

(Re)Calibrating Language Capital among Malay Youths in Singapore

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Abstract : Certain languages are held in higher regard than others given their respective socio-economic and political value, perceived or real. The different positioning of languages manifests in a state's language-in-education policy, such as Singapore's which places a premium on English in relation to the mother tongue (MT) languages (Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil). Among the latter, Mandarin Chinese, as the language of the majority ethnic group, has a more privileged status. The relative positioning of the four official languages shapes Singaporeans' attitude towards their bilingualism. This paper offers an overview of the attitudes towards English-Malay (EM) bilingualism among Malay youths in Singapore, those who are in school and those already working. It examines how 200 respondents perceive the benefits of their EM bilingualism and their EM bilingual identity. The sample is stratified along gender, socio-economic status, dominant home language and self-rated language proficiency. The online survey comprises questions on the cognitive, communicative, pragmatic and religious benefits of bilingualism, and on language identity. The paper highlight significant trends relating to respondents' positive attitudes towards their EM bilingualism and their bilingual identity. Positive ratings are lowest among young working adults. EM bilinguals also perceive their bilingualism as less useful than English-Chinese bilingualism. These findings are framed within Bourdieu's metaphor of field and habitus in order to understand why Malay youths make their language choices and why they recalibrate their linguistic capital upon entering the workforce, and in so doing understand the impact a state's language-in-education policy has on its citizens' attitude towards their respective English-MT bilingualism.

Keywords : English-Malay bilingualism, language attitude, language identity, recalibrating capital

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