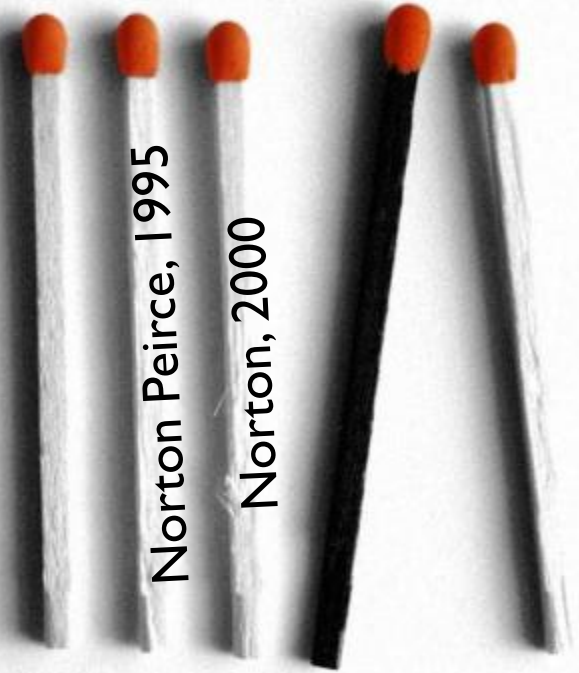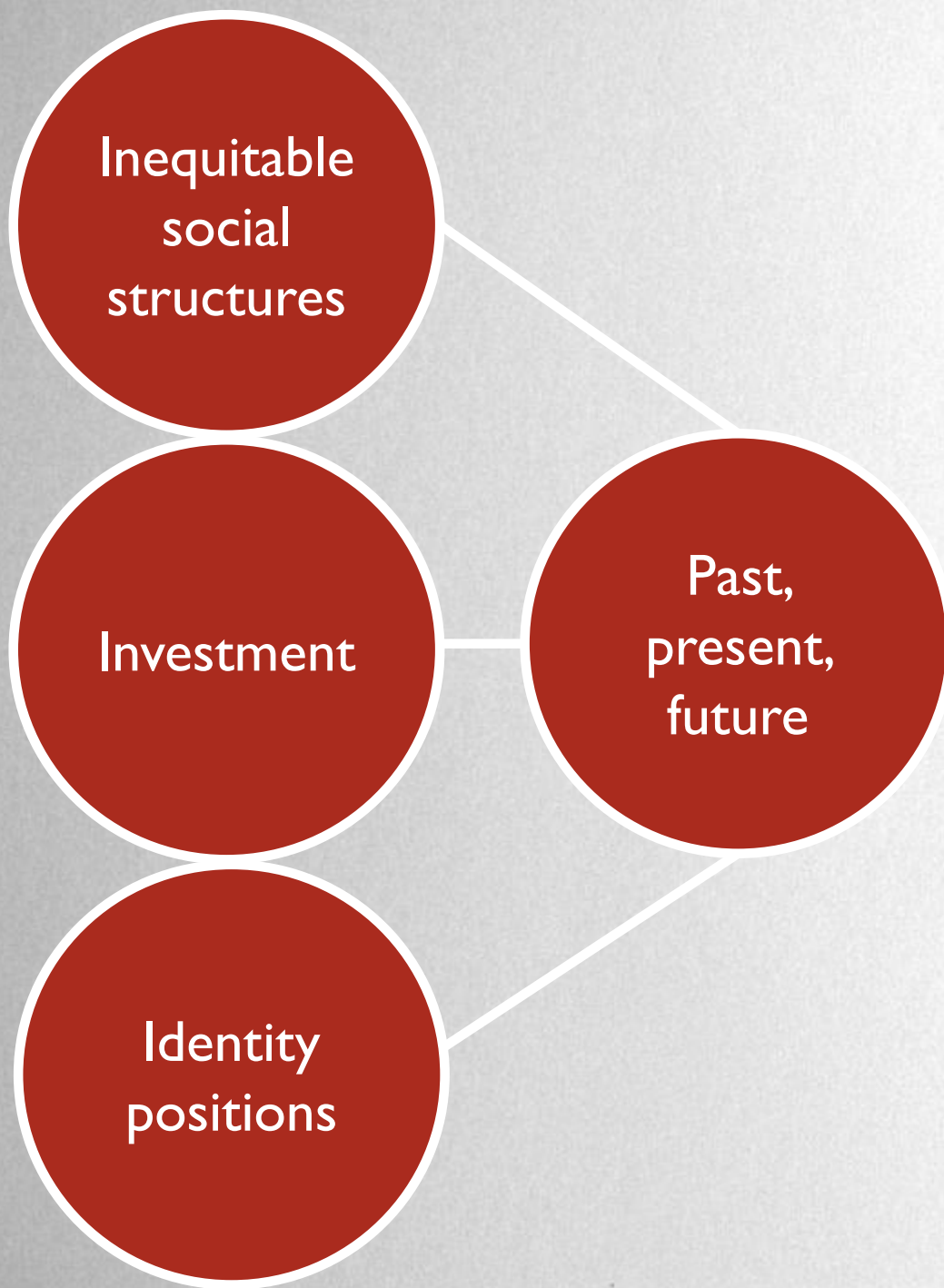# Me and those English-speaking Elites

