Intra-Language Discrimination and Linguistic Human Rights: The Case of Singlish

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Although studies involving linguistic human rights (LHRs) have focused at length on cases of inter-language discrimination, much less attention has been given to intra-language discrimination (Blommaert 2001a; Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2001). This paper highlights a number of theoretical issues that the LHRs framework needs to deal with once intra-language discrimination is seriously considered. It does this by analysing the case of English in Singapore, and in particular, debates surrounding the colloquial variety of Singapore English (known as Singlish). Supporters of Singlish are concerned with negotiating a space for the variety, especially in response to the Singapore government’s Speak Good English Movement, which seems intent on eliminating Singlish. The implications of the Singlish case raise some very fundamental questions about LHRs, such as whether LHRs can be coherently attributed to groups (rather than just individuals), and whether LHRs can, in fact, be waived. The latter part of the paper considers these questions by drawing upon the work of scholars who have approached the issue of human rights from a more philosophical perspective (Donnelly 1989; Nickel 1987).

INTRODUCTION

While the notion of linguistic human rights (LHRs) has been discussed in a large body of works (e.g. Baugh 2000; Hamel 1997; Phillipson 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1994; de Varennes 1996), it seems fair to say that the primary articulators of the theoretical foundations of LHRs are Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, and their associates (Phillipson, Rannut, and Skutnabb-Kangas 1994; Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). As such, it is not surprising that critiques of LHRs (Blommaert 2001a; May 2001: 8; Pennycook 1998; Silverstein 1998; Stroud 2001, 2002) have been directed primarily at the writings of Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas.

The following statement (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995: 483, italics in original) usefully summarizes the key ideas behind LHRs:

Our starting-point is that it is axiomatic that:
• linguistic rights are one type of human right and as such one intricately interlocking element in a set of inalienable, universal
norms for just enjoyment of one’s civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights;
- depriving people of their human rights leads to conflict. If the rights of minorities are respected, there is less likelihood of conflict. Linguistic diversity is not causally related to conflict, though of course language is a major mobilizing factor in contexts where an ethnic group feels itself threatened.

The authors then end their paper by declaring what they think LHRs should hope to achieve (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995: 500):

What such a declaration (and later a convention) should guarantee, in our view, is that:

A. everybody can:
- identify with their mother tongue(s) and have this identification accepted and respected by others;
- learn the mother tongue(s) fully, orally (when physiologically possible) and in writing (which presupposes that minorities are educated through the medium of their mother tongue(s));
- everybody whose mother tongue is not an official language in the country where s/he is resident, can become bilingual (or trilingual, if s/he has 2 mother tongues) in the mother tongue(s) and (one of) the official language(s) (according to his or her own choice);
- any change of mother tongue is voluntary, not imposed.

The notion of LHRs, then, revolves around the relationship between particular minority groups and their associated mother tongues; it attempts to ensure that the relevant mother tongues are accorded the appropriate status (‘accepted and respected’) and that members of these minority groups can use them in a number of domains considered crucial for participation in society (‘medium of education’ and ‘official language’).

LANGUAGE COMMUNITY AND SPEECH COMMUNITY

This view of LHRs presupposes the existence of a ‘language community’ since it assumes that the promotion of the mother tongue is the best way to ensure the protection of speakers’ socio-economic interests. But if we are interested in the socio-economic conditions of speakers, it is the ‘speech community’ that we should be concerned with instead.1 The confusion between language and speech communities was already noted in an early paper by Hymes (1968) who criticizes, among other things, the assumptions that the world could be divided into ‘one language = one culture’ ethnolinguistic units, and that the boundaries of such units were co-terminal with the boundaries of mutual intelligibility and communication (Hymes 1968: 38). In fact, this point reappears in Hymes (1974: 49–50) as Sprechbund ‘speech area’ and Sprachbund ‘language area’, and speech field
and language field. Hymes also considers the distinction sufficiently important to bear stressing:

I must stress this point. An enumeration and classification of languages will not suffice as an index of communicative boundaries, quite apart from any question of correlation with ethnic units, recent shifts of language or ethnicity, and the like. Even if one could demarcate all languages objectively, one to a group, there is no univocal relation between the linguistic facts and the facts of communication. (Hymes 1968: 33)

Silverstein (1998) also takes up this distinction between language and speech communities. While accepting that a ‘denotational code’ does ‘seem to play a role, however implicit, in the local cultural definition of normatively conforming vs normatively nonconforming use of language’ (1998: 406), he points out that the ‘people encompassed under this measure of normativity are members of what we have been terming a “language community”…’ (1998: 407). Silverstein then reminds us that:

This contrasts with a ‘speech community’, a much more general term. This term indicates that there are perduring, presupposable regularities of discursive interaction in a group or population. When we can recognize an implicit normativity to such indexical semiosis as informs and underlies communicative acts of identity and groupness, we have a speech community. Denotational function—and the degree of successful denotational communication—is not here to the point. Speech communities, even more than language communities, are highly variable in manner and degree of stability and extent over populations, times, institutional formations, places, and other determinants. (Silverstein 1998: 407)

Crucially, Silverstein (1998: 407) notes that ‘speech communities are frequently plurilingual, that is, they encompass speakers who belong to more than one language community’, thus echoing Hymes’ criticism of the assumption that ‘one language = one culture’.

