

## LANGUAGE PLANNING IN SINGAPORE: PROMOTE THE USE OF MANDARIN CAMPAIGN

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Singapore<sup>1</sup> as a multiracial, multicultural and multilingual republic has had to master many linguistic problems since its founding in 1819 by Sir Stamford Raffles. Although it had a population of about 1000 at the time (see Turnbull, 1975:5-7), no dominant culture was available as a target for the stream of immigrants who flocked to Singapore. Some of the resulting linguistic problems became the concern of missionaries, other private organizations and the colonial government. I will analyze one effort in the area of status planning in Singapore - the "Promote the Use of Mandarin Campaign" in its first stage.<sup>2</sup> This type of planning within the area of language use implies dictating which language or languages are to be learned and which are to be accepted for certain purposes. Not abiding by these 'rules' can be an obstacle or even an obstruction in achieving educational, political or economic goals. This essay will illustrate the relationships between language and achievements in these areas.

### The Ethnic and Linguistic Situation

Of the appx. 2.3 million inhabitants of present day Singapore 76% are classified as being ethnic Chinese,<sup>3</sup> 25% Malay, 7% Indian and 2% Other. The first three groups find their parallel in three of the official languages of Singapore; these being respectively (Mandarin) Chinese (all other varieties are referred to as dialects)<sup>4</sup>, Malay (it also being the national language), and Tamil. English, the fourth official language is reminiscent of Singapore's colonial history. Although there appears to be a 1:1 correlation between official languages and ethnic groups in Singapore, which would mean a more or less balanced linguistic situation, the following table of native languages with ethnic groups illustrates the opposite.

Native Languages<sup>5</sup>  
(rounded to nearest per cent)

Chinese: (Sinitic languages)	Hokkien	42%
	Teochew	22%
	Cantonese	17%
	Hakka	7%
	Hainanese	7%
	All others (incl. Mandarin)	5%
Malay: (Malayo-Polynesian languages)	Malay	85%
	Javanese	8%
	Boyanesse	6%
	Others	1%
Indian: (Dravidian and Indo- Aryan languages)	Tamil	66%
	Malayalam	12%
	Punjabi	8%
	Others	14%

The largest discrepancy between native languages of an ethnic group and their 'parallel' official language occurs among the Chinese language group. Hokkien is spoken by 42% as a native language and according to Kuo (1980:51) is understood by 97% of the Chinese in Singapore over 15 years of age. One reason for this choice is the opinion that the written forms for all Chinese dialects and Mandarin, which is considered to be the 'high' Chinese variety, are basically the same and only the spoken forms differ. Other reasons can be found in the development of the education system.

### The Education System

The role Mandarin has played in Chinese education is important for the understanding of recent developments in Singapore's education system. Until the early part of the twentieth century Chinese schools in Singapore and Malaya, all supported by non-governmental funding from Chinese associations, private persons, missionary societies, etc., used dialects as the medium of instruction. According to Wilson (1978:55-58), after the Revolution of 1911 in China the new government in Peking sought to increase its influence on Overseas Chinese and sent representatives to inspect schools in Malaya and Singapore in 1917. As a result of this visit "... the National Language Movement was



launched to encourage the use of Kuo Yu (colloquial Mandarin) as the medium of instruction in all schools" (Wilson, 1978:56). This was the beginning of the introduction of Mandarin as the 'common tie' among the Overseas Chinese. And according to Turnbull (1979:136), Kuo Yu was adopted as a medium instruction by all Singapore Chinese schools by 1935.

The British Government did not look favorably on this 'uniting factor'. In 1923 grants-in-aid were offered to Chinese schools for the first time. Possible recipients were only those schools which were willing to be inspected and to educate "Chinese speaking children through the medium of their own domestic dialects or dialects which they understand" (Nagle, 1928:91). Furthermore in Chinese schools neither the teaching of English or Mandarin was considered grant-earning; that is no financial assistance would be given for the teaching of these languages (ibid.). These principles remained in effect until World War II (for an extensive analysis of the education system see Wilson, 1978; Gopinathan, 1974).

At the end of the 1950s when Singapore gained internal self-government, the main goals of the system in respect to language were 1. "Equal treatment for the four streams, namely, Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English" (where stream means one unit of the education system identified by the main medium of instruction used in it) and 2. "Establishment of four official languages with Malay as the national language of the new nation in an attempt to unify the multi-racial community" (Report on the Ministry of Education 1978, 1979:2-1).