Uncovering the Identity of One Minority English Language Learner (ELL) in Singapore

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Inequitable social structures

Investment

Identity positions

Past, present, future

Identity

Norton Peirce, 1995

Norton, 2000
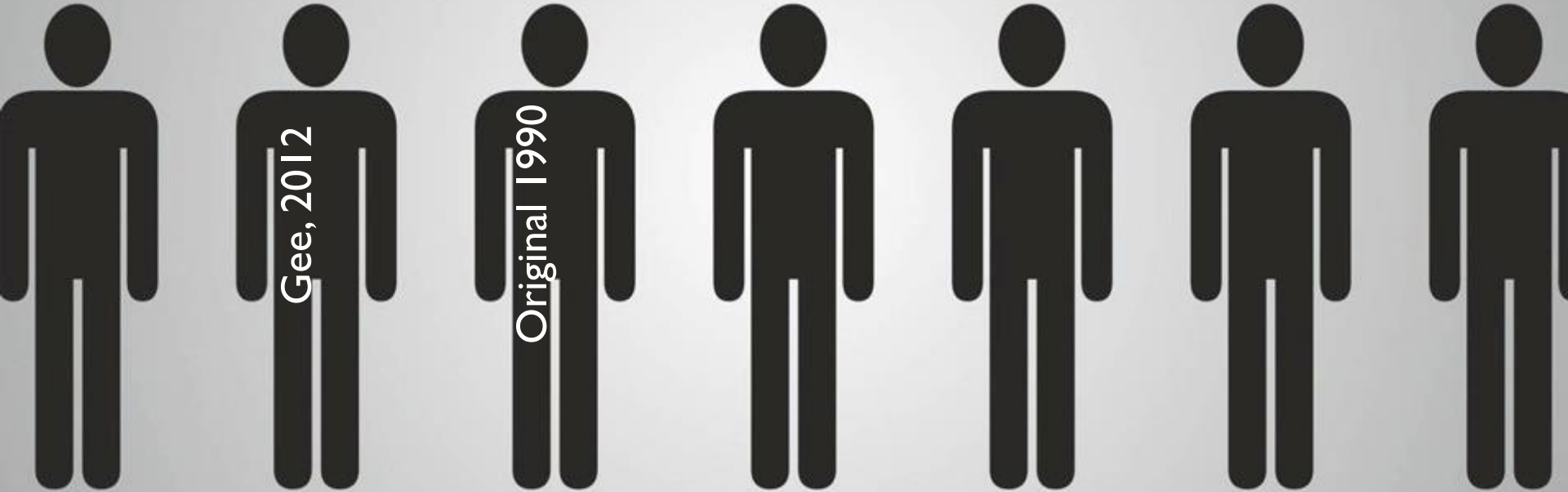
Mushfake

making do with something less when the real thing is not available   Gee, 2012

Singapore: English Only?