Confusing language and speech communities consequently leads to the belief that ‘native speakers will maintain or preserve their cultures if they continue speaking their language’ but this ignores ‘the fact that in the first place they would not stop speaking it if they valued its association with their ancestral culture over their necessary adaptation to the current world order—a simple matter of prioritising things in their struggle for survival’ (Mufwene 2002a: 23). Elsewhere, Mufwene reiterates this point bluntly:

Language endangerment is a more wicked problem than has been acknowledged in the literature. It sometimes boils down to a choice between saving speakers from their economic predicament and saving a language. Seldom can both goals be congruent unless the ecologies are made more advantageous to the relevant populations. (Mufwene 2002b: 376–7)
This confusion between language and speech communities underlies many of the more specific remarks that have been directed at LHRs, and it is to these that we next turn.

SOME RECENT CRITIQUES OF LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHTS

In line with his attempt to distinguish language and speech communities, Silverstein (1998: 414–15; see also Blommaert 2001a) criticizes LHRs proponents for ‘taking units such as languages, dialects, and similar constructs as givens’, so that language becomes ‘a timeless, essential quality of community membership, notwithstanding changes of practical discursive knowledge and practice of it over time’. In particular, while Skutnabb-Kangas (1981: 12) has acknowledged the different ways that individuals can identify their mother tongue, the focus of LHRs has been on how the mother tongue, once identified, can be given its appropriate place in society in relation to other mother tongues. Consequently, LHRs advocates have also been criticized for being more concerned with ‘inter-language’ rather than ‘intra-language discrimination’. Blommaert puts it thus (see also Pennycook 1998: 80):

Strangely enough, diversity and hence inequality is reduced to inter-language diversity and inequality. Diversity and inequality within particular units conventionally called ‘language’ is not treated (there is cursory mention of it, but it remains undeveloped). What is at stake is the difference between, e.g. ‘French’ and ‘Berber’, ‘English’ and ‘Swahili’, ‘Dutch’ and ‘French’: things that have a name. (Blommaert 2001a: 135)

In a wide-ranging critique of LHRs, Stroud (2001: 346–7) argues that by singling out specific ‘minority’ languages for special treatment, LHRs are ‘potentially discriminatory and socially divisive’ as claims to limited resources are being argued for along ethnolinguistic lines. Instead, Stroud (2001: 353, italics in original) suggests that it is more useful to appreciate ‘the situation where speakers themselves exercise control over their language, deciding what languages are, and what they may mean’. This point is reinforced in Stroud (2002), which emphasizes the need for careful ethnographic and historiographic work to better appreciate ‘the specific ways in which power and language are interrelated in historically and culturally distinct speech communities’ (2002: 250).

Related to Stroud’s call for deeper ethnographic work is May’s criticism that the internal complexity and heterogeneity of minority groups is not fully appreciated by advocates of LHRs:

The principal problem here is that advocates of linguistic human rights tend to assume the identity of linguistic minority groups as given, the collective aims of linguistic minority groups as uniform, and the notion of collective rights as unproblematic…. And yet this simply cannot be assumed, not least because of the processes
of language shift and loss... which may already have led many group members to abandon the minority language in question and/or any identification they may have had with it.... This common disjuncture between ‘individual’ and ‘collective’ aims immediately problematises the legitimacy of any claim to a group-based minority-language right, whatever its social and political merits. (May 2001: 8, italics in original)

In response particularly to Blommaert’s charge that insufficient attention has been paid to ‘diversity and inequality within “language”’, Kontra (in Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2001: 143) suggests that:

The interactions of inter-language discrimination and intra-language discrimination may be very diverse, and hence concentration on the former only does not tell the whole story. But then nor does JB [Jan Blommaert: LW] tell the whole story either. Nobody can do this today because these interactions have barely been researched. Simply put, the task is to complement the inter-language discrimination studies with intra-language studies.2

My goal in this paper, therefore, is to draw attention to the theoretical issues that intra-language discrimination poses for LHRs. To do this, I analyse the debates surrounding the colloquial variety of English in Singapore (known as Singlish). Singlish speakers are keen to negotiate a space for Singlish, especially in response to the state’s Speak Good English Movement (SGEM), which seems intent on eliminating Singlish. This case study is useful since it concretizes the actual problems faced by speakers experiencing intra-language discrimination, and helps illustrate in detail the theoretical issues that intra-language discrimination raises. Also, because it deals with a ‘nativized’ variety of English (Kachru 1986), it is relevant to ‘liberation linguistics’ (Kachru 1991), which is concerned with ‘contexts of social injustice’ faced by ‘nonnative speakers’ of English (Bhatt 2001: 528). The issues in this paper can help proponents of ‘liberation linguistics’ to better decide if they should appeal to the notion of LHRs as they focus on how speakers of different Englishes struggle for legitimacy.

The next section points out the major differences between intra-language and inter-language discrimination, using the notion of standardization as a point of departure. This is followed by a brief historical overview of language policy in Singapore, and a detailed analysis, in the fourth section, of the case of Singlish and its implications for LHRs. Some of these implications raise very fundamental questions about LHRs, even about ideas which Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson take as ‘axiomatic’. These include ‘Can one actually coherently attribute LHRs to groups?’ and ‘If LHRs are inalienable, can they in fact be waived?’ These questions require a discussion of the properties of human rights in general and the fifth section then draws upon a number of more philosophically oriented works (Donnelly 1989; Nickel 1987).
The best way to start ‘discriminating’ between intra- and inter-language discrimination is through understanding the ideology of a standard language (cf. Lippi-Green 1997: 64). Standardization is an ongoing process whose desired goal is the promotion of invariance or uniformity in language structure (Milroy 2001: 531). While the standard variety is often the prestige variety, prestige is essentially an attribute of speakers while uniformity is a property of the language system, and it is via metonymic association that the variety spoken by prestigious individuals becomes seen as the standard (Lippi-Green 1997: 56; Milroy 2001: 532). Once a particular variety is treated as the standard, other varieties, by implication, are non-standard and consequently, less prestigious. ‘In this conceptualization, the dialects become, as it were, satellites that have orbits at various distances around a central body—the standard’ (Milroy 2001: 534).

