

Age as a factor in ethnic accent identification

In this paper, I look at age as a factor in ethnic accent identification. Research on the topic of discriminability of ethnicity in voice in Singapore English (SgE) has received some attention over the last three decades, but in the form of only three published works by Platt et al. (1984), Lim (2000) and Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo (2000). Lim's (2000) and Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo's (2000) studies show that ethnicity in SgE can be perceived with high degrees of accuracy, contrary to the study by Platt et al. (1984), where their test on telephone switchboard operators showed that these operators could not identify the ethnicity of young Singaporeans beyond the fact that they were Singaporean. All three studies were carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, which means that there has not been any study on accent identification in SgE done in the last 10 years. The dearth of research on this topic in the last 10 years means that the current situation of ethnic identification in SgE remains unknown. The question then arises: can SgE speakers today distinguish between ethnic groups based on voice? Furthermore, as noted earlier, the three above-mentioned studies had contradictory findings. Lim (2000) and Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo (2000) used college students as informants, whereas the study by Platt et al. (1984) used working adults. Can age be a factor in ethnic accent recognition? Do Singaporeans of different generations perceive ethnic accents differently?

To answer the question, a simple but carefully designed and controlled ethnic perception test was carried out on 325 Singaporean informants of the three major ethnic groups across three age groups in Singapore, of which 126 were Chinese Singaporeans, 109 were Malay Singaporeans and 98 were Indian Singaporeans. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the informants' ethnic group and age group.

Age/Ethnicity	Chinese Singaporean	Malay Singaporean	Indian Singaporean
19-30	66	40	35
31-49	30	29	31
50-65	32	30	32

Table 1. Breakdown of informants' ethnicity and age group

The participants were all English speakers and all had at least 12 years of formal education. They were born between 1943-1989, or aged, at the time of data collection, between 19-65. The perception test involves participants listening to a set of test stimuli and identifying the ethnic group – namely Chinese, Malay or Indian – of the speaker(s) in the stimuli. The participants are from the same three ethnic groups of Singapore and these participants are broadly classified across three different age groups. The aim is to find out how accurate ethnic identification is based solely on short utterances, and if there is a difference in accuracy across the different age groups. The test stimulus comprises 20 short utterances, each utterance of no longer than 5 seconds. Each utterance from the test stimuli was played 3 times to each participant from a computer speaker in a quiet environment. Informants were given a questionnaire and asked to indicate, for each utterance, if the speaker was (i) Singaporean, and if so, (ii) if the speaker was Chinese, Malay or Indian.

The results show that listeners of different age groups identify ethnic accents with different rates of accuracy, and this is especially so for the Malay and Indian accents, where the rate of accuracy is highest with the oldest group of informants, and lowest with the youngest group of informants. What is interesting is that young Singaporeans seem to present themselves as a homogenous “accent-deaf” group, imperceptible to ethnic nuances in voices. This is not only

true for other ethnic accents – these young Singaporeans are not even very good at identifying their own ethnic accents. This might be a testament to the successful national campaign of inculcating the Singaporean identity. As the national policies build in these young Singaporeans a sense of national identity rather than ethnic identity, these young Singaporeans may perhaps have moved their sense of national identity to the perceptual, recognizing a national Singaporean accent, rather than one that is coloured by ethnic traces. To borrow Fishman's (2010) term, the "ethnic consciousness" of the youths seems to be weakening.

As this study has shown how there is a cross-generational difference in the perception of ethnic accent, one wonders if there can in fact be a link between perception and the construction of ethnic identity. When one is afflicted with accent deafness, does that signal an end to one's ethnic consciousness and ethnic affiliation?

References

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