English and Identity in Asia[1]

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Abstract
A common assumption is that one's mother tongue is essentially one's ethnocultural identity. Contact by speakers of local languages with a hegemonic language such as English is therefore seen as endangering not only the local language but also threatening the identity that speakers deem closest to them. I will argue in this paper that identifying language with identity is an oversimplification. I present societal attitudes toward English in a number of East and Southeast Asian nations and discuss the roots of those attitudes. Macro-societal attitudes towards language are, however, only one factor in the construction of ethnocultural identity in face-to-face interaction. I borrow Bucholtz and Hall's tactics of intersubjectivity to frame my case that personal identity is constructed and negotiated by language performance in oral and literate practices and it is neither determined nor fixed by the attitudes of a society toward languages.

Keywords
World Englishes, social identity, intersubjectivity, ethnicity, multilingualism, language planning

Introduction
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threatening the identity that speakers deem closest to them. I want to argue in this paper that identifying language with identity is an oversimplification. I present societal attitudes toward English in a number of East and Southeast Asian nations and discuss the roots of those attitudes. Macro-societal attitudes towards language are, however, only one factor in the construction of ethnocultural identity in face-to-face interaction. I borrow Bucholtz and Hall's tactics of intersubjectivity to frame my case that personal identity is constructed and negotiated by language performance in oral and literate practices and it is neither determined nor fixed by the attitudes of a society toward languages.

The theme of this conference is English and Asia, and contributors have investigated the relationships between the English language and Asian cultures. My own interest, however, is not primarily in the societal relationship between the English language and the specific culture of a nation or a region. I believe that relationships between language and society are epiphenomena; that is, they are constructed from countless millions of interactions between and among individual people. I intend to spend most of the time allotted to me to talk about these interactions at the micro level. Nonetheless, every individual interaction in speech or writing between people occurs in the context of beliefs and societal forces that operate at a larger level than any individual, and in order to understand what these individuals are doing, it is necessary to examine the larger picture.

In preparing for my paper, I asked colleagues in a number of Asian countries to reflect on the theme of English and Asia and to give me their own personal views of the roles that English plays in the communities that they know best. I received responses about Korea, Laos, Singapore, and Vietnam, and I was able to glean some information about Malaysia from the web. I would like to share some of their reflections with you.[3]

Countries in East and Southeast Asia have very different histories and experiences with colonialism and colonial languages. For this reason, the roles of English in different countries are diverse. I therefore report diversity, but I believe there are nonetheless some underlying themes. Those themes are colonial and postcolonial history, economic development, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and access to education.

Portraits of English in Asia

First, Korea. The Republic of Korea is a country that has not experienced rule by a European colonial power. Nonetheless, the push by the South Korean government to increase English ability among its citizens is currently among the strongest in the region. Some 103,000 South Korean students currently study at American primary, secondary schools and at colleges and universities throughout North America. In fact, according to the *International Herald Tribune* (April 27, 2008), there are currently

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more Korean students studying in the U.S. than students from any other country. Sending young people abroad to study is a significant economic challenge for many Korean families, and for this reason there are many initiatives for developing English skills at home.

When South Korean President Lee Myung-bak was elected at the beginning of 2008, he proposed that beginning in 2010, English should be the sole medium of instruction in Korean public high schools, not only in English language classes but also in other subject classes such as mathematics, science, and history. There was considerable public opposition to the plan and the Korean government reduced the policy to requiring only that all English classes be taught entirely in English by 2010.

Apart from national government initiatives to increase English proficiency, there is widespread interest in developing English skills by local governments. In Jeju Province off the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, there are plans to build an entire city where the lingua franca, including the medium of instruction, will be English. The English Education City on Jeju Island could transform the island into an education hub. The Jeju Free International City Development Centre is developing the city, which will be built near Seogwipo on Jeju's southern coast at a cost of 1.4 trillion won (US $1.17 billion), to attract elementary and high school students from overseas and to give Korean parents who are looking to send their children abroad for further education another option. The provincial government's belief is that education at the English Education City on Jeju Island will be an attractive economic alternative to parents' sending their children to study abroad.