A number of consequences follow from this. First, there is the belief in ‘correctness’ or ‘canonical form’ so that ‘when there are two or more variants of some word or construction, only one of them can be right’ (Milroy 2001: 535). Second, this correctness is treated as commonsensical; speakers believe that some forms are clearly right and others are obviously wrong, and no justification is needed for such evaluations (Lippi-Green 1997: 61; Milroy 2001: 535). Third, this further implies that the variety that speakers acquire ‘naturalistically’ in, say, the home environment, cannot have any bearing on what the canonical forms ought to be:

What they acquire in an informal way before school age is not reliable and not yet fully correct. In this general context ‘native speaker intuition’ means nothing, and grammatical sequences are not products of the native speaker’s mind. They are defined externally—in grammar books, and school is the place where the real language learning takes place. It is common sense that children must be taught the canonical forms of their own native language, mainly at school. (Milroy 2001: 537, emphasis in original)

Finally, the use of incorrect/non-canonical forms does not merely index social distinctions such as prestige; it may also be treated as a moral issue:

Ignorance or defiance of grammatical rules is equated with anti-social or criminal behavior. Grammar needs to be taught . . . less to inculcate the norms of polite usage than to encourage respect for persons and property, to keep people clean and law-abiding, to build their ‘character’ and discourage indiscipline or ‘sloppiness’. (Cameron 1995: 94)

The ideology of a standard, with all its attendant consequences, holds intra-linguistically rather than inter-linguistically, and we can now summarize...
the main differences between intra-language and inter-language discrimination.

Particular languages are often linked to specific ethnicities so that inter-language discrimination can lead to ethnic conflicts. In contrast, intra-language discrimination is less often linked to distinct ethnic identities, and so is more likely to lead to social rather than ethnic, conflicts, where speakers of the non-standard variety are judged to be less sophisticated or less respectable than their standard-speaking counterparts.

Disputes over the issue of authenticity (i.e. which variety best represents a particular ethnic or national identity) tend to involve intra-language rather than inter-language disputes (e.g. Hornberger and King 1998). This is because particular languages typically already have a historical association with specific ethnic/national identities. So, when authenticity is contested, it tends to involve competing varieties of what is considered the ‘same’ language rather than different languages.

The notion of a correct form associated with an institutional setting (such as the school) and the devaluing of a non-standard variety (such as the variety acquired at home) means that speakers often themselves collude in their own intra-language discrimination. Consequently, those speakers who do decide to champion the non-standard variety face resistance even from their fellow speakers. Thus, compared to inter-language discrimination, opposition to intra-language discrimination is more likely to be contested within the group itself.

Because non-standard varieties are generally devalued, attempts to extend the use of non-standard varieties into status domains (e.g. to use as the medium of education or for official broadcasts) are unlikely. Unlike inter-language discrimination, where the use of a different language is felt to impede communication and significantly disadvantage non-speakers, problems of intelligibility in cases of intra-language discrimination are often attributed to the lack of proficiency in the standard. The proposed remedy, then, is better instruction in the standard, rather than the extension of a non-standard variety into status domains.

Because the notion of a mother tongue involves inter-language rather than intra-language distinctions, a discourse of LHRs that revolves around mother tongues may raise awareness of inter-language discrimination, but it is unlikely to be as effective when it comes to intra-language discrimination. Speakers’ own belief that the standard variety is the correct variety means that the standard is also the one considered worth protecting. Non-standard varieties are not merely marginalized, they are rendered invisible by the question of why anyone would even want to champion the use of what is ‘obviously’ an ‘incorrect’ use of the language.

Although not all of these issues will be exemplified in our case study, they provide a useful backdrop to our discussion of Singlish. We begin with a brief historical overview of English in Singapore.
LANGUAGE POLICY IN SINGAPORE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Singapore is a linguistically and ethnically diverse country with a population of about 3.2 million. Its ethnic composition is as follows (2000 Census of Population): 76.8 per cent Chinese, 13.9 per cent Malay, 7.9 per cent Indian. The remaining 1.4 per cent is officially categorized as ‘Others’, a miscellaneous category which comprises mainly Eurasians and Europeans. Singapore reluctantly gained its independence in 1965 after being ejected from the Federation of Malaysia, due to political differences with the central government. Because Singapore has no natural resources of its own, its leaders were convinced that economic survival was possible only as part of the Federation, and had worked hard to bring that about. Singapore’s subsequent departure from the Federation meant that its leaders were faced, quite suddenly, with the task of building a nation out of an ethnically diverse population, and with developing the nation’s economy.

