained the same over the last five years.

These findings came from two surveys, conducted in 2013 and 2018 by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), which polled 8,146 participants over the age of 18. They aimed to study Singapore's linguistic landscape and provide empirical data on key language trends here.

The 2018 study took place between August 2018 and January 2019.

The demographics of the survey respondents were weighted to closely mirror that of Singapore's population.

Based on the 2018 survey, more than 20 per cent of Malay and Indian respondents said that they felt there was "more" or "much more" prejudice on the basis of language, compared with 2013.

But overall, the majority of the respondents indicated that language discrimination in public spaces had lessened or remain unchanged over the years.

The researchers, Mathew Mathews, Melvin Tay, Shanthini Selvarajan and Tan Zhi Han, said that this contrast in responses could be due to the fact that Chinese individuals may be less sensitive to potential language discrimination since they are the majority.

They added that the findings warrant greater attention and further study in the future.

Perceptions of linguistic discrimination

Among other things, the 2013 survey asked respondents about their personal encounters with language discrimination and whether they have received preferential treatment based on the language spoken.

Most of them said that they rarely or never experienced discrimination in their everyday life based on the language they spoke. This included settings such as using public transport, shopping, engaging in leisurely activities or when applying for a job.

Only a small minority, 5 per cent, of those surveyed reflected otherwise.

For the respondents who do not usually speak English, about 70 per cent of them said that they were treated the same as English speakers when using public services, such as those in healthcare, education, social, legal and enforcement settings.

About 20 per cent of them said that they were treated worse than English speakers when using public services.

“This could likely stem from the designation of English as the official working language and (it could) potentially impact the dispensing of public services if citizens spoke in a language other than English,” the researchers said.

They cited examples such as form filling, official communication channels or conversations with frontline civil servants.

Use of Singlish

Separately, the study found that about half the respondents reported to have a strong proficiency in Singlish.

In particular, the younger respondents, those between the ages of 18 and 35, were more likely to report a proficiency in speaking Singlish compared with the older cohorts.

Of those who reported strong proficiencies in speaking Singlish, more than 90 per cent of them also said that they have a strong proficiency in speaking standard English.

This, the authors said, suggests that respondents have the ability to “code switch”, which refers to the alternate use of two or more languages in a conversation. This also suggests that respondents believe their use of Singlish does not affect their spoken English proficiency.

Supporting this were the survey participants’ responses that they were aware of the contexts where it would be appropriate to use Singlish.

A majority of them agreed that Singlish is best used in private settings, such as when speaking to family members, friends or classmates, but that it is not appropriate when used in educational settings and official state communications.

However, the responses were mixed as to whether it is appropriate for frontline staff members working in government departments to use Singlish in this context. Close to half of those surveyed believed that it is rarely or never appropriate for them to do so.