Moving south now to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Unlike Korea, the colonial history of Laos did include European rule, first by the French and then for a short period in the 1970s and 1980s by the Soviet Union. Also, unlike Korea, Laos is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world. There are estimates of at least 49 ethnic groups and 70 or more different languages. Indeed, the Lao language may be the first language of less than 50% of the population. In such diversity, the introduction of a European language as a lingua franca could perhaps be seen as an advantage in unifying the country, but this has not happened. During the French colonial period, there was little investment in education and even by the mid-20th century, over 90% of the population had little or no access to education. Primarily, it was the Lao elite and children of Vietnamese civil servants who attended school. The Lao elite, consisting of approximately 200 families, adopted the French language for education, government, and social functions. The last King of Laos, Savang Vatthana, his prime minister, Souvanna Phouma, and Souphanouvong, who served as president from 1975 to 1991, all held degrees from French universities. Nowadays, the government of Laos is committed to English through its involvement in ASEAN, and English is taught in most secondary schools (although materials and trained teachers are severely lacking). As in Korea, English plays a key and growing role in international business, tourism, information technology, and in other fields. Proficiency in English is viewed as a key to finding a good job and getting promoted.

But the opportunities to do so are available to only a minority of the population – those who live in urban areas and/or have government or family connections. Access to English is thus restricted to a small proportion of the population.

Moving further south to Singapore. Because of its colonial history and its strategic position, English occupies a unique position in Singapore. It is the *de facto* working language of the nation and the sole medium of instruction in all its schools. It is one of four official languages – the other three being Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil – but unlike these three languages, English is viewed as a first language in the schools, while the other three languages are often referred to as Mother Tongue languages and occupy a secondary status in the school curriculum. Since the role of English is so important in Singaporean life and in daily interactions among Singaporeans, the language has evolved to match local conditions – a process of natural language change that has been observed in all communities throughout history. The Singaporean variety, known as Singlish, is different from the standard Englishes of the U.S., of Britain or of Australia. Just as in Korea, Konglish and in Malaysia, Manglish differ in vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics from their foreign ancestors, so the independence of Singlish is prized by Singaporeans. Speaking Singlish in Singapore has advantages and disadvantages. It is widely used among Singaporeans to establish solidarity. The Singapore government, however, takes a different view and recognizes that Singapore is a service economy. The government maintains that, in order to conduct business with the rest of the world, Singaporeans need to use an internationally acceptable (that is, a standard) form of English. This prompted the government to launch in 2000 a Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) to curtail what were viewed as sliding standards of English use. The SGEM policy is contentious and has not been successful. A recent survey of 1,243 Singaporeans by a local newspaper revealed that 4 out of 10 Singaporeans aged between 15 and 39 feel that there is little need to improve the level of English in Singapore. There have been public requests to have foreign workers in frontline service jobs take an English test, but employers have resisted. They have said that it is less expensive to hire a foreign worker who does not speak English or just little English than to hire a Singaporean. Employers in Singapore also acknowledge China's rising status in the world, and with it, the ascendant place of Mandarin Chinese.

The conflict between local and international varieties of English is also found in Malaysia. Here it is a conflict perhaps exacerbated by the two etymologies of the name for the variety spoken: Is Manglish "Malaysian English" or is it "Mangled English"? In order to sample some current opinions of the issue, I logged on to the website "Manglish: For and Against." On this site, opinions as to the value of Manglish are divided. Some bloggers saw the value of the ancestor language for international communication:

For instance, Sol writes:

> Proper English should be reinforced, and Malaysians ought to be trained to know when and when NOT to use Manglish. I'm not saying Manglish is totally wrong, but in order to go global, we have to learn how to think global. Afterall, we want to be internationally understood, don't we?