Where language policy is concerned, this emphasis on economic development in the context of ethnic diversity has led to four official languages being recognized: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. English language proficiency is seen to be necessary for attracting foreign investment and for providing access to scientific and technological know-how. But the government is also concerned that exposure to English can lead Singaporeans to become increasingly ‘Westernized’ or ‘decadent’. Thus, it has instituted a policy of ‘English-knowing bilingualism’ (Pakir 1992), where in addition to English, Singaporeans are also expected to be proficient in their mother tongues—which are expected to provide them with links to their traditional cultures and values. There are three major ethnic groups recognized in Singapore, each group with its own official mother tongue: Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays and Tamil for the Indians. There is no official mother tongue for the miscellaneous ‘Others’ category.6

Singapore’s language policy thus involves a division of labour between English and the mother tongues, the former associated with scientific and technological knowledge and Western values, the latter with traditional ‘Asian’ values. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first Prime Minister and currently Senior Minister, makes this clear (The Mirror 20 November 1972):

(1) When I speak of bilingualism, I do not mean just the facility of speaking two languages. It is more basic than that, first we understand ourselves… then the facility of the English language gives us access to the science and technology of the West. It also provides a convenient common ground on which… everybody competes in a neutral medium.

With the language [mother tongue: LW] go the fables and proverbs. It is the learning of a whole value system, a whole philosophy of life, that can maintain the fabric of our society intact, in spite of exposure to all the current madnesses around the world.
A full discussion of the problems raised by this language policy would take us too far afield, but these have been dealt with in a number of works. For example, Gopinathan et al. (1998) provide an overview of major concerns in the field of education, while PuruShotam (1998) discusses the sociolinguistic complexities masked by the category ‘Indian’, and Wee (2002a) analyses the reasons why English is not a possible mother tongue for the Eurasian community.

ENGLISH IN SINGAPORE: SINGLISH, BROKEN ENGLISH, GOOD/PROPER ENGLISH

In recent years, the state has become concerned over the increasing popularity of a colloquial variety of English, Singlish. Singlish shows a high degree of influence from other local languages such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay and Tamil (Platt and Weber 1980: 18). The varieties of Malay most important to the development of Singlish are Bazaar Malay (a simplified form of Malay used predominantly as an inter-ethnic lingua franca) and Baba Malay (spoken primarily by the Straits Chinese7) (Gupta 1998: 109). Below are sample Singlish utterances, showing how it is characterized by a lack of inflectional morphology (2a), the productive use of reduplication (2b) and discourse particles (2c: the particle lor indicates a sense of resignation, see Wee 2002b).

(2) (a) He eat here yesterday.
   [He ate here yesterday.]
(b) I like hot-hot curries.
   [I like very hot curries.]
(c) I won’t get married, lor.
   [I have no choice but to not get married.]

But before looking at how the state has responded to the ‘Singlish problem’, it is important to realize that among ordinary Singaporeans themselves, there is actually no real consensus as to the merits of Singlish. Those favouring Singlish claim that it is a crucial part of their national identity. Those rejecting Singlish claim that it is not ‘proper/good’ English. Two points are worth noting in this regard. One, this illustrates what Milroy (2001) means by an ideology of correctness, where the notion of a standard variety leads speakers to treat the variety acquired outside of institutional contexts as being ‘wrong’ or ‘broken’. Two, groups are far more heterogeneous than LHRs advocates admit (May 2001), since there is strong disagreement about the legitimacy of Singlish among its speakers. Examples of these differing viewpoints, taken from a series of letters to the press, are given below. Examples (3–4) support the use of Singlish, while (5–7) are against it.

(3) Singlish is a mark of how we have evolved as a nation and should surely have a place in our culture. Embracing Singlish as part of our heritage is not self-deception. It’s about not being
embarrassed by something that is unique and precious to how we express ourselves. *(The Straits Times 3 November 1998)*

(4) Singapore literature written in Singlish has a distinctively local flavour which appeals to readers. The words and expressions used in the context are meaningful to local readers and they conjure up images in a way that non-local lexicon cannot. Moreover, it makes the story more convincing and authentic. In other words, Singlish used in literary works keeps us in touch with our rich culture. *(The Straits Times 16 November 1998)*

(5) I cannot support its promotion. We must dissociate English from Singlish, its insidious enemy. Is cultural indulgence worth lingual disrespect and diffidence? *(The Straits Times 30 October 1998)*

(6) It would be sad if we continue to promote the use of Singlish among Singaporeans simply because it ‘is a mark of how we have evolved as a nation’. As other Forum page letter writers had commented rightly, it is parochial to adopt a nationalistic stance towards the use of Singlish. As long as we are not economically or politically powerful as the Americans, who have their own form of the English language, it would certainly be to our advantage to endeavour to master the English language. *(The Straits Times 7 November 1998)*

(7) We should take language as artistic refinement instead of as ‘a blunt instrument of communication’. Perhaps schools with better fluency in Standard English could set the standard as they feed our leadership positions. Do we want Singlish-immersed representatives on the world stage? *(The Straits Times 16 November 1998)*

While ordinary Singaporeans disagree about the status of Singlish, the position of the state is unequivocal. ‘Good/proper’ English, which it equates with standard English, is crucial for Singapore’s continued economic competitiveness, particularly in a global economy. And it sees Singlish as a problem because it fears that speaking Singlish will adversely affect the ability of Singaporeans to learn ‘good’ English. Thus, as stressed by Singapore’s current Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, the existence of Singlish actually poses a threat to the nation’s economic well-being:

(8) We cannot be a first-world economy or go global with Singlish. The fact that we use English gives us a big advantage over our competitors. If we carry on using Singlish, the logical final outcome is that we, too, will develop our own type of pidgin English, spoken only by 3m Singaporeans, which the rest of the world will find quaint but incomprehensible. We are already half way there. Do we want to go all the way? *(1999 National Day Rally Speech)*

