

BILINGUAL POLICIES IN A MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY:  
REFLECTIONS OF THE SINGAPORE MANDARIN CAMPAIGN  
IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PRESS

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Singapore is a multilingual society. Of its population of 2,413,945 (1980 Census) 76.9% are Chinese, 14.6% Malays and 6.4% Indians. However, the Chinese are of various 'dialect' groups, the main ones being (in descending order): Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakka. These are not all mutually intelligible but Hokkien had become the lingua franca among the Chinese well before independence. The Tamils are the main Indian group but there are also Malayalis, Punjabis and other smaller groups. A pidginised form of Malay, Bazaar Malay, was the common inter-ethnic lingua franca but its use is dying out and many younger people have little or no competence in it. English is a compulsory school subject, either as first language, that is as medium of instruction, or as a second language. The policy for over 20 years has been that education could be through the medium of English with Chinese (Mandarin), Malay or Tamil as second language or through the medium of Mandarin, Malay or Tamil with English as second language. In practice, there has been a steady increase in English-medium education, with recent enrolments of children entering primary school being around 90% in English-medium schools. The fact that more and more younger Singaporeans have been taught or are being taught English has meant not only that English has been supplanting Bazaar Malay as an inter-ethnic lingua franca but also that it is increasing as a lingua franca among the Chinese. Unlike Bazaar Malay, of course, English, at least in its standard form, is a language of high status, and competence in it is one of the prerequisites for most higher paid occupations. Since 1975, it has been the sole language of tertiary education, except, of course, for other language studies. Various aspects of the Singapore language situation are discussed in more detail in Afendras and Kuo (1980), Platt (1976, 1977a,b, 1978, 1980) and Platt and Weber (1980).

On the other hand, although according to the 1980 Census 63.8% of the Chinese population were literate in Chinese alone or in Chinese and English and although Chinese (Mandarin) has been the medium of instruction or second language at school for virtually all younger Chinese Singaporeans, the use of Mandarin in interpersonal communication among the Chinese has not increased very much. A survey of language use on Singapore buses carried out in March 1979, showed that 75% of Chinese passengers used Hokkien with Chinese conductors while only 3.5% used Mandarin. A similar survey of language use at hawker centres (areas set aside for hawkers' stalls selling food and drinks) showed that 89% of customers and hawkers at Chinese stalls used dialects and only 1.2% Mandarin. (*The Mirror*, vol.15, No.39, 1979.)

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David Bradley, ed. *Papers in South-East Asian linguistics* No.9: *Language policy, language planning and sociolinguistics in South-East Asia*, 15-30. *Pacific Linguistics*, A-67, 1985.

Language/ Dialect	Chinese passengers speaking to			Distribution of dialect groups in Singapore
	Chinese conductors	Malay conductors	Indian conductors	
Hokkien	75.0%	30.6%	26.8%	42.2%
Teochew	7.0%	1.7%	0.8%	22.3%
Cantonese	5.2%	1.0%	0.8%	17.0%
Other dialects	1.0%	0.5%	-	18.5%
Sub-total: Dialects	88.2%	33.8%	28.4%	100.0%
Mandarin	3.7%	1.0%	0.8%	NA
English	7.0%	34.2%	36.2%	NA
Malay	1.2%	31.1%	34.6%	NA
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
NA = not applicable Notes: 1. Data on language/dialect use were from a Singapore Bus Service survey in March 1979 on 116 bus trips. 2. Of 8,914 passengers observed, 5,637 or 63.2% did not speak to the conductors during the survey because they were pass holders, had extra fares, or used hand signals. ( <i>The Mirror</i> , vol.15, No.39, September 24, 1979.)				

Table 1: Languages/dialects used by Chinese bus passengers

Language/ Dialect	Distribution of hawkers surveyed	Hawkers speaking to customers	Customers speaking to hawkers	Distribution of dialect groups in Singapore
Hokkien	37.6%	53.2%	55.5%	42.2%
Teochew	39.0%	20.9%	17.3%	22.3%
Cantonese	10.5%	14.3%	15.2%	17.0%
Other dialects	12.9%	1.0%	1.1%	18.5%
Sub-total: Dialects	100.0%	89.4%	89.1%	100.0%
Mandarin	NA	1.2%	1.2%	NA
English	NA	2.7%	3.0%	NA
Malay	NA	6.7%	6.7%	NA
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
NA = not applicable Notes: 1. Data on language/dialect use were from a Ministry of the Environment survey in April 1979 covering 295 hawkers in nine markets/food centres. 2. 13,746 customers spoke to the hawkers surveyed; the hawkers replied in 13,517 instances. 3. In 86.3% of the conversations, hawkers responded in the language/dialect spoken by the customers. 4. Customers who spoke English were mostly tourists and non-Chinese. Customers who spoke Mandarin were mostly young persons.				

Table 2: Languages/dialects used at Chinese stalls in hawker centres

On 7 September 1979, the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew launched a 'Promote the use of Mandarin' campaign. In his speech he announced, among other things, that "all government officers, including those in hospitals and clinics, and especially those manning counters, will be instructed to speak Mandarin except to the old, those over sixty. All Chinese taxidriver, bus conductors, and hawkers, can and will be required to pass an oral Mandarin test, or to attend Mandarin classes to make them adequate and competent to understand and speak Mandarin to their customers".

Hokkien, the speech variety of the numerically dominant group among the Singapore Chinese, has been the intra-ethnic lingua franca from early in Singapore's history as a British colony and remains so today when at least one of the participants in verbal communication has little or no formal education. Singapore Hokkien has been influenced by Malay and by other Chinese dialects and has also assimilated some English lexical items. The attitude of some Singaporeans, including government ministers, is that it has become a pidgin, a creole or a patois. At the conclusion of the speech previously referred to, Mr Lee stated that "because it is Mandarin, not dialect, we teach in schools, the dialect spoken will be a limited pidgin-type patois".

Kuo (1980a) refers to Stewart's (1968) classification of language planning policies in new states into two types of strategies:

- (1) the eventual elimination, by education or decree, of all but one language, which is to remain as the national language,
- (2) the recognition and preservation of important languages within the national territory, supplemented by the adoption of one or more languages for official purposes and for communication across language boundaries within the nation.

Kuo suggests that "the second approach is clearly the policy being adopted in Singapore today". Certainly, the policy of promoting English as an inter-ethnic and international language along with the three other official languages fits into the second approach, but the Mandarin campaign is obviously related to the first approach. Hokkien