And Desmond KZY has a plan for developing Standard English over the long term. He writes:

> I think to help Malaysian to improve their English from Mangled English to proper English take time, what we need to do is establish a plan because Malaysia have too many ethnics and dialects, the government should compile all medium school into one nation school study the same language and make English Language as main language like what Singapore have use to do, by doing so everyone's learning English, and for thence onward they will start learning proper English slowly… so everything takes time, can't be too hurry toward this....

But other bloggers on the same site see the value of Manglish for local solidarity among Malaysians (and even with Singaporeans). Majapahit writes:

> Talking or speaking proper english doesn't mean u have to have an accent like the foreigners. As long as ur grammar and pronunciation are understandable n correct its good enuf
> I hate people who try to have angmoh accent juz to impress. Bloody fake!
> Be proud of who u are... be original.

And QuaChee takes a global perspective:

> English in every country is rather different. Even the Aussies speak a different lingo with the Brits & so does the Americans....
> I believe each country should speak their own style, though, yes, they must know Brit or American English for business or work. But when back in Malaysia, let's do it our way!

These comments from Malaysians and the brief review of policies in Korea and Singapore show that opinions about the use of English in local circumstances vary widely. Both public policies and personal opinions are influenced in complex ways by colonial and postcolonial history, economic development, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and access to education.

But what does the international Standard English or the local variety of Singlish, Manglish or Konglish do for their speakers? There is no doubt that speaking English can be useful. A Vietnamese colleague once told me that, when he was collecting data in Vietnam for his dissertation, he couldn't reach the corporate directors and

managers that he needed to interview. The key that finally opened the door for him was switching to English over the phone when he requested to talk to them. Yes, there are clearly advantages to using English in certain social situations, but beware! Using an international variety of English not only does things *for* you, it does things *to* you. There are ways of expression in the English used by speakers in the Inner Circle that diverge widely from the ways that it is used in the Outer Circle. In other words, people from different parts of the world use different varieties of English in different ways to construct identities for themselves. Using language is not just a means of representing meanings that are commonly understood, it is a way of creating meanings. In this respect, language is not a noun-like thing, but it is a tool of action, a verb-like process. And the ways in which speakers construct identities for themselves through the discourse pragmatics of English or their mother tongue, I call *languaging*.

Languaging an Identity

I take an example of how identities are constructed through languaging, again from Vietnam. Another colleague from Vietnam conducted a study of how Vietnamese students applied to universities in English-speaking countries (Nguyen, 1999). One key part in the university application process is the statement-of-purpose essay. However, an essay about oneself is generally not a part of a student's course of education in Vietnam. Nguyen described how Vietnamese students constructed the unfamiliar genre of the statement-of-purpose essay in English and compared their languaging with their native English speaking counterparts in America. The languaging of the two groups differed considerably. Nguyen found that the Vietnamese applicants tended to construct their essays as requests, while the American students constructed theirs as statements. In constructing their identities, American students tended to explicitly interpret their experiences in order to promote themselves, while Vietnamese students tended to state the facts and leave the interpretations up to the reader.

The differences in languaging showed that individuals in Vietnam present different identities for themselves from individuals in the United States. In other words, ways of presenting one's identity differ from one country and one community to another. Although both groups used the English language, they did not share a linguistic repertoire. A shared linguistic repertoire of ways of using English to create identities – to language – is part of what constructs a community.

Does this mean when Asian students use Standard English, their local variety, or their mother tongue that their identity changes, that they language themselves into a different identity? Contact between speakers of local languages and a hegemonic language such as English is seen by some as endangering not only the local language but also threatening the identity that speakers deem closest to them. What I want to argue in this paper is that equating language with identity is an oversimplification. In other words, *languaging an identity is not the same as changing one's identity*.

Societal attitudes towards English like those that I have reported in Korea, Laos, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam are only one factor in the construction of ethnocultural identity in face-to-face interaction.