Because Singlish is viewed as an economic threat, whatever merits it may have as a marker of a Singaporean identity must be jettisoned in favour of
the global economic value associated with the standard variety. The Prime Minister thus expressed the hope that in time to come, Singaporeans will no longer speak Singlish:

(9) Singlish is not English. It is English corrupted by Singaporeans and has become a Singapore dialect. Singlish is broken, ungrammatical English sprinkled with words and phrases from local dialects and Malay which English speakers outside Singapore have difficulties in understanding. Let me emphasise that my message that we must speak Standard English is targeted primarily at the younger generation...we should ensure that the next generation does not speak Singlish. (The Straits Times 29 August 1999)

This led the state to initiate the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) on 29 April 2000, and according to the movement’s chairman, Col. David Wong:

(10) We are trying to build a sense of pride, that as Singaporeans, we can speak good English as opposed to pride that we can speak Singlish. We are trying to check a trend in which younger Singaporeans are beginning to feel that it is perhaps a way of identifying themselves as Singaporeans if they speak Singlish. (The Straits Times 31 March 2000)

But as we saw above, there are Singaporeans who feel strongly that Singlish is an important part of their identity, and not surprisingly these Singaporeans feel a need to ‘speak up for Singlish’. Two such examples are presented below. Notice that (11) makes the same point as (3–4), arguing that Singlish is an important part of Singapore’s culture. What is different is that (11) is directed specifically against a state-initiated campaign, the SGEM, which the writer fears may well lead to the elimination of Singlish (If the government has its way, Singapore will become a dish devoid of flavour).

(11) Singlish is crude precisely because it’s rooted in Singapore’s unglamorous past. This is a nation built from the sweat of uncultured immigrants who arrived 100 years ago to bust their asses in the boisterous port. Our language grew out of the hardships of these ancestors. And Singlish is a key ingredient in the unique melting pot that is Singapore. This is a city where skyscraping banks tower over junk boats; a city where vendors hawk steaming pig intestines next to bistros that serve haute cuisine. The SGEM’s brand of good English is as bland as boiled potatoes. If the government has its way, Singapore will become a dish devoid of flavour. (Hwee Hwee Tan, Time July 29 2002)

Thus, while (3–7) were simply part of a discussion amongst Singaporeans themselves, (11) is motivated by the fear that Singlish is under threat. Example (12), from a speech by Colin Goh, who runs a ‘satirical humour website’ known as TalkingCock.com, makes this fear particularly clear.
Goh was concerned enough about the fate of Singlish to launch a Save Our Singlish campaign on 27 April 2002. And at a speech during the launch, Goh makes the following points (the use of upper case is in the original text downloaded from the website, www.talkingcock.com). He first suggests that there is no incompatibility between speaking Singlish and good English; the two should be seen as complementary. Crucially, notice that even as he supports Singlish, Goh still contrasts it with ‘good/proper’ English.

(12a) WHY A SAVE OUR SINGLISH CAMPAIGN?
First, please notice that it’s not the Speak Good Singlish campaign. It’s the SAVE our Singlish campaign. The difference is crucial, and we urge you to ignore the attempts of certain people to sabo ['sabotage': LW] us by painting it as anti-English.

We are NOT anti-English. We completely support the speaking and writing of good English. We actually hope that the Speak Good English Movement will see us as complementary, and not adversarial.

The reason Goh gives for ‘saving’ Singlish is, again, that it is a part of Singapore’s culture and heritage:

(12b) Why we’re fighting for Singlish, is because it’s simply a part of our culture. In fact, it may be the ONLY thing that makes us uniquely Singaporean. It mixes all the various languages, which to me, seems to spread multi-cultural understanding. I thought this was something to be proud of.

...Again, we’re protecting Singlish simply as part of our folk history. Singlish is not just broken English. It’s a patois.

Goh then describes what he sees as discrimination against Singlish, where it is unfairly censored in the local media:

(12c) We’re not asking you to switch to teaching Singlish in school as a subject. We’re just saying, don’t try to wipe out our culture by preventing it from being depicted on TV or radio. Don’t be afraid of it. Don’t be afraid of letting our radio and TV depict speech as normal people speak it.

Goh once more appeals for a diglossic perspective on the relationship between Singlish and ‘proper English’, acknowledging that there are contexts where Singlish should not be used.

(12d) Once again, Singlish is NOT simply broken English. And I am confident that we know when to speak Singlish, and when we should use proper English. We are intelligent enough to know we don’t write formal letters in Singlish. When was the last time you typed out, ‘Eh, give me a job, leh!’ And we try not to speak Singlish to our foreign friends because we instinctively know that they might not understand.... If at all we do, it’s not because
Singlish exists, but that we may not have been taught proper English. What I fear most about trying to wipe out Singlish is the creeping colonialism and double standards. It may not be intentional, but the SBA [Singapore Broadcasting Authority: LW] is suggesting that it’s okay if Singaporeans say ‘‘Yo, bro’, wassup, man? Just chilin’, ya know what I’m sayin’?’ but cannot say, ‘Arbuthen?’… Why is it okay for the Friends on TV to say, ‘As if!’ but we cannot say, ‘Like real’!

He ends his speech with a summary of his key points:

(12e) Let me summarize our platform:

1. that we are not against grammatical English, but that Singlish be allowed in TV, radio, films and all publications as a natural reflection of our dialogue;
2. that the same censorship standards be applied to English and other language programmes as they are to Singaporean ones.

