

### Statement of contributions to diversity and equity

My 11-year career as a linguistic anthropologist started out, as most do, with a question: What is Singlish? As an undergraduate student in Singapore, I grew up with the language, used it liberally in most interactional settings, and often found myself wielding it as a badge of national identity and pride. I thought I knew what Singlish was, seeing that among other things, I *spoke* it—but as I spent more time studying it, I gradually realized that while claiming linguistic expertise may have been a productive rhetorical move for me personally, I still did not have a satisfactory answer on what it really was. Singlish's origins as a contact language and ironically, its lack of a standard variety make it notoriously hard to pin down, its constantly shifting forms often obscuring the meaningful ways it can be described. Over the years, my research has been based on one main belief: that describing Singlish is not just about what people speak, but about what speakers *do*. My dissertation takes Singlish as a space of speaker-listener intervention and negotiation, and it is within this space where the micro-negotiations of a "right" word, or a more "authentic" accent unveil the hard-fought battles for speaker recognition. We can thus visualize this *Singlish-ing* space as a critical zone of knowledge and culture construction, one that has the potential to create the new and reimagine the old, even as we recognize its entrenchment in omnipresent asymmetrical systems of power throughout Singapore's development as a nation. Singlish as a language, then, is produced and reproduced, over and over again, a product of *doing* Singlish by invested parties.

I have increasingly found parallels between my research and my teaching in the imagining of this third space. Mary Louise Pratt's call to reconceptualize the classroom as a "contact zone", where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of powers" (1991: 34), has been essential in helping me understand the erasure that minority students often experience in a classroom, and the central role teachers play to ensure that their voices are heard and valued. In the same way that speakers of Singlish fight passionately to define what Singlish is as opposed to English, it is important to remember that the contact zone is often the *only* space where subordinate peoples are able to acquire any form of capital, linguistic or otherwise. The negotiations that occur within the contact zone are therefore extremely high stakes, making it all the more crucial that meaningful interactions are encouraged, through the facilitation of a fully engaged instructor. But what does this actually mean, practically speaking? What are some specific examples of "the pedagogical arts of the contact zone" that will make the classroom the ultimate site for learning (Pratt 1991:40)?

Joseph Harris, in a critique to Pratt's theorization of the contact zone, makes a strong point about motivation: what must teachers do as they reimagine their classrooms, to give students *reasons* to find "claims and interests that extend beyond the borders of their own communities" (1995: 39, emphasis added)? As he rightfully points out, students can and will, choose not to venture into a contact zone that subjects them to continued misunderstanding and fetishization. Through my teaching experiences over the years, I have found that it has been the most beneficial to approach and encourage diversity in my classroom through two main principles:

1. finding a balance between the safe spaces of shared experiences and the uncertainties of difference; and

2. scaffolding assignments that help move students from novice to expert.

In other words, in ways reminiscent of how Singlish speakers identify themselves to members of their community through the explicit display of colorful stickers, t-shirts, and bags printed with humorous Singlish tokens, students need to have reason to want to engage (safely) in the displaying and sharing of their differences in a potentially dangerous space. In my introductory sociolinguistics class (LING 1000 Language in U.S. Society), students complete a slang assignment near the beginning of the semester. In this assignment, students are encouraged to identify a community of practice they belong to and come up with a list of slang words or phrases that are exclusive to said group to analyze. In that process, students are able to recognize that their specific linguistic practices, often dismissed as youth speak, nonstandard and thus not valuable, are in actual fact important building blocks to understanding how language evolves. Slang terms are also almost always humorous ways of how speakers euphemize taboo and controversial topics within their cultures, which then opens up the classroom for fun discussions of linguistic diversity, language borrowing, and language mixing.

That being said, this is in no way an endorsement of maintaining a “more welcoming” or “less threatening” classroom, but purely a scaffolding step that allows students to gradually attain the knowledge and skills to engage in productive conversations on diversity and equity. Over the course of the semester, LING 1000 moves into more serious discussions of language and its intersection with race, ethnicity, and gender. These are issues that are fundamental to an academic exploration of the field of sociolinguistics, but are also issues that embody the potential hostilities of the contact zone. In order to for students to navigate them fruitfully, a gradual opening of safe spaces is required, a process that is necessarily guided by the instructor through thoughtful assignments and lectures.

The question of considering diversity in my work, as I occupy the dual roles of a scholar of contact languages and multilingualism and a graduate instructor, finds solutions in providing a forum for underrepresented peoples and students to articulate what is valuable to them, in the belief that engaging with these ideologies would have effect on the ultimate products that develop from the act of cultural mediation itself.

## References

- Harris, J. (1995). Negotiating the contact zone. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 27-42.  
Pratt, M. L. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*, 33-40.