

The Impact and Implications of Language Policy and Its Evolution on Nation-Building in Singapore

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Abstract: Singapore has promoted English as the lingua franca and inter-ethnic language since independence. Simultaneously, Mandarin has replaced several Chinese dialects as the common language of the Chinese community to achieve linguistic unity and ethnic identity. This paper explores the evolution of the language policy of Singapore and its impact on nation-building and analyses the promotion of collective identity by establishing of a neutral lingua franca to replace other languages. The study also examines how the Speak Mandarin Campaign influenced ethnic Chinese people's sense of collective identity, arguing that language serves as a tool rather than a goal in fostering ethnic identity. The paper mentions that under the premise of no change in policy and social situation, the shrinking of the space for the use of the weaker languages, and even the gradual shift from a multilingual society to a monolingual one with the stronger languages, is a general trend.

1 INTRODUCTION

As a multiracial and multicultural country comprising of 8% of Indian descent, 14% of Malay descent, and the majority 77% of Chinese descent as the major ethnic groups, Singapore reflects great richness and diversity in its linguistic landscape. The Singaporean government has designated four official languages since granting autonomy in 1959: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. English is the working language for interethnic communication, while the other three are considered the official 'Mother Tongues' of each of the three major ethnic groups (Dixon, 2003). This is despite the fact that almost all Chinese used their own Chinese dialects of Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese rather than Mandarin by 1965 and before, and only 60% of Indians used Tamil as their mother tongue in 1957 (Afendras & Kuo, 1980; Dixon, 2005).

Since independence in 1965, the emerging nation has achieved a series of remarkable changes and successes, including a time-honoured and effective bilingual policy that has seen English gradually transformed from a working language and a language of inter-community communication to the primary mother tongue of all ethnic groups that dominate its society. However, some controversial language policies in history, such as the suppression of Chinese

language education, have also attracted questions and criticisms. On the other hand, Singapore's national identity and the collective identity of ethnic Chinese have also been significantly impacted by the bilingual policy that focuses on promoting English and the Speak Mandarin Campaign. This paper aims to examine and consider how Singapore's language policy has changed over time, the effects of associated political actions on nation-building, and the fallout from these policies. It seeks to shed light on how language policy is developed, how national identity is created, and how to balance the interaction between ethnic mother tongues and the lingua franca.

2 THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE POLICY

2.1 The Development of English Education Policy

Prior to gaining independence in 1965, the majority of Singaporean pupils attended Chinese schools, which were mostly separated into Chinese, Malay, and Tamil-medium schools as well as English-medium government and parochial schools (Gopinathan, 1974; Chen, 1984). English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil were the four official languages

that parents may choose for their children's education in 1966, but all students also had to learn another official language. Students in non-English-speaking schools were required to acquire English (Yip, 1990).

By 1979, just over 10% of students were enrolled in Chinese schools, and parents had ceased sending their kids to Malay and Tamil schools. After that, the government changed its bilingual education policy, mandating that all students learn the curriculum in English and become proficient in their official 'mother tongue' as a second language (Dixon, 2003).

In 1987, due to the decrease in students, mother-tongue schools were closed one after another, and since then, English has taken centre stage in the educational system (Tan, 2007). The Speak Good English Movement was started in 2001 by the Singaporean government with the goal of raising the general level of English in Singaporean society and promoting standard English there.

Singapore's English education has been widely recognised as a major success. In the 2024 EF English Proficiency Index report by Education First, Singapore was ranked third globally and awarded a 'very high proficiency' rating (First, 2004).

2.2 Conflict Between English and Chinese Education

In a 1953 white paper titled 'Chinese Schools Bilingual Education and Increased Aid', the colonial government of Singapore suggested that in exchange for more funding, bilingual education be implemented in Chinese-medium schools, introducing English and teaching science and math (Singapore, 1953). This policy was criticised by Chinese-medium schools, which argued that the increased use of English would undermine the importance of Mandarin and harm the language and Chinese community's cultural identity.