An attempt to describe how these goals have changed throughout the following twenty years would go beyond the scope of this paper (see Gopinathan 1974, 1976), but one could say that the emphasis was placed more and more on bilingualism. Bilingualism means in Singapore the ability to speak English and one of the other official languages each of which is also known as a 'mother tongue'; the language of the ethnic group one claims to belong to. Despite its name, it is not necessarily the language spoken at home or during childhood. Therefore, the 'mother tongue' of all Chinese in Singapore is considered to be Mandarin; that of all Indians Tamil; that of all Malays Malay.

Benjamin illustrated this with the following example taken from the Straits Times, a Singapore daily English paper:

A year or so ago, the civil servant whose actual mother tongue was Malay, but whose actual second language was

English and whose ethnicity was Chinese was refused permission to take his qualifying language exam in Malay on the grounds that it is 'only natural' that one should be qualified in one's 'mother tongue' -- in this case Mandarin, a language which the civil servant in question did not know (1976:125).

A recent change, called 'streaming', has been a further step in the direction of bilingual education. Streaming means that after they are assessed through testing at the end of primary III (when they are age 9 to 10), pupils are divided into three groups designated to attend one of the three following school types; a) extended bilingual stream, b) normal bilingual stream, or c) monolingual stream. In the extended and the normal bilingual streams (those leading to higher education), either English or Mandarin is used as the main medium of instruction. If English is the main language, the second language can be either Mandarin, Malay or Tamil; if Mandarin is the main medium, English must be the second. The medium of instruction in the monolingual stream is directly dependent upon the language of the ethnic group (see footnote 3) to which the pupil belongs; e.g. Chinese students are taught in Mandarin (with some oral English); Indian, Malay or Other (Eurasian, Arab, etc.) are taught in English. The implementation of this system went into effect in January 1980.

#### "Speak Our School Languages" Campaign<sup>6</sup>

When the brief description of the education system is compared with the statistics presented in the above table, one can presuppose that most of the children entering school are taught in a language which is not their native language; indeed, 85% of children are currently taught in languages they do not speak at home. This problem was described in the Report on the Ministry of Education 1978 as follows:

If as a result of a world calamity, children in England were taught Russian and Mandarin, while they continue to speak English at home, the British education system would run into some of the problems which have been plaguing the schools in Singapore and the Ministry of Education (1979:1-1).

The Ministry of Education felt if the amount of time spent speaking the school language (meaning in this case English



and Mandarin) were increased, proficiency in these would rise. Therefore a 'Speak Our School Languages' campaign was started at twelve selected Singapore schools in July 1979. The purpose of this campaign was to increase the amount of English and/or Mandarin spoken during school recesses, at lunch, and even in the bathrooms. During the campaign the negative aspects of speaking Chinese dialects at home, at school, or in general, were emphasized. Posters with the saying 'dialects cannot communicate your educated thoughts and refined feelings' (Straits Times, July 11, 1979) were used in one school. In another school penalties were imposed on students who continued to speak dialects.

A survey done by the Ministry of Education on the effects of the campaign showed that the amount of English and/or Mandarin was increased in comparison to the amount of dialects which was spoken at most schools.

#### "Promote the Use of Mandarin" Campaign

Another campaign called "Promote the Use of Mandarin" was organized by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Singapore as "a response to recent government statements that the use of dialects, instead of Mandarin, is hampering the Republic's bilingual education policy for the Chinese, and overburdens the learning process of the young" (Straits Times, September 7, 1979). The ultimate goal of this campaign is that throughout Singapore, Mandarin should take the place of dialects.

The campaign was opened on September 7, 1979 by the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, with a speech<sup>7</sup> which was broadcast live on Singapore's two television channels and on most radio stations. He stated that the government had undertaken a series of investigations into language use in buses and at hawker centers. (Riding buses and eating out are everyday activities in Singapore.) The results of the first investigation showed that when Chinese passengers spoke to Chinese conductors, 88% of the time they used dialects, and only 3.7% of the time they spoke Mandarin. At the hawker centers Mandarin was used only 1.2% of the time between Chinese customers and Chinese hawkers meaning that again dialects were being spoken most of the time. (It is interesting to note that in 86% of the cases the hawker responded in the language spoken by the customer.)