Is a Language an Identity?[4]
Traditional ideas of "language = identity" stem from a social-psychological perspective grounded in Henri Tajfel's (1974, 1981) and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of social identity and intergroup conflict. According to Tajfel and Turner, individuals achieve a positive and secure social identity through a process of in-group differentiation. In other words, "a positive social identity is achieved… to the extent that group members can make social comparisons [in their own favour] with respect to relevant outgroups" (Giles and Byrne 19). Tajfel's observations were expanded by Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell, (1987), who held that a person had not one, "personal self," but rather several selves that corresponded to widening circles of group membership.

Although this social-psychological theory acknowledged the presence of multiple identities, the main argument was that in order to maintain a language, an individual must identify with the smallest number of groups or categories that differed from his or her ethnic group. Giles and Byrne wrote, "The strength of individuals' ethnic identification and hence their desires for psycholinguistic distinctiveness will depend in part on their belonging to few other social categories, each of which provides them with less satisfactory identities and lower intragroup statuses than does their ethnic collectivity" (25). A result of this identification is that those with a strong ethnic identity are less likely to "achieve native-like proficiency" in another group's language (34).

The need to limit identity categories in order to maintain ethnolinguistic vitality is echoed by Joshua Fishman (1991), one of the foremost writers on language maintenance. In Fishman's writing, he emphasised an innate emotional or spiritual connection between a person and his or her native language. His philosophy is summed up in the quote: "The destruction of a language is the destruction of a rooted identity" (4). Fishman asserted that "intimacy, family, community, identity and affiliation are the essences of ethnocultural creativity and continuity" (5). Fishman's view is also shared by researchers in the area of linguistic human rights such as Tove Skuttnab-Kangas and Robert Phillipson (1986). These writers attributed an "intense significance" to the use of one's mother tongue (Skuttnab-Kangas and Phillipson 344).

For Fishman, then, the native language has an emotional and intimate role, while majority and hegemonic languages such as English continue in a public role. More importantly, Fishman seems to imply that *the mother tongue is the only*

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[4] This section is built very firmly on a foundation provided by Michele Back in her 2009 dissertation. I am very grateful to Back for her thorough and perceptive review of the relationships between language and identity discussed in the literature of social psychology and linguistic anthropology.

language with which a speaker can completely identify, and that it is the mother tongue – above all other tongues – which is infused with emotion, intimacy, and identity.

In recent years, however, this language = identity approach has been criticised by scholars in multilingualism and language maintenance. Their principle critique is that this approach fails to take into account multilingual contexts. According to Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge (2004), the social-psychological theory of identity, "obscures hybrid identities and complex linguistic repertoires of bi- and multilinguals living in a contemporary global world" (5). Pavlenko and Blackledge note that many languages are not necessarily linked to ethnic or national identities, such as the use of English as a lingua franca among non-native speakers. They also cite several studies that challenge the association of high second language competence with weak intergroup (native language) identification. They critique the "oversimplified" terminology of the social-psychological approach, which they say ignores "complex sociopolitical, socioeconomic and sociocultural factors which shape interactions between various groups in multilingual societies" (6).

John Myhill (1999) has also taken issue with the social-psychological perspective on identity, or, more accurately, with the conflict between what he terms the ideologies of "language-as-identity" and "language-as-territory." Myhill defines "language-as-identity" as the ideology espoused by Fishman (1991), Skuttnab-Kangas and Phillipson (1986), and others that one's language is an essential component of one's identity. "Language-and-territory," on the other hand, is the theory espoused by LaPonce (1987), Woolard (1989), and others that a language is defined by geographical boundaries.

Myhill lists some of the "real-world" problems that have arisen as a result of the "language-as-identity" belief. One example is the difficulty that people face in learning a language because of strong feelings that non-natives are "incapable" of learning the language (as in the case of Welsh), or because resistance to a hegemonic language (such as Russian in Estonia) has led English to become a lingua franca. The struggle against multiculturalism in the Canadian province of Québec also shows the conflict between the geographical and political unit of Québec and the identities of non-Francophone immigrants to the province. Myhill also notes that in their desire to preserve minority languages, proponents of the language-as-identity ideology often give the impression that speakers of majority languages have fewer rights to the preservation of their language and to their own identity.