The conflict between the Singapore government's promotion of English as the medium of bilingual education and Mandarin education was particularly evident in the reform of Nanyang University. Following the People's Republic of China's establishment in 1949, the British colonial government severed ties between Singapore and Malaysia and mainland China, while promoting an 'English-first' policy and marginalising Mandarin education. Nanyang University was established in 1955, becoming the sole university outside of China to use Chinese as its instructional medium. However, the university's Mandarin education conflicted with the government's bilingual policy, leading to a series of confrontations (Wong, 2000). Between 1963 and

1964, the government, supported by military and police forces, forcibly closed Nanyang University and arrested students, sparking student protests. In 1965, the Wang Gungwu Curriculum Review Committee pushed for educational reforms. In 1975, Minister of Education and Chancellor Lee Chiaw Meng led a thorough restructuring of Nanyang University, with all subjects, except for Chinese language courses, being taught in English. The National University of Singapore was created in 1980 by the merger of Nanyang University and the University of Singapore, and the original campus of Nanyang University later became Nanyang Technological Institute, which was renamed Nanyang Technological University in 1992 (Ku, 2003).

2.3 Promotion of the Speak Mandarin Campaign

The Chinese community in Singapore, with diverse ancestral origins, used various Chinese dialects before 1965 (Afendras & Kuo, 1980). Mandarin was officially recognized as the Chinese population's 'mother tongue' by the Singaporean government in 1966 (McCarty, 2011). Researchers have identified that the various Chinese dialects, which served as the factual mother tongues of many, hindered the promotion of Mandarin among Singaporean Chinese (Man-Fat, 2005). Consequently, the Lee Kuan Yew government launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979 to encourage the replacement of dialects with Mandarin as the common language for Singaporean Chinese (Yew, 2012). Mandarin education underwent three reforms between 1992 and 2004 (Wu, 2010).

The Speak Mandarin Campaign's original goal was to replace dialects with Mandarin to reduce communication barriers and promote unity within the Chinese community. However, with the dominant status and growing influence of English in Singaporean society, many young people began to reduce or abandon the use of Mandarin. Similarly, the proficiency in official mother tongues among the younger generations of other ethnic groups also declined (Curdts-Christiansen & Sun, 2020). As a result, the target audience of the Speak Mandarin Campaign gradually shifted from dialect speakers to young people (Khiun, 2003).

The encouragement of Mandarin by organizations such as the Promote Mandarin Council, coupled with China's rapid rise, has to some extent increased Singaporean society's positivity toward Mandarin. However, the dominant position of English in Singapore remains unshakable, and Mandarin is likely to remain in a subordinate position in the long

term. This indicates that adjustments to Mandarin language policies are more about refinement rather than fundamental changes (Wu, 2010). Overall, English's supremacy in the linguistic landscape and the shift of Mandarin's value from communicative to symbolic remains unchanged (Zhang, Tupas & Norhaida, 2020).

3 LANGUAGE POLICY AND THE FORMATION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

At the time of its founding, Singapore was a typical immigrant country with a diverse and complex social structure. The different ethnic groups were distinctly separate, with no common language or culture, nor a shared historical memory. Therefore, in terms of nation-building, the Singaporean government chose to focus on institutional recognition, with cultural recognition as a secondary factor. In its early development, Singapore leaned towards pragmatism and a comprehensive Westernization, aiming to gain recognition and support from major Western countries.

The old colonial language is regarded as ethnically neutral in many post-colonial African nations. Its economic benefits and relative neutrality are often the reasons it is adopted as one of the de facto national languages (Madumulla, Bertoncini & Blommaert, 1999). At the time of Singapore's founding, the country could be largely divided into three main ethnic groups: Chinese, Indian, and Malay. Each group had its own distinct language, culture, customs, and traditions, with many smaller subgroups that differed significantly in language and cultural practices. In this context, English played a relatively neutral role between the various ethnic groups. Using English as a lingua franca not only facilitated diplomatic and economic engagement for the newly established nation but also reflected the government's neutrality and fairness on ethnic issues. Additionally, Singapore was surrounded by Malaysia and Indonesia, two countries predominantly composed of Muslim populations and Malay speakers. Within Singapore, however, the Chinese community was the majority, and its main economic and political partners were Western capitalist countries. To ensure national security and diplomatic interests, Singapore's leaders had to be cautious in issues of language, ethnicity, and culture, so as to shape the country's image on the world stage. Using English as a common language across many sectors

was one of Singapore's ways to differentiate itself from China and assert its Southeast Asian identity (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999). Thus, Singapore ultimately chose to promote English as the de facto national language, while, due to geopolitical and historical reasons, Malay was established as the de jure 'national language' — reflecting the language of Malaysia, from which Singapore had gained independence.