The Prime Minister went on to state that because of Singapore's 25% non-Chinese population, the language of inter-

ethnic communication would continue to be English. But English should not be the intra-ethnic language of the Chinese community. He pointed out that this danger exists as long as dialects were used instead of Mandarin. He appealed to Chinese parents to choose English and Mandarin instead of English and dialect for their children. In conjunction with the campaign, Lee Kuan Yew stated that the administration would be taking the following actions:

All government officers, including those in hospitals and clinics, and especially those in manning counters, will be instructed to speak Mandarin except to the old, those over 60. All Chinese taxi drivers, bus conductors, and hawkers can and will be required to pass on oral Mandarin test, or to attend Mandarin classes to make them adequate and competent to understand and speak Mandarin to their customers.

Throughout the speech the Prime Minister tried to make it clear that the choice for Singaporean Chinese was between dialects and Mandarin and not between English and Mandarin. He ended his speech by saying:

This is a stark choice - English-Mandarin, or English-dialect. Logically the decision is obvious. Emotionally, the choice is painful.

The government officials are thus encouraging everyone, and making it mandatory for Chinese Singaporeans who work with the public to break with the traditional speaking of dialects and to support the use of English and Mandarin, in order to secure for Singapore a place within East (i.e. China) - West trade and development (scientific and technological exchange).

The campaign and all activities accompanying it were given extensive coverage not only from the Chinese newspapers but also from two English dailies (Straits Times and New Nation). Statements of ministers, people on the street, etc., were printed and all actions taken by firms and administration were reported. The largest Chinese Singapore newspaper, the Sin Chew, distributed stickers with the following slogans written in Chinese characters and in some cases also in English: "Make Mandarin the common tongue of our Chinese community", "Speak Mandarin instead of dialects". These stickers were seen at hawker centers, in public buses, on private cars, all over Singapore.



Early in the campaign the government administrative personnel began wearing yellow plastic badges saying in Chinese characters "I can speak Mandarin". Also policewomen and - men who were on street duty wore such badges if they were capable of speaking Mandarin. Several large department stores have included a statement such as "We speak Mandarin" or "We support the speak Mandarin campaign" in their advertisements in the Straits Times.

The campaign was also supported by a host of programs designed to help people learn Mandarin. Various community centers and schools developed Mandarin classes for older people and parents of schoolchildren. Rediffusion, a private radio broadcasting company which rents receivers for its primarily Chinese programs, began sending Mandarin classes for speakers of the various dialects; that is, classes designed for Hokkien speakers, Teochew speakers, or Cantonese speakers. The government owned and operated Singapore Broadcasting Company, which is responsible for television programs and regular radio programs in Singapore, started a series of Mandarin lessons broadcasted twice a week. These were accompanied by the appropriate texts printed in the Straits Times.

The courses offered by private institutions for Mandarin were stormed after the start of the campaign. The YMCA and various other language course holders reported that their classes were booked out well in advance. The Ministry of Culture prepared a four-part course, each part consisting of one book and a cassette, "of conversational Mandarin lessons designed for officers in the public service who wish to learn the language in response to the Speak more Mandarin and Less Dialects Campaign."<sup>8</sup> (Ministry of Culture, 1979: Preface) The first part was released for sale in December 1979 and was sold out within two days. (However, popular support was not given to the Singapore Broadcasting Company for the dubbing, in Mandarin, of a popular Cantonese television series; the Chinese population complained that the use of Mandarin seemed artificial in these films and that older people could no longer enjoy them.)

The "Speak Mandarin" campaign was also supported, starting in late 1979 by the use of television commercials promoting the use of Mandarin. Each commercial showed a typical scene from Singaporean life, such as buying at the market, picking children up at school, or eating at a hawker center. During these scenes Mandarin was spoken accompanied by Chinese character subtitles. After the scenes the slogan "Speak Mandarin instead of dialects" was shown in English and in characters.

Reactions towards the campaign came not only from the Chinese but also from the non-Chinese communities in Singapore. Those ethnic Chinese favoring the campaign felt a common language would create an extra common bond among the Chinese community, which has traditionally been divided along dialect boundaries. In Singapore the differences among the various dialect groups were reflected by special ghettoization along professional (e.g. Hokkiens as merchants, Cantonese as skilled workers), and cultural (different foods, types of Chinese opera, religious customs, etc.) lines.