You know, I know many of you agree. We have gotten hundreds of letters from Singaporeans supporting our stand on Singlish.

There is this tension then between, on the one hand, treating Singlish as a legitimate part of Singapore’s linguistic ecology, and, on the other hand, seeing it as a threat to the nation’s economic competitiveness. An appeal that Singlish and ‘proper/good’ English can exist side by side (12d) in a relationship of diglossia is untenable as far as the state is concerned, since the presence of Singlish is felt to undermine proficiency in ‘proper/good’ English. As such, tolerating the existence of Singlish jeopardizes the nation’s economic well-being. Perhaps the clearest statement of how strongly the state views the oppositional relationship between Singlish and ‘good’ English comes from Lee Kuan Yew:

(13) Those Singaporeans who can speak good English should to help create a good environment for speaking English, rather than advocate, as some do, the use of Singlish…. Singlish is a handicap we must not wish on Singaporeans. (The Sunday Times 15 August 1999)

Before closing this section, it will be helpful to highlight a number of points raised by the Singlish case. First, does the Singlish situation really constitute a case of LHRs violation? According to the criteria that Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson themselves employ, the answer is ‘Yes’. This is because they treat any attempt to eliminate a linguistic variety (‘linguicide’) as a LHRs violation, in fact, a violation of the strongest kind (Skutnabb-Kangas 2002: 46). The following statement is from Philippson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1995: 484):

The extreme form of deprivation of linguistic rights is linguicide…. A more appropriate metaphor than language death, which seems to imply natural causes for the demise of a language, might be
language murder, since it has frequently been a conscious policy of the dominant group to eliminate minority languages. Linguistic wrongs occur when languages are marginalized and deprived of resources or recognition, when language shift is imposed on individuals and groups.

Where Singlish is concerned, the SGEM can be seen as an attempt on the part of the state to engage in linguistic genocide, or at the very least, to impose a language shift.

Second, this is not simply a matter of a unified group of Singaporeans resisting a state-initiated attempt at ‘linguicide’. Singaporeans are truly divided in their views on Singlish, raising the question of to what extent linguistic rights can be plausibly championed if there is no group solidarity.

Third, the question of whether Singlish is really a reflection of Singaporean culture and identity is one that hinges on the notion of authenticity, but as Hornberger and King have pointed out:

Designating a particular language variety as authentic, then, implies that it is uniquely legitimate. . . . For some language users, the claim of authenticity suggests that a particular variety of the language is not artificially constructed, but interwoven with their own traditions and unique heritage. Clearly, assertions of authenticity hold important implications, and . . . are often highly charged—both emotionally and politically. The claim of authenticity is also, however, one for which there exist no clear linguistic criteria. (Hornberger and King 1998: 391, italics mine)

Without clear linguistic criteria, it is unsurprising that Singaporeans disagree on which specific variety is the authentic one. For example, while Singlish supporters see it as ‘truly Singaporean’, the chairman of the SGEM suggests instead that:

(14) It’s important that while we develop a brand of English which is uniquely identifiable with Singapore, it should not be a Singlish type. There are Singaporeans who speak English very well and after they have spoken for less than a minute or two, I would be able to identify them as coming from Singapore, just by the choice of words and the phrases they use and their intonation. . . . I don’t think we are trying to resist the use of words like kampong or kiasu. . . . The idea, really, is to use the word in a grammatically correct sense. (The Straits Times 31 March 2000)

Thus, the counter-claim to Singlish is that an authentically Singaporean English should be one that is ‘grammatically correct’. Where a Malay word like kampong ‘village’ or a Hokkien word like kiasu ‘fear of losing out’ is used, it must be embedded in constructions which are grammatically ‘standard’.

Consequently, questions of authenticity are more likely reflected as intra-language rather than inter-language disputes, with debates on authenticity
revolving around which variety of a language—rather than which language—is the authentic one. Contestations over which variety is authentic thus contribute to the lack of group consensus. But authenticity raises yet other issues for LHRs. This is because LHRs advocates are interested in using the mother tongue as a medium of education, but this clearly requires that the ‘authentic’ variety undergo changes such as functional elaboration, codification, and graphization (see also Blommaert 2001a: 137), especially in a highly developed society like Singapore, where education is intended to prepare individuals for participation in a global society. Any language used as a medium of education will have to undergo some degree of standardization to facilitate communication with people from other parts of the world (Cameron 2002; Fishman 1982; Heller 2002). Consequently, as Hornberger and King point out:

To the degree that language planning efforts seek to unify and standardize language use according to unilateral norms and unchanging forms, they will not only fail, but worse, run the risk of harming the very languages they seek to protect. (Hornberger and King 1998: 407)

In the case of Singlish, if it were given the kind of status that LHRs advocates wish to claim for mother tongues, it would be changed so drastically that it would no longer be recognizable to its supporters. Thus, LHRs advocates need to confront the problem that preserving the authenticity of a variety may be at odds with its use in institutionalized contexts. This also amounts to the waiving of rights from the rights holders since the Singlish supporters themselves (see (12c)) clearly do not want it taught or used in schools. But if LHRs are inalienable, a point which Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson take as ‘axiomatic’, can LHRs in fact be waived?