Apart from the considerations of complete Westernization, economic benefits, demonstrating policy fairness, and presenting a 'non-Chinese' image to the international community, Singapore's strong promotion of English as an inter-ethnic lingua franca also serves the purpose of reducing ethnic divisions and constructing a unified Singaporean national identity (Chua, 2020). In contemporary Singaporean society, the division between the three major ethnic groups—Chinese, Indian, and Malay—remains quite distinct (Frost, 2020). There are significant differences in language, script, cultural traditions, and even appearance among these groups. English, with its neutrality and fairness, is widely accepted by all ethnic groups in Singapore, helping to reduce conflicts and friction between them. Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has achieved remarkable successes in many fields, including the economy and technology. These achievements have greatly boosted national confidence and contributed to the growth of Singapore's sense of national identity. In this wave of economic and technological rise, English has played a role in maintaining mutual tolerance and understanding among the various ethnic groups in Singapore. As English has become more firmly established as the dominant language in Singapore and the space for ethnic languages has been squeezed, the unity and national identity of the people have been objectively promoted and deepened.

The Chinese community itself is made up of different ethnic groups, each speaking a variety of Chinese dialects (Zhang, Su, Zhang & Jin, 2007). Standard Mandarin belongs to the Mandarin dialect of Chinese, which is mainly spoken in northern China and accounts for the majority of the population, thus often being regarded as the representative of the Chinese language. However, the Chinese in Singapore primarily come from China's southern provinces, including the Hokkien (Taiwanese), Cantonese, and Hakka ethnic groups (Department of Statistics, 2010). During the period of nation-building, very few people in the Chinese community spoke Mandarin as their first language. The majority used their native dialects such as Taiwanese,

Teochew, and Cantonese as their first language. Although these dialects can all be written in Chinese characters, their phonology, vocabulary, and grammar differ greatly, making them mutually unintelligible.

Mandarin was positioned as the mother tongue of the Chinese community to facilitate the establishment of a clear language education system. In contrast, choosing a specific Chinese dialect might lead to dissatisfaction and even division among different Chinese groups. To promote internal unity within the Chinese community, save educational resources, and ensure that the language policy was as neutral as possible to all groups within the Chinese community, the government ultimately chose Mandarin as the official mother tongue for the whole Chinese populace.

As early as the founding of Singapore, Mandarin had already been established as the official mother tongue of the Chinese community. In the early stages of promoting Mandarin, the government did not deliberately restrict or suppress the use of Chinese dialects. However, in the 1970s, Singapore's leader Lee Kuan Yew believed that if both English and Mandarin were emphasized in education, the result would be that both languages would be difficult to master. Therefore, in 1978, the government began evaluating the previous bilingual policy related to the Chinese community and, in the 1979 'Goh Keng Swee Education Report,' concluded that Singapore's earlier bilingual education policy had been partially unsuccessful. It decided that future bilingual education would focus on English as the primary language and Mandarin as the secondary language, with students being divided into different proficiency levels, where weaker students could only learn English. The Speak Mandarin Campaign officially began during this period, and the government's attitude towards Chinese dialects gradually shifted from being relatively tolerant to intentionally suppressing them to make way for the promotion of Mandarin. Early publicity in the campaign also intentionally positioned dialects in opposition to Mandarin, using the suppression of dialects to enforce the promotion of Mandarin. Official slogans over the years, such as 'Speak More Mandarin, Speak Less Dialects' (1979), 'Mandarin In, Dialects Out' (1983), 'Start With Mandarin, Not Dialects' (1986), 'Better With More Mandarin, Less Dialects' (1988), and 'More Mandarin, Less Dialects. Make It a Way of Life' (1989), directly reflected that reducing dialect usage was part of the campaign's goal. Although, as Mandarin's position relative to dialects became more stable in the Chinese community and English posed a

threat to Mandarin's status as the ethnic language of the Chinese community, the target audience of the Speak Mandarin Campaign gradually shifted to young people who were accustomed to speaking English, the core policy of promoting Mandarin and suppressing or even eliminating dialects remained central to the campaign (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999).