The problem, as I see it, with the social-psychological view of identity is that identity is seen as an essential attribute of a person. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2004) put the case clearly when they write that, in the social-psychological approach, identities are assumed to be "attributes of individuals or groups rather than of situations" (376). This perception ignored the possibility of heterogeneity inside the speech community, which in turn leads to an essentialist concept of identity as group sameness and difference; that is, those who occupy an identity category are both

fundamentally similar to one another AND fundamentally different from members of other groups. "One of the great weaknesses of previous work on identity," Bucholtz and Hall write, is in fact "the assumption that identities are attributes of individuals or groups rather than of situations." The case that I wish to present is the opposite, namely: "identity inheres in actions, not in people" (376).

Identities of People and Identities of Trees

One day, I was walking around the KLCC Park in Kuala Lumpur meditating on the nature of identity and language. I stopped to read a notice describing one of the trees in the park. I circled the park twice and returned to the same tree. The identity of the tree that I examined the first time was the same as the identity of the tree that I examined the second time. They were the same tree. If you go to the KLCC Park, I can point the tree out to you. It will be the same tree. The tree's identity is an essential part of its existence. In the limited time span that us humans have to observe it, the tree doesn't move and, although it does different things – it blooms at a certain time of the year and produces fruit – it is, I think you will agree, the same tree. But people are not like trees.

The sense that we have of our own identity and the identity of other people is a sense that seems at times confusing. If we have known a person for a long time and interacted with that person in many different contexts, we feel that although this is always the same person, sometimes they seem to be different, and we remark on this by saying things like "You were acting weird last night," "You're so nice to her, why can't you be nicer to me?" or "When I first knew him, he had a very strong accent, but now I hardly notice it." Identity, then, has two contradictory meanings. In one sense it is like a tree. It is the stable sense of self-hood attached to a physical body which, although it changes over time, is somehow the same. In a second sense, our identity refers to what we *do* in a particular context, and of course we do different things in different contexts. The first sense of identity helps us to distinguish one tree or one person from another, even two people with the same name. My telephone directory at home has two listings for "Jennifer Hamilton," but I don't expect that this is the same person with two different telephone numbers. Although this sense of identity helps us to distinguish among individuals, individuality may be more important in some cultures than in others. In some cultures, individuals value their unique identity by wearing different clothes, by speaking differently, and by competing in order to distinguish themselves from others. In other cultures, it is more valued *not* to distinguish yourself from others, to wear the same clothes, to talk in similar ways, and to work as part of a team.

In the second sense, a person's identity is, as Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) wrote, "an interactional accomplishment, produced and negotiated in discourse" (13). The production of identities in discourse is illustrated by the creativity with which people escape the identity cast upon them by a hegemonic language. Meredith Doran (2004) showed this negotiation in her work on multiethnic youth in suburban Paris.

Doran demonstrated how young people's use of *Verlan*, a variety of French characterised by borrowings from Arabic, English, and other languages, creates what Homi Bhabha (1994) called a "third space" of social interaction. This space allows young people to take on identities that are not available in dominant French society, as well as to validate "the existence of a local multi-culture within which they could affirm the hybridity of their own identities" (Doran 111). In other words, a seemingly low-prestige variety of French has enabled and empowered young immigrants to construct a new identity. At the same time, these young people are still able to adopt a dominant French identity by using Standard French and to interact with their family members in their home languages such as Arabic. These young people adopt several identities, yet they are able to maintain their languages (both French and Arabic) and even to develop new varieties such as Verlan.

Similarly, Alister Pennycook (2005) showed that the multilingual code-switching found in rap music from East and South East Asia produces a variety of "new, hybrid identities" (34). For Pennycook, marginalised groups select from the cultural products offered to them by the majority culture, incorporating those aspects that are most relevant to them. Pennycook viewed identity as a fluid concept, and the flow of cultural products such as hip-hop as a "reorganization of the local" rather than a top-down process of homogenisation (33). Thus, the cultural borrowings from English and from U.S. hip-hop culture have not served to limit local East and South East Asian identities, but rather to enrich them.