These dialect groups were organized into clans (some of which still exist today) which aided the immigration of new clan members from China. Some people supporting the campaign went so far as to call the Chinese who did not speak Mandarin non-Chinese, that is, Chinese who had forgotten their ethnic roots. These supporters argued that through Mandarin a common cultural heritage can be found for the Chinese in Singapore. However, another group of ethnic Chinese felt that their cultural roots were to be found in their dialects and not in Mandarin itself. These critics argued that while Mandarin could be an important means of communication in the economic life of Singapore (e.g., in facilitating trade with the People's Republic of China), it should not be forced within a very limited period of time upon the total Chinese populations.

The reaction of non-Chinese towards the campaign had not been as well publicized as that of the ethnic Chinese. Besides the support voiced by various non-Chinese members of Parliament and the government, a fear that Mandarin was going to be imposed on the Malays, Indians and Euroasians seemed to exist in the community at large. In late 1979, the Affiliates of the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organization urged the Council "to ask the government to clarify the impact of the Speak More Mandarin and Less Dialects Campaign on the other races" (Straits Times, Dec.10, 1979). This call for additional information appears to express uncertainty about the consequences of the campaign for the non-Chinese in Singapore. To counter some of this uncertainty caused by the campaign more emphasis was placed on the 'mother tongues' of the Malays and Indians. Several articles appeared in the Straits Times and the New Nations stressing the importance of Malay and Tamil for their respective ethnic groups. This emphasis went so far that Devan Nair, an Indian government member, suggested that a "Speak Tamil Campaign" should be started among the Indians. This was countered by strong criticism from the non-Tamil Indian population which felt that their own lan-



guages and not Tamil were the symbol of their cultural identity and that the forcing of Tamil upon them was the same as forcing English or Mandarin with their respective cultures upon them.

### Justification of the Campaign

The "Promote the Use of Mandarin" Campaign can be seen as an effort to support the Singaporean government's goal of universal bilingualism (meaning the ability to speak English and one other official language) which is considered an economic and political necessity for the development of the nation.

The relationship of English and Mandarin is best illustrated by looking at the language skills demanded by industry and commerce. A sample<sup>9</sup> of classified ads over a ten months period in the Straits Times showed that of the ads which called for specific language knowledge (19% of the total ads, with another 24% calling for educational qualifications which imply the knowledge of English) 96% asked for English proficiency whereas 40% called for Mandarin (these percentages indicate how often English or Mandarin alone, together, or in combination with dialects or other languages appeared). This shows that knowledge of English is still the most important linguistic factor in public and private economic life. Although Mandarin is gaining importance for economic development (because of the trade relationships with the People's Republic of China), it has not yet reached the status which English maintains. It is not only trade relationships and ethnic unity that have prompted the campaign. The government also justifies the campaign by calling attention to the high 'costs' of multilingualism, especially among the Chinese in Singapore.

The political importance of bilingualism lies in Singapore's multiracial and multicultural policy. Each ethnic group has, at the same time its own identity and a national identity. The 'mother tongues' are used ideally as the languages of intra-ethnic communication and English as the language of inter-ethnic communication (see Kuo, 1980). Each ethnic group was to maintain its own culture but, inevitably, with the acquisition of linguistic skills in English came a certain type of modernization called 'Westernization' of those English-educated. One of the consequences of this development has been described as the estrangement from traditional values and moral standards (see Murray, 1971). This 'deculturisation', as it was called by the Ministry of

Education, could best be combated by moral education (see Report on Moral Education 1979, 1979: passim) and by teaching children "the historical origins of their culture" (Report on the Ministry of Education 1978, 1979:1-5). For the Chinese this means being taught Chinese history and culture via Mandarin. Officially the Chinese community is a homogeneous and united political element in a multicultural state. This can be strengthened by offering the Chinese a common heritage and a common tongue - Mandarin (see Benjamin, 1976:passim).