In Goh Chok Tong's 1991 speech 'Mandarin Is More Than Just a Language', he argued that if the Chinese community were to maintain the coexistence of more than ten dialects without adopting Mandarin as the common mother tongue of the ethnic group, English might take its place as the inter-ethnic language of communication (Tong, 1991). This reflects that the purpose of the Speak Mandarin Campaign was not merely to replace various dialects, with Mandarin serving as the primary language used by the Chinese population. Instead, it sought to preempt the rise of English—a socially dominant language—as the natural common language within the Chinese community, by positioning Mandarin as the lingua franca. By establishing a shared language, the campaign aimed to shape a collective identity for the Chinese community. If English, rather than any Chinese dialect, became the common language within the Chinese community, it would likely weaken the sense of unity among the group. Members would instead tend to divide themselves along the lines of their respective dialect groups, corresponding to their ethnic subgroups. In other words, the collective Chinese identity could be supplanted by distinct identities tied to different Chinese subgroups. Thus, Mandarin served as a barrier against English becoming the community's common language. Through linguistic unification with Mandarin, the campaign sought to foster a cohesive Chinese identity, preventing the internal fragmentation of the Chinese community into smaller subgroups with shared dialects, while relying on English as the inter-ethnic lingua franca.

4 EXPERIENCES, LESSONS AND INSIGHTS

4.1 Constructing Collective Consciousness Through Linguistic Unity

In Singaporean society, English plays a role similar to that of Mandarin within the Chinese community. Both function as relatively neutral foreign languages within their respective social groups, reflecting the

neutrality and fairness of the language policies. By gradually replacing the existing intra-group languages used for communication among smaller subgroups, they have become the common languages for the larger groups as a whole, thereby fostering collective identity. Whether it is Singapore's bilingual education policy, which primarily aims to promote English, or the Speak Mandarin Campaign implemented within the Chinese community, the underlying behavioural logic remains consistent: introducing an external, neutral language to replace the various internal languages and dialects of the group, thereby quickly unifying the group's identity and advancing the construction of collective consciousness by promoting linguistic uniformity while suppressing or even eliminating linguistic diversity.

On the other hand, precisely because English and Mandarin possess 'neutrality' within their respective audiences, the government's promotion of these language policies avoids exacerbating conflicts between different ethnic groups or communities. This minimises the risk of the policies being perceived as favouring a particular group. Therefore, when promoting a common language (or similar unifying measures) within a collective that encompasses groups with internal conflicts, attention must be paid to whether the common language itself could influence or aggravate internal tensions and whether it can effectively contribute to the cohesion of collective consciousness.

4.2 Language as a Means of Shaping Collective Identity

People must also acknowledge that the dominance of English as a powerful language across all sectors of Singaporean society has not fundamentally changed. With the continued implementation of English education policies, the increasing proficiency in English among successive generations of young people entering various fields, and the growing number of people using English as their first language, the linguistic landscape of Singapore has been steadily shifting. The space for Mandarin, other official mother tongues, and various dialects has been progressively diminished, highlighting the trend of Singapore moving from a multilingual nation towards a predominantly monolingual one.

In Singapore's Chinese community, an important component of the broader society, there is a similar shift in the intra-ethnic lingua franca from Mandarin to English. From a long-term historical perspective, the common language of the Chinese community in

Singapore may evolve through a trajectory that begins with various Chinese dialects and ends with English. The historical period in which Mandarin was the common tongue of the Chinese population is what makes the Speak Mandarin Campaign significant. Without the campaign and the shared historical period of utilizing Mandarin as the common language, the construction of collective consciousness and the shaping of cultural identity among the Chinese community might have been difficult to achieve.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that the ultimate goal of the campaign was not Mandarin itself, but rather the use of Mandarin as a means to shape ethnic identity. Although Mandarin may eventually be replaced as the common language within the community, the role it played in fostering a collective identity for the Chinese community remains an unchangeable historical fact. This illustrates that the promotion of a language within a community to shape collective identity is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve the goal of fostering that identity.