Tactics of Intersubjectivity

Identity in this view is not an essential feature of a person, it is fluid and created dynamically by interaction between people in different contexts. Because identity is fluid and because it is co-constructed in interaction, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) referred to the processes of identity construction as *tactics of intersubjectivity*. They recognised three different types of tactics:

- Adequation and distinction
- Authentication and denaturalisation
- Authorisation and illegitimation

Adequation "involves the pursuit of socially recognized sameness," while *distinction* "is the mechanism whereby salient difference is produced" (Bucholtz and Hall 383, 384). The mechanism of adequation is seen in the comment on the Manglish website by QuaChee who wrote that "each country should speak their own style, though, yes, they must know Brit or American English for business or work. But when back in Malaysia, let's do it our way!" The contrary tactic of *distinction* is well represented by Majapahit's comment that, "Talking or speaking proper english doesn't mean u have to have an accent like the foreigners." Majapahit strongly

expresses his support for the tactic of distinction when he writes, "I hate people who try to have angmoh accent juz to impress. Bloody fake!"

In discussing *authentication*, Bucholtz and Hall comment that, "In the standardization of a national language, for instance, a single language variety and the people who speak it are frequently repositioned as more central, fundamental, or 'authentic' to the historical workings of the nation-state" (385). This is the tactic that purists use to establish an identity as in the case of *súddh* or "pure" Sanskritic Hindi, and in the preference for British English over American English in countries of the Commonwealth. In language planning, the "pure" language is sometimes promulgated as the national standard for education even when nobody speaks it. This is the case of súddh Hindi in Fiji. The colonial government of Fiji established súddh (or "pure") Hindi as the standard because this variety enjoyed the status of official language in India. It was a variety that was already codified and was incorporated as a language of education in Fiji, although no Fijians use súddh Hindi and very few teachers use it in class (Shameem, 2007).

When identities become severed from claims to reality, the process of *denaturalisation* "highlights the artificiality and non-essentialism of identity" (Buchholtz and Hall 386). Examples of denaturalisation are found most often in the phenomenon of crossing. Ben Rampton (2005) describes language crossing as the practice of using a language variety that belongs to another group. Crossing includes a wide range of sociolinguistic practices such as the "outgroup use of prestigious minority codes" (for example, white suburban teenagers in America using African-American English speech markers to affiliate with hip hop culture) and pejorative secondary foreigner talk (the mocking use of a foreign accent to convey distance from a particular ethnic group).

The final pair of tactics of intersubjectivity are *authorisation* and *illegitimation*. As Buchholtz and Hall write, "The authorization of a single, often highly artificial, form of language as the standard may be central to the imposition of a homogeneous national identity in which modern elites and speakers who once held traditional authority have very different roles" (386). An authoritative identity may be constructed by the strategic use of linguistic markers of expertise such as the specialist register of a court of law that construct authority for lawyers and judges or the technical vocabulary and discourse practices of the medical profession that construct authority for physicians. In contrast, *illegitimation*, "or the process of removing or denying power may operate either to support or to undermine hegemonic authority" (Buchholtz and Hall 387).

Conclusions

In conclusion, I have made the case against the identification of a personal identity with language, and I have argued instead that speakers and writers create identities by participating in practices with others. Identities are fluid and co-constructed. A consequence of viewing identity as tactics of intersubjectivity is that contact between

local languages and a hegemonic language like English neither endangers the local languages nor the identities of people in a multilingual society. The mother tongue is not the only means for expressing emotion, intimacy, and identity. Nor is the hegemony of English proof against the historical processes of language change that adapt it to local needs and circumstances. Long live Konglish, Singlish, and, yes, Manglish. Local languages, local Englishes, and international Standard English are in constant contact and flux. The outcome of the contact is subject to the relations of power between speakers and the political attitudes of the community in which they live. The identities of speakers inhere in their actions not the language they speak, actions that differ from practice to practice and from speaker to speaker.

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