### Costs of the Campaign for Singapore

The cultural costs of the campaign for Singapore appear to be borne by all ethnic groups, although perhaps not equally. Within the Chinese groups a synthesis of all the various dialect-bound traditions is expected to occur which will mean that one's identity as Hokkien, Hakka, etc., is to be abandoned in favor of the general identity Chinese. While uniting the Chinese and strengthening their 'traditional values', the other ethnic groups may react in the direction of a 'loss of culture'. Because of the highly competitive structure of the Singaporean job market which makes language skills an important factor for obtaining jobs, many non-Chinese parents may enroll their children for Mandarin as the second or even first language instead of Tamil or Malay. If Mandarin and English is the combination needed for advancement, many parents will opt for these languages for their children.

Another possible outcome could be the development of skepticism among the non-Chinese towards the propagated multicultural, multilingual and multiracial policy of the government. The uniting of the Chinese in a 'homogeneous' element within Singapore could be seen as a 'threat' to the remaining minorities.

### The Campaign in Terms of Language Planning

Language planning is defined as deliberate language change; that is either change in the functional pattern of language use (caused by status planning) or within a language itself (caused by corpus planning) (see Rubin, et al. 1977). The "Promote the Use of Mandarin" Campaign is one way of trying to change the language usage patterns among the Chinese in Singapore. With the Republic of Singapore



Independence Act of 1965 in which Mandarin was declared one of the four official language and with the Constitution in which it is listed as one of the languages of procedure for the Parliament and as one of the languages in which the literacy requirement for members of Parliament could be met (the other being English, Malay, or Tamil, see Turi, 1977: 137-139), the basic status planning for Singapore was established. Furthermore educational policy was used to help establish the knowledge of Mandarin. But these measures alone did not suffice to establish Mandarin's position within the community as a whole. That is the best job opportunities were for English speakers; the most recognized and prestigious form of education was in English and in Great Britain; participation within the political system was easier if English was known; and only English testimonies and documents are admissible to judicial proceedings with all other languages subject to translation into English.

The campaign and with it the economic measures taken by the government (Mandarin requirement for Chinese civil servants, bus conductors, taxi drivers, hawkers, etc.) are attempts to change this. The position which English holds, and still will hold for the non-Chinese in Singapore, is to be shared with Mandarin for the ethnic Chinese. English alone will no longer suffice.

A period of ten years was set by the Prime Minister as the goal for the replacement of dialects by Mandarin in Singapore. It is not yet certain if over 90% of the Chinese population are willing to give up their native language in favor of Mandarin. Asked as to their feelings towards this, seventy Chinese Singaporeans, interviewed by the Straits Times one day after the start of the campaign responded "The head says 'yes' but the heart dithers ..." (Sept. 8, 1979) but at the same times felt that Mandarin must replace dialects. One must wait and see if economic, cultural and political factors around the campaign can convince the Chinese population of Singapore that there is no alternative but "speak more Mandarin and less dialects".

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Research for this paper was done during fieldwork in Singapore in 1978-1980 and was supported by the Volkswagen Foundation, Hannover. An earlier version was presented at the Language and Power Conference, Rockefeller Foundation Study and Conference Center, Bellagio, Italy, April, 1980.

- 2 A description of all language planning processes going on in Singapore and the position of the other languages would go beyond the purpose of this paper. - For such see DeSouza, 1980; Afendras and Kuo, 1980.
- 3 Ethnic group in Singapore is usually based on the ethnic groups of the father. This means that a child A with a Chinese father and an Indian mother would be considered Chinese. If this child A (a male) married an Indian woman, their child B would also be considered Chinese even though three of his four grandparents were Indians.
- 4 A discussion as to the classification of the various forms of Chinese (i.e. Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew, etc.) will not be presented here. The Singaporean form of classification will be used; that is all spoken varieties of Chinese except Mandarin will be referred to as dialects.
- 5 Compiled from Arumainathan, 1973.
- 6 The use of campaigns in Singapore is quite common. In 1979, the following campaigns took place: Courtesy campaign, Health campaign, and the Promote the Use of Mandarin Campaign.
- 7 It should be noted that the Prime Minister's speech was delivered in English and in Hokkien. He presented a short summary at the end in Mandarin, saying that those who knew and used Mandarin were not the object of the campaign and therefore his speech need not be in Mandarin.
- 8 "Speak more Mandarin and less Dialects" is a second name for the campaign which was used commonly in the press, on posters and in signs.
- 9 The classified ads from every tenth issue of the Straits Times from May 1979 through February 1980 were used as the basis for this analysis.

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