Finally, advocates of LHRs explicitly link rights to development and thus, for them, the question of how to resolve the conflict between rights and development never arises (Brookes and Heath 1997: 199). But the Singlish case shows that cultural considerations can be perceived to conflict with economic ones. Singaporeans who support the state’s desire to eliminate Singlish do so because they see it as a threat, and in particular, one that jeopardizes their children’s educational success (The Straits Times 31 March 2000). We are thus reminded of Mufwene’s (2002a: 23) point that speakers may themselves decide to stop speaking a language because they are more interested in adapting to prevailing economic conditions than maintaining some kind of cultural association that the language may represent.

The Singlish case study therefore raises a number of key points, to be pursued below. These are summarized as follows:

1. If LHRs are inalienable, can they be waived?
2. Can LHRs conflict with other rights, and if so, what should be done under such circumstances?
3 What happens to LHRs if there is no group consensus?
4 Even if there is group consensus, can LHRs be attributed to groups?

LHRs AS HUMAN RIGHTS

We will consider (1–2) together because they raise the issue of whether LHRs are absolute in the strongest possible sense, that is, whether LHRs can ever defensibly be violated or not. Note that while Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (see above) take it as ‘axiomatic’ that LHRs are inalienable, it is not necessarily the case that inalienability implies absoluteness:

the assertion that a right is inalienable does not imply that it cannot be set aside by the holder in particular cases, that its scope contains no exceptions, or that it cannot be overridden in exceptional circumstances by other important norms…. The existence of an inalienable right to A implies that attempts to repudiate permanently one’s own right to A, or attempts by others to declare someone’s right to A null and void, will be without moral effect. If people lack the moral power to eliminate permanently a right of their own or others, that disability makes the right inalienable. And since the right cannot be eliminated, those who act as if it had been eliminated may violate it. (Nickel 1987: 44–7)

Nickel goes on to highlight a number of problems if inalienability is equated with absoluteness:

One problem with this claim is that some of the rights in the Universal Declaration are forfeitable in many legal systems upon conviction of serious crimes. In the United States, for example, one’s right to vote is forfeited by a felony conviction—and I cannot see that denying felons the vote violates a still-existing right to political participation…. People give up much of their liberty when they enter monasteries or military service, yet we would not propose forbidding these acts universally. Suppose that a public official repudiated his moral and legal rights to privacy, so that his life would be an open book. This might be a foolish step, but it is not clear that individuals cannot take it or that other persons would be wrong to act in accordance with it…. I suspect that only some—probably only a few—human rights are immune from permanent repudiation. (ibid. italics mine)

Thus, with the exception of a few core or basic rights (Shue 1980) dealing with subsistence, security and liberty, the claim that LHRs are inalienable must not be taken to automatically mean that they cannot be waived or repudiated. Of course, LHRs advocates might want to claim that LHRs are in fact absolute, that LHRs are on par with basic rights. But this would be incompatible with the claim that LHRs fall under the class of cultural rights (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995: 496) since, however important
cultural rights may be, it would be difficult to equate them with subsistence, security, or liberty.

LHRs advocates therefore need to consider under what circumstances LHRs can be waived by the holders of the rights themselves (such as members of a group) or even repudiated by the addressees of the rights (such as the state). Unfortunately, these considerations are often missing from the discourse of LHRs. Instead, the focus is on cases of LHRs violations and the advocacy that such violations should be overcome (Kontra et al. 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas 2002; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1994). But if LHRs are waivable or repudiable, then what counts as a case of LHRs violation becomes less clear and needs to be examined more carefully for any mitigating circumstances. As we saw, from a LHRs perspective, the Singlish case counts as a case of ‘language murder’ and thus a clear LHRs violation. But using the fate of a language as a criterion for deciding if the rights of human beings have been violated once again confuses language community with speech community, especially if it is the speakers themselves who are committing this ‘murder’ in order to adapt their ‘communicative relationships’ (Hymes 1968: 24; see above) so as to obtain perceived economic advantages. LHRs advocates reasonably fear that allowing for LHRs to be repudiated can open the door to rampant oppression, but, if the notion of LHRs is to be workable, then cases where the waiving or repudiation of LHRs is justified must be seriously considered.

Coming now to the question of what happens to LHRs when there is no group consensus, as we saw earlier, speech communities, unlike language communities, tend to be highly variable (Silverstein 1998: 406–7). This is because patterns of communication and ideas about group identity tend to vary from one individual to another, and even within the same individual over time. Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas do not deal with such cases in detail, probably because they want to move, as quickly as possible, from a discourse of individual rights to one of collective rights. For example, while conceding that human rights are primarily aimed at the protection of individuals, they quickly assert that:

Until recently, rights have been conceptualized and formulated as the property of the individual, but there is increasing recognition that this has not prevented violation of the rights of minority groups, and that collective and individual rights are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. Rights pertaining to the use of a given language are an eminent example of the way in which the rights of the individual presuppose their social and collective exercise. (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995: 484–5, italics in original)

Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas’ desire to treat LHRs as collective rights is understandable. This is because as a form of social practice, the maintenance of a language and its continued vitality cannot depend on its use by only one
individual. Instead, it requires that a group of individuals persist in using the language as part of their interactions, and ideally, across generations as well (Fishman 1991). However, is this a sufficient basis for extending LHRs from individuals to a collective? Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas seem to think so, since the only reason given by them is a teleological one: restricting LHRs to individuals has not prevented the violations of the rights of groups, and so, LHRs should be extended to groups. It is true that if LHRs were restricted to individuals, then the goal of protecting minority group languages becomes all the more difficult. But such a goal should not obscure the very real conceptual problems raised in talking about collective human rights:

This is simply incoherent—unless, again, we are to redefine the very idea of human rights. Human rights, as they have heretofore been understood, rest on a view of the individual person as separate from and endowed with inalienable rights held primarily in relation to society, and especially the state. Within the area defined by these rights, the individual has prima facie priority over social goals or interests. The idea of collective human rights represents a major and at best confusing conceptual deviation. Groups, including nations, can and do hold a variety of rights. But these are not human rights. Whatever their relative importance, (individual) human rights and (collective) peoples’ rights are very different kinds of rights and should be kept distinct. There are legitimate social limits on the exercise of all individual rights. Society does have certain rights, or at least responsibilities, that legitimately constrain the exercise of many human rights; a properly ordered society must balance individual rights (against society) with individual duties (to society). (Donnelly 1989: 145, italics in original)

We have seen the problems involved in talking about the LHRs of groups, that is, in attributing human rights to groups. But there is an even more fundamental problem. Can human rights be linguistic? The problem arises because the kind of linguistic rights we can claim as individuals is simply the (individual) right to language, and not the right to a specific language. Whether or not we believe an individual is genetically programmed to acquire language (Chomsky 1975), it is clear that appropriate linguistic input and social interaction from the external environment is needed if language acquisition is to take place. Children deprived of such input and interaction (e.g. ‘feral children’, see Pinker 1994: 277) may then be said to have their linguistic human rights violated since by growing up isolated from human interaction, no language at all was acquired. But this is obviously not what LHRs advocates have in mind—for them, LHRs means access specifically to the mother tongue, in education systems and other institutionalized domains of society. To summarize, the dilemma for LHRs advocates is this: either the rights sought by LHRs advocates are collective
(and thus not human rights) or they are individual (and thus human rights, but then they do not address language in the intended social sense).

CONCLUSION

Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas have indicated their awareness of the need to address issues of intra-language discrimination, but they rather optimistically assume that these can be easily absorbed under the notion of LHRs, as currently conceived (1994: 104). However, the issues raised by intra-language discrimination, particularly as illustrated by the Singlish case, require a revisiting of some fairly fundamental questions about standardization, group heterogeneity, authenticity, and even whether the notion of LHRs can be coherently established.

The challenge for LHRs advocates is twofold. In addition to the specific problems posed by intra-language discrimination, there is also the general problem of confusing language community with speech community. LHRs advocates need to consistently bear in mind the distinction between the two kinds of communities and decide if it is languages or speakers that are their primary concern. Only when this consistency is maintained can the more specific problems be productively addressed.

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NOTES

1 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out, and for drawing my attention to a number of useful references.

2 Kontra’s claim that hardly any research has been done on intra-language discrimination ignores an entire body of sociolinguistic research that has focused on ‘style’ or ‘intra-speaker variation’. Consider Labov’s (1966) study of English in New York, which essentially shaped the variationist paradigm, and Eckert’s (1989, 2000) study of language use in an American high school. Eckert and Rickford (2001) is a recent collection of recent theorizations of ‘style’. Other relevant works include studies of ‘crossing’ (Rampton 1995), ‘verbal hygiene’ (Cameron 1995), analyses of the ideological bases of linguistic discrimination (Lippi-Green 1997) and bilingualism in a New York Puerto Rican community (Zentella 1997), and the collection of papers in Blommaert (1999).

3 Milroy also suggests that there may be cultures that are not ‘standard language cultures’, where languages are not conceived by their speakers to have any definable boundaries (2001: 539).
This is because ‘language standardization stands out as crucially important in defining what constitutes a language’ (Milroy 2001: 541). In the absence of specific data, a discussion of LHRs in such cultures is beyond the scope of this paper. I would speculate, however, that the idea of LHRs might not even be applicable to such cultures. Since LHRs aim to ensure that ‘everybody can identify with their mother tongue(s) and have this identification accepted and respected by others’ (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995: 500), if there is no clearly definable notion of a language, then asking speakers to choose their own mother tongues might be incoherent to the speakers themselves. Needless to say, this scenario, if correct, raises questions about the universality of LHRs.

4 Milroy and Milroy (1999: 19) suggest that the ideology of standardization is ‘motivated in the first place by various social, political and commercial needs’ and ‘is bound up with the aim of functional efficiency of the language. Ultimately, the desideratum is that everyone should use and understand the language in the same way with the minimum of misunderstanding and the maximum of efficiency.’

5 This is not to deny that non-standard varieties cannot enjoy ‘covert prestige’, typically because these serve to mark local identities (Heller 1999; Trudgill 1972). But, crucially, the prestige is covert precisely because there is still recognition of the ‘overarching power structure within which local communities function’ (Eckert 2000: 226).

6 A ‘mother tongue’ in Singapore is thus officially assigned by the state rather than decided by individuals themselves, constituting a prima facie violation of LHRs. For example, the linguistic heterogeneity of the Chinese community has been diminished by the imposition of Mandarin as the official mother tongue (Blommaert 2001b: 540; Skutnabb-Kangas 2003).

7 The Straits Chinese or Peranankans are of mixed (Chinese and Malay) ancestry. While seeing themselves as culturally and ethnically Chinese, they often use a variety of Malay as the home language.

8 Hornberger (1997) is an important exception, recognizing that the promotion of LHRs will often involve difficult ethical choices. Hornberger (1997: 101) suggests, as a guiding principle, that the various dimensions of LHRs (tolerance and promotion, individual and communal freedoms, etc.) be balanced for the mutual protection of all, while acknowledging that this is no easy task.

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