4.3 Creating New Native Speakers Through Educational Transmission

It is also worth mentioning that before Singapore began to promote Mandarin, almost no one in the Chinese community used it as their mother tongue. However, more than forty years after the Speak Mandarin Campaign, there are now Chinese people in the community who communicate in Mandarin and even use it as their first language. This seems to prove that when a language is spread within a society, even if the language originally used in that society is quite different from the promoted language and there are no native speakers of the promoted language, as long as it is forcibly promoted through means such as educational courses and media dissemination, and applied in all aspects of society, the language may gradually be used and even transformed into the main means of communication by the collective of that society, giving rise to new native speakers.

4.4 Generally Irreversible Loss of Linguistic Diversity

With the evolution of Singaporean society, changes in the linguistic environment, and the continuous rise of English's status, the Singaporean government's bilingual policy of promoting English has also been constantly evolving and adjusting. The shift of the

Campaign from originally targeting mainly dialect speakers to primarily focusing on young people who use English as their first language reflects the government's awareness of the extrusion of the survival space of other languages in society by English as a dominant language, and its intention to maintain the status of Mandarin and other ethnic mother tongues. However, under the premise that the overall direction of English dominance remains unchanged, the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity is largely irreversible.

Although the Singaporean government has been taking measures to teach and protect the mother tongues of various ethnic groups, the strong position of English, along with its economic and political value, has led to an increasing dominance of English in Singaporean society. The overall trend of weakening mother tongue proficiency among the younger generations of various ethnicities has not changed, and there is a tendency for Singapore to move from a multilingual society to an English-dominated society, or even a monolingual society.

It can be inferred that without fundamental changes in policy or in the power dynamics between dominant and subordinate languages, the suppression and gradual replacement of subordinate languages by the dominant lingua franca in society is an inevitable trend. The impact of long-term language policies is far-reaching and profound, making it difficult to change or reverse the situation in the short term.

5 CONCLUSION

Singapore's language policy, in the context of a multilingual and multi-ethnic society, has undertaken the historical mission of building the nation and promoting development both internally and externally during special historical periods. The language policy has revolved around the promotion of English as an inter-ethnic communication language and a social working language, ultimately achieving remarkable success. The successful promotion of English as a lingua franca has not only facilitated national construction and ethnic unity,

but also laid the foundation for Singapore's cultural prosperity and economic rise.

The Speak Mandarin Campaign, which was primarily implemented within the Chinese community, shares the same logic as the bilingual policy of promoting English. The campaign aimed to replace Chinese dialects with Mandarin in order to promote unity and ethnic identity among the Chinese community. It also served as a barrier to prevent English from replacing Mandarin as the internal communication language of the Chinese community. However, the promotion of Mandarin has not reversed the dominant position of English and its impact on the mother tongues of various ethnic groups. The trend of English becoming the first language and, in effect, the mother tongue among the younger generation is an inevitable fact.

The Singaporean government's choice of English and Mandarin as languages with relatively strong neutrality in its language policy is a correct strategy for reducing internal conflicts and enhancing collective identity. This experience indicates that when multi-language and multi-ethnic countries determine their language policies, they should focus on selecting languages that are 'neutral', 'fair' and easily accepted by all parties. It is necessary to promote language unification while balancing its relationship with language diversity and cultural identity.

Overall, the evolution of Singapore's language policy provides valuable experience for multi-ethnic countries. Its successful practice also reminds us that language policy encompasses more than just language selection for communication and economic construction, but can also be an effective way to promote collective identity and shape ideology. In the wave of future development, how to maintain national identity while preserving language diversity in the context of globalisation, and how to achieve a balance between the social dominance of strong languages like English and relatively weak multicultural languages, will be a continuous exploration for Singapore and other multilingual societies.

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