Lingnan University 嶺南大學 香港 Hong Kong

Department of English

Research Seminar Series

Language and identity among elite students: Grounded highflyers in Singapore

ILP: 1 Unit (IED)

29 September 2026 (Tue)

2:00 - 3:00 PM

LYH317
(Lau Lee Yuen Haan Amenities Building)

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Luke Lu is Assistant Professor of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Before academia, Luke was a secondary school teacher for five years. He is primarily interested in approaches to interactional sociolinguistics and ethnography, pertaining to issues such as transnational mobility, education, language rights, language planning and policy, and ethnicity. Such research has been published in *Language Policy, TESOL Quarterly, and Language in Society*. His most recent funded projects involved examining the pedagogical value of Singlish in ELT classrooms and recovering a grassroots and transnational history of Chinese language reforms in Singapore.

Abstract

This talk draws on a Linguistic Ethnography (Blommaert and Rampton 2011) of a group of 30 students (including Singaporeans and immigrants) who attended and graduated from a top-ranked secondary school (Raffles Institution) in Singapore between 2007 and 2012. I offer instantiations of my informants being involved, to various degrees, in 'the politics of moving (and belonging) and the politics of place' (Yeoh and Huang 2011:683). I argue how these processes might be better seen as *en*-territorialisation – taking up local circulating discourses; being socialised into local ways of thinking and behaving; developing ties to and affiliations with local peer groups and spaces. Thus, my informants' structured talk about their conventionalised aspirations and trajectories to move abroad is linked to Raffles Institution's ethos of elite academic ability and globalist curriculum. Singaporean informants' ready acceptance of state undergraduate scholarships sponsoring overseas education is connected to the local political economy that rewards scholarship holders with a prestigious career in the civil service. Their accounts of self-differentiation and strategies of acculturation are based on nationality and time of entry into Singapore, rather than race (which is a key criterion of immigration). This is related to wider anti-immigrant sentiment and negative connotations of being overtly Chinese. Their consistent valuation of Standard English and Singlish is a reflection of their participation in and affirmation of localised peer groups. Taking these processes together, informants are seen to construct and consolidate their consecrated positions (cf Bourdieu 1990) as localized academic elites in the Singaporean sociopolitical field of power.

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