English as lingua franca v. native tongue (Alsagoff, 2010)

More English-dominant speakers at home (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011).

What about the non-English speakers?

Who is a minority ELL?

Home language environment =
Mother tongue, no/little English

Not international ESL (English as
2nd Language) students

Singaporean Chinese, Mandarin/Hokkien-speaking home background

Relatively lower English proficiency
PSLE "C" / N-Levels "B"

Former Normal Tech and ITE student

Case Study: "Rachel"

Research Questions

How have Discourses and social relationships influenced Rachel's English language learning experience?

What has motivated Rachel's investment in learning English and how has it changed over time?

What identity positions have been useful in helping Rachel learn English?

15 students wrote responses to two prompts on past & current English learning experience

6 students selected for face-to-face interviews

"Rachel" chosen as case study

Methodology

Narrative Inquiry

80 min semi-structured interview

Questions about family, school, classmates and teachers

Discourses

Data analyzed according to themes

social relationships

investment

Verified analysis with Rachel

Limited English

Primary Discourse =

Mandarin speaking / working class

Limited right to speak during English lessons and peer interactions

Low investment in language learning

Primary school classmates

R: My English foundation is not that good. Then I just feel very inferior when they are talking to me in English. When I respond, I respond back in broken English, how to say, [pause] not in full sentence. So they will think what is this girl trying to relate?

I: You mean that say that to you?

R: No, they just give me that face.

Interview

Primary school English teacher

Instead of encouraging me, she laughed and criticized me, [said] that … I am a disgrace to her.

I remember clearly that she said 'stupid'

Email response

Secondary school English teacher

R: I just remember favoritism.
I: To those who can speak English?
R: Yah. … She ask them to sit near her, then she will keep asking them questions and not us, and ask us to keep quiet.

Interview

Safe Houses

School band
Interacted with students with better English; used more English than Chinese

Peer coaching
Used Chinese as linguistic capital in exchange for English

Reading and blogging
Using English skills in a non-threatening environment

Canagarajah, 2004

… I join [the] band, I have a lot of friends. Actually band helped me to improve my speaking of English.   *Interview*

R: most of my friends, I mean, those elites in English, actually help me in my English language. They prepare those assessments for me to do, guide me through. …[T]hey normally fail their Chinese. But when I teach them, they actually pass.
I: So did you get better grades [in English] because they helped you?
R: Yep, I got a B because they help me.   *Interview*

By starting a blog about things that inspire me and share my thoughts is part of learning and sharing information with others.   *Email response*

I: Can you describe the students in your class and your diploma?

R: Oh, there are all very good, way better than me. Like what I say, feel very inferior.

I: Did they behave in any way that made you feel that way?

R: Maybe the way they speak, the way they do their homework. They get prepared before coming to lessons. The way they bother themselves to answer teachers' questions, participation.

Interview

English = Challenge

I do feel afraid of speaking and writing when I am working as a group with the power elite (English elite). However, I do know that I need to make mistakes so that people can correct me and is a process of learning.

Email response

Identity Positions

Successful student

Future worker

Family provider

Investment in language learning

Flickr: Dima Bushkov

Mushfake Identity

Fear of speaking to proficient English speakers still lingers

Feels more at ease with Mandarin speakers or less proficient English speakers

Social interaction limits Rachel's right to speak but academic context gives her incentive to learn from peers

Mushfake Identity: Using identity positions to overcome anxiety when interacting with English-speaking elites

Limitations of study

Reliance on introspective self-reported data

Could have better triangulation with observations and journal reflections

Conclusions

Tensions between primary and secondary Discourses are a result of inequitable social structures

Mushfaking can potentially help one overcome the tension

ELLs become more invested in language learning when they take on positive identity positions

Flickr: Toni Blay

Discussion Questions

Are there really minority ELLs?

To what extent do we see them as marginalised?

Do you know any mushfaking students?

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