

# Language Planning in Action: Singapore's Multilingual and Bilingual Policy

Patrick NG

*University of Niigata Prefecture*

## **Abstract**

Language planning is a time - and society - specific activity; any inquiry into the practices of language planning requires an awareness of the peculiar and historical context in which language planning measures emerged and were implemented, and the sociopolitical effects of these policies. The aim of this paper is to describe the language planning policies adopted by the Singapore government. An overview of the sociopolitical background will first be provided, followed by an explanation of the sociolinguistic situation in Singapore. In addition, there will be detailed discussion of the multilingual and bilingual language planning policies implemented by the Singapore government, and the ways in which these two policies have evolved and changed. In addition, the importance of English in the linguistic ecology of Singapore will also be discussed. The paper concludes that language planning in Singapore is primarily motivated by the view that language is both an economic resource as well as an emblem of culture that necessitates careful planning by the Singapore government.

**Keywords:** Singapore, multilingual policy, bilingual policy

## **Introduction: The Sociopolitical Background of Singapore**

Singapore is a small (633 square km) island state located at the tip of the Malay Peninsula. With a population of approximately 4.8 million (Chew 2007), it is a young country of many races whose forebears are from Southeast Asia, China, India and Europe. According to the 2000 census, the four main races in Singapore are the Chinese (76.5%), the Malays (15%), the Indians (6.5%) and Others (2%) which include Eurasians and guest workers from the region as well as from English-speaking countries. Singapore's racial diversity can be traced to immigration trends that formed as a result of colonial commercial practices. When Singapore was founded by the British colonial administrator, Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, it was a fishing village with about a hundred residents living on the island. However, the strategic location of Singapore as a trading port was recognized by Raffles who leased it from the Sultan of Johore in 1819. It was later a part of the Straits Settlements (a collection of Malay states) from 1867–1942, and soon rose from a humble village to a great trading port. Bokhorst-Heng (1998) observes that many other races from other parts of Asia were as a result attracted to Singapore, which led to the formation of a multiracial society. In 1959, Singapore achieved self-government and was led by the People's Action Party (PAP) under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew. Since self-government, the PAP has run

the parliamentary democracy in Singapore as a tight and well-ordered society with little or no opposition being tolerated. Singapore has become an entrepot for commerce and finance, and has one of the highest standards of living in Asia after Japan and Brunei (Kaplan and Baldauf 2003:123).

### **The Sociolinguistic Situation in Singapore**

As mentioned above, Singapore has been a place of settlement for many ethnic groups around the region since its founding as a great trading port. As a result, its racial composition has changed tremendously. The 2000 census lists the three main ethnic groups in Singapore: Chinese, Malays and Indians. Each ethnic group has been ascribed an official mother tongue by the government. Thus the official mother tongue of the Malays is Malay, the Chinese Mandarin and the Indians Tamil. These three languages are also accorded the status of official languages in Singapore to grant linguistic and cultural recognition to the multi-ethnic population (Tan 1998). Students in Singapore are required to master two official languages, that is, English and one of the ethnic mother tongues. In school, English is learned as a “First Language”, while the ethnic mother tongue is learned as a “Second Language”. The official working language is English (Bokhorst-Heng 1998). However, the English that is used in Singapore is different from the Standard English spoken by native speakers in the United Kingdom. It is an informal type of English known as Singapore Colloquial English or better known as Singlish (Gupta 1994). Pakir (1994) observes that although Standard Singapore English is used among the more educated Singaporeans, Singlish is increasingly foregrounded in the consciousness of other English users in Singapore.

The dominant ethnic group is the Chinese who comprise not more than 76% of the resident population (Lee 2001: 1). Although the Chinese in Singapore form a large demographic majority, they are far from being culturally or linguistically homogenous. According to Lee (2001), the ancestors of Singapore’s Chinese residents are from various parts of Southern China who spoke various regional dialects. In the context of Singapore, the term ‘dialect’ refers to a vernacular variety of the Chinese language, and is spoken by various sub-groups of the Chinese community. In Singapore, all Chinese belong to a dialect group, and that group is inscribed on each of their identity cards. Many Singaporean Chinese acquire some knowledge of one or more additional dialects, either through their parents, relatives, friends or neighbors. It is the practice in Singapore to refer to Mandarin as a language, while other varieties of Chinese such as Cantonese or Hokkien are considered to be dialects. Although politicians in Singapore do not recognize dialect as a language, linguists, on the other hand, view dialect as another variety of language. The major dialects in Singapore include Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka, Hokchiu, Henghua and Shanghainese.

According to Cheng (1995), the various Chinese dialects differ primarily in phonology, secondarily in lexicon, and least in grammatical structure. All dialects have different sound speech systems, even though they share some common origins and grammatical structures. There is no written form of the dialects (except for Cantonese). Different dialects are used in different parts of Singapore. For example, Chinese living

in Chinatown (Central Singapore) usually speak Cantonese while Chinese living in the Hougang area (North-East Singapore) usually communicate with each other in Teochew. In public places, linguistic difficulties arising from different dialects can be rather serious, especially for illiterate dialect speakers who stay in one geographical area and have little contact with other dialect speakers. However, most dialect speakers can speak another dialect besides their own native dialect.

### **Language Planning in Singapore**

According to Chua (1995), language planning in Singapore is closely linked to economic development and nation building. Ho and Alsagoff (1998: 202) also observe that in Singapore language choices are dictated by forces of the marketplace. However, language planning in Singapore is highly centralized. Centralized planning implies a top-down approach in decision-making and implementation. As reported by Kuo and Jernudd (1994), decisions about language policy, adjustment measures and their application are made in the cabinet, parliament and relevant ministries. Kuo and Jernudd (1994) observe that the decisions to implement national language policies are articulated by top political leaders without much consultation with specialists on language planning.

Kuo and Jernudd (1994) and Gopinathan (1998) define language planning in Singapore as an approach to language management: they state that the basic strategy adopted by the government for dealing with linguistic diversity in Singapore is to treat languages as resources and to engineer language development to targeted needs. Gopinathan (1974) explains that through decisions made by the Singapore government, different languages play different roles in the domains of the home, school, housing estates and other public places. However, Kuo and Jernudd (1994) admit that Singaporean language planning practice has allowed a gap to develop between the macro-level implementation of language norms and micro-level observation and evaluation of language use. In pursuing the macro-level implementation, individual difficulties in accommodating linguistic policies may not have been given the attention they deserve. The following section will discuss two major language-planning policies adopted by the Singapore government: the Multilingual and the Bilingual Policies.

### **The Multilingual Policy**

As mentioned earlier, Singapore is a multilingual society where a multiplicity of languages is spoken. Kuo and Jernudd (1994) explain that from the point of view of the Singapore government, language diversity is problematic in Singapore because:

Linguistic identity is associated with ethnic and cultural identity. Language loyalty could lead to inter-ethnic conflict when the functional status or sentimental values of one's own ethnic language are at stake. Language diversity weakens communicative integration and generally implies inefficiency in the management of economy and polity which

hinder the social, economic and political development of the nation (Kuo and Jernudd 1994: 87).

As a result, language planning in Singapore is perceived as fulfilling the pragmatic needs of the nation. A policy of multilingualism was developed, resulting in the Republic of Singapore Independence Act of 1965 which decreed that Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English would be the four official languages of Singapore. This means that Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are officially designated as the 'mother tongues' of the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities, respectively. For an individual, this means that regardless of what language(s) may actually have been spoken in early childhood, the ethnic group of a child's father must determine which language is officially assigned as his or her 'mother tongue'. Gopinathan (1998) explains that the strategy of multilingualism has been the adoption of a policy of equal treatment which requires that the languages of the different racial groups be formally given equivalent status. As a result, the entire population is officially constituted into four units of equal status: Chinese, Malays, Indians and 'Others' (Eurasians, etc.). The multilingual policy also entails reconceptualizing the internally heterogeneous communities as each definable in terms of one single language, paired with one associated culture (Ho and Alsagoff 1998). Thus intra-group differences among the Chinese, Malay and Indians were radically reduced by the installation of a single language for each (Clammer 1985).

Under the multilingual policy, English was accorded the status of an official language as it is the language of technology and economic development. The use of English has been defended as a necessity for its utility in science and technology, being essential to economic development from the early years of Singapore's independence. This view was expressed by the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew:

The deliberate stifling of language (English) which gives access to superior technology can be damaging beyond repair. Sometimes this is done to elevate the status of the indigenous language as much as to take away the supposed advantage a minority in society [are] deemed to have because that minority has already formed a greater competence in the foreign language. This is most damaging. It is tantamount to blinding the next generation to the knowledge of the advanced countries (Bokhorst-Heng 1988: 298).

On the other hand, the ethnic mother tongue was decreed by the government to give Singaporeans an anchor in their cultural traditions so as to avoid excessive Westernization and to prevent deculturalization. Rappa and Wee (2006) view the policy of multiracialism as a method of counteracting charges of 'linguicism' (Phillipson 1992) by speakers of the mother tongue. The term 'linguicism' refers to a situation where the imposition of English is equated to the imposition of the cultural, social, emotional and linguistic norms of the dominating society onto the dominated society, thus maintaining an unequal allocation of power and resources.

Although Kuo and Jernudd (1994) agree that the policy of multilingualism does serve the government's goal of establishing equality of all languages, in reality not all languages are equal. Pakir (1994) states that English is the premier language in Singapore as government administration, banking, business, law and accountancy are all conducted through the medium of English. In addition, English is the only compulsory language of education, and its status in school is that of First Language, as opposed to the Second Language status delegated to the others. Bokhorst-Heng (1998) observes that English plays several major roles in Singapore. English is an international language that allows Singapore to plug into the world economy. Besides being the official administrative language in most government offices in Singapore, English is also important as a neutral language for communication with other ethnic groups. For the individual, the ability to speak English is important for securing a job. As a result, the popularity of English has soared and it has become the dominant language in Singapore. Chew (1999) reported that the choice of English over other official languages (Mandarin, Tamil, Malay) was due to a pragmatic realization by Singaporeans that a lack of command over English would mean the continued marginalization of the country, and a denial of extensive resources available in English which have developed as a consequence of globalization. Hence, for the past twenty years, the use of English has become prevalent in Singaporean society. As reported by Tan (2003), in 2000 about 23% of Singaporeans claimed to speak English at home compared to 8.9% in 1980. This shows that the domain of English use has extended beyond the public to the private domains of kinship. Although the spread of English in non-native English-speaking countries has been viewed as "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson 1992), the Singapore population has knowingly adopted English as the key toward the accumulation of cultural, political and economic capital and not as a threat to their own languages (Chew 1999).

### **The Bilingual Policy**

However, the unbridled dominance of English as an official and administrative language has been a cause of concern for the nation. Chua (1995) reported that by the late 1970s, several cultural consequences of the dominance of English were revealed. While English proficiency granted Singaporeans greater economic access to global opportunities, it also created problems for the nation. This was expressed in the words of former President Wee Kim Wee:

Singapore is wide open to external influences. Millions of foreign visitors pass through our country each year. Books, magazines, tapes and television programmes pour into Singapore every day. Most are from the developed West. The overwhelming bulk is in English. Because of universal English education, a new generation of Singaporeans absorbs their contents immediately without translating or filtering. This openness has made us a cosmopolitan people, and put us in close touch with new

ideas and technologies from abroad. But it has also exposed us to alien lifestyles and values. (Ho and Alsagoff 1998: 203)

Chua (1995) reported that some of the undesirable Western lifestyle brought about through the dominance of English includes drug abuse, sexual permissiveness and political liberalism. In response to the dominance of English, the Singapore government thus promoted:

The learning of the mother tongue to give students an anchor in their ethnic and cultural traditions, thus avoiding the excesses of westernization and hopefully preventing deculturalisation (Gopinathan 1998: 21).

A policy of bilingualism was implemented and made compulsory in schools in 1966. The policy was succinctly explained by the former Minister for Education, Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam:

Our policy on bilingualism – that each child should learn English and the mother tongue – I regard as a fundamental feature of our education system. Children must learn English so that they will have a window to the knowledge, technology and expertise of the modern world. They must know their mother tongue to enable them to understand what makes us what we are today (Lee 1983: 43).

As a result of the bilingual policy, Chinese students in Singapore are required to study English as a ‘First Language’ and Mandarin as a ‘Second Language’. Chiew (1980) reported that:

The imposition of the policy was based on two political objectives. Firstly, the English component in bilingualism is seen as a means towards facilitating interethnic interaction in order to break down communal exclusiveness and to foster a Singaporean identity. Secondly, bilingualism is expected to reduce the inequalities of occupational achievement between the English-educated and the disadvantaged vernacular-educated (Chiew 1980: 238).

However, this definition of bilingualism is specific to Singapore, as it is defined by the government as “proficiency in English and one other official language” (Pakir 1994: 159). As stated by Kachru (1983), “The bilingual policy made English the *lingua franca* of Singapore, giving the policy the name ‘English-knowing bilingualism’” (Kachru 1983: 42). Pendley (1983) observes that the bilingual policy clearly compartmentalizes the role of languages in Singapore society. As a result, English becomes the official working language in Singapore while Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are the respective official mother tongues of the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities. The mother tongues are a demarcation and embodiment of culture, each serving to re-ethnicize and

consolidate separate ethnic communities and acting as a cultural ballast against undesirable Western influences (Rubdy 2005).

In addition, the government stressed the critical importance of the community language cultural link, while deploring the modern Western baggage that was associated with English, no matter how important that language might be for access to science and technology (Kaplan and Baldauf 2003). Several measures were undertaken by the government to launch the bilingual education policy. Chinese, Malay and Indian medium schools were required to study their 'mother tongue' community language (Kaplan and Baldauf 2003). Gopinathan (1998: 21) reports that school bilingualism was implemented by a series of detailed guidelines involving exposure time, subject-language matching, examinations and attainment requirements. Television programs in dialects were replaced by Mandarin to better reflect official policy requirements. Even the counter staff in government departments were deployed to promote Mandarin usage.

However, Teo (2004) observes that although Mandarin has been decreed by the government as the mother tongue of the Chinese under the multilingual policy, it is not the language first learned and usually spoken by all Chinese in Singapore. An individual Chinese may speak a Chinese dialect or English as his or her first language. Wee (2002) observes that:

Linguistic ownership in Singapore is defined in terms of the notion of mother tongue rather than native speaker. And because mother tongue is defined as a property of the community which is itself identified based on the father's ethnicity, we have an official policy that ignores an individual's linguistic experience in favor of a community's historical association or heritage (Wee 2002: 289).

Thus, all Chinese Singaporeans are required to learn and use Mandarin even though not all Chinese Singaporeans speak Mandarin as a mother tongue. Because of this, although the bilingual policy aimed to give greater emphasis to the mother tongue, most Chinese adopted English as a language of use and preference. As observed by Pakir (1994), English is being used increasingly in the day-to-day interaction between interlocutors who are Chinese in Singapore. English is also the medium of instruction in all schools and this was implemented from a 'bottom-up' rather than a 'top-down' process without strong controversy (Chew 1999). Thus, in the long run, as more parents embrace English as the language for success at school, there is a strong possibility that English will become more important in the linguistic ecology of Singapore. English is also being spoken in the homes of many schoolchildren.

By the late 1970s, it was obvious that the bilingual education policy was not succeeding and the 1978 Goh Report (the most explicit and authoritative critique of Singapore's language policies) concluded that bilingual education had not had the desired impact. The key findings as they relate to bilingualism were:

- a) Low literacy. At least 25 percent of the Primary 6 population did not attain minimum literacy levels. For early secondary school leavers in the armed forces, only 11 percent of recruits were able to handle English competently;

- b) Between 1975 and 1977, 62 percent of those who sat for the Primary School Leaving Examination and 66 percent of those who sat for the GCE “O” Level Examination failed in either the first or second language;
- c) Students fared badly in Chinese examinations, reading of Chinese books and newspapers; and
- d) The various strategies devised to improve language levels were found to be ineffective (Gopinathan 1998: 23).

The principal finding of the Goh Report was that too much was being demanded of too many in terms of language competence. The achievement of the bilingual educational policy was described by its initiator, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, as “patchy and uneven” (Shepherd 2003: 60). Lee observed that effective bilingualism, in the sense of being able to speak, read and write in two languages, was being achieved by only three to five percent of school students. The expectations of the authorities and the aspirations of parents were high but students were not able to cope with the complexities of speaking two school languages. As reported by Kaplan and Baldauf (2003: 131), the bilingual policy was a failure as students found it very difficult to learn two languages proficiently, especially when 85 percent of them came from dialect-speaking homes where Mandarin was not spoken. Ang (1998) also observed that although a dialect might help schoolchildren to learn Mandarin, having to cope in three languages was hurting students’ English performance. The policy of bilingualism being propagated in the schools was undermined by the various languages spoken by students outside schools which included Malay and Chinese dialects.

The failure of the bilingualism policy was also attributed to the attitudes of Chinese Singaporeans toward Mandarin. Ho and Alsagoff (1998) report that in the matter of language attitudes, there are signs of linguistic and cultural discrimination against the Chinese language:

Because English has a great deal more status and prestige than any of the vernaculars in Singapore, it is not uncommon for members of the English-speaking elite to show a negative attitude towards the vernaculars and their users. A case in point is their prejudices against Chinese language (Ho and Alsagoff 1998: 205).

Similarly, Shepherd (2003) observes that in Singapore, the position of English as the working language seems unassailable, given the ever-increasing trend of globalization and the advent of the Internet. It would simply not be viable to substitute Chinese for English. Wee (1990) observes that for a local Chinese to embrace Mandarin would mean to identify oneself with a community with less power economically, socially and politically. It also means adopting a less prestigious language (Mandarin) over a prestigious one (English). Mr Ho Kwon Ping, the former Chairperson of the Speak Mandarin Campaign, believes that “it is the perception of the superiority of English language and culture that underlies a negative attitude toward Chinese-ness. The English-educated elite or intelligentsia tends to see Mandarin as a second-class language



which they speak only at hawker stalls” (Mandarin – The Chinese Connection: 2000: 23).

Ho also feels that as long as English continues to expand in the linguistic ecology of Singapore, most Chinese will prefer to associate themselves with English and not Mandarin as their linguistic choice. Since language use is a personal preference, any deliberate interference by the government through the bilingual policy may not necessarily result in more Chinese learning and speaking Mandarin. The younger generation of Chinese will be reluctant to shift their language habit in favor of Mandarin due to their more individualistic orientation towards English as their preferred language choice. However, this does not rule out the possibility of Mandarin existing side by side with English in the near future, as the economic benefits of learning Mandarin with regard to business ventures in China is being gradually drummed into the consciousness of Singaporeans. Rappa and Wee (2006) believe that the economic reason for learning Mandarin, to develop economic ties with China, is an attempt by the government to persuade more Chinese Singaporeans to embrace the language. However, in recent years, the promotion of Mandarin has increasingly become an issue of contention for other non-Chinese ethnic groups as more Chinese Singaporeans adopt Mandarin in their verbal repertoire.

## **Conclusion**

This article attempts to provide an overview of language planning in Singapore and, in particular, it focuses on language policies in the context of governmental involvement by the Singapore government. We have seen that under the multilingual policy, English has been designated the official working and administrative language in Singapore. The use of English in Singapore is mainly influenced by world economic trends. Since English is an international language, it allows Singaporeans to plug into the world economy. As a result, English has become the dominant language in Singapore. However, over time, the Singaporean government has come to perceive the dominance of English as problematic. English has been accused of leading Chinese Singaporeans to undesirable Western influences such as drug abuse and moral decay. In order to counteract these undesirable Western influences, the mother tongue was given more emphasis in schools to curb the erosion of Chinese cultural values. Thus the government implemented the bilingual educational policy in schools. Under the bilingual policy, it was mandatory for all students to study English as a ‘first language’ and Mandarin or the mother tongue as a ‘second language’. Through the English-knowing bilingual policy (Pakir 1991), the government clearly differentiates the relationship between English and the mother tongue. By assigning English and the mother tongues to different domains, the Singapore government assigns a complementary relationship between the two languages.

It can thus be concluded that in the context of Singapore, language is seen not only as a resource with economic value but also as an emblem of culture. The pragmatic linguistic language planning policy adopted by the Singapore government has enabled Singapore to remain modern and competitive in the world through English but, at the

same time, maintain an Asian identity with the acquisition of the mother tongue. Bokhorst-Heng (1999) explains that the multiracial discourse in the “Asianizing of Singapore” is to ensure that Singapore remains a cohesive nation with three homogenous ethnic communities coexisting in equilibrium with each other. Thus the language planning policy of Singapore has been described as “pragmatic multilingualism”, because the concept of ethnic identity of each racial group is viewed as very important. However, the profit and prestige involved in ethnic activities do not become motivating forces blocking the progress of a whole people (Pakir 1991). Official language planning decision-makers choose a satisfactory or even suboptimal course of action to be part of the global neo-liberal trend sweeping the industrialized world. Like a chameleon, Singapore has no choice but to reinvent its identity and culture in its language planning policy in order to confront globalization (Chew 2007).

### Notes

The author may be contacted at chin@unii.ac.jp.

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Why is language planning needed? Language policy and planning decisions arise in response to sociopolitical needs. Language planning decisions may be required, for example, where a number of linguistic groups compete for access to the mechanisms of day-to-day life, or where a particular linguistic minority is denied access to such mechanisms. The changing linguistic composition of the population has resulted in legislative action, such as the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII) of 1968 and the provision of bilingual ballots, aimed at ensuring that non-English speakers have equal access to participation in government and society. Are you bilingual monolingual trilingual multilingual, or polyglot? After reading this article, we would appreciate sharing your experience with us, by commenting below, especially if you speak more than one language. Multilingual: A person who speaks more than two languages, but used often for four languages or more (3% of world population speak more than 4 languages). Polyglot: Someone with a high degree of proficiency in several languages (less than 1% of world population speak 5 languages fluently). A monolingual is someone who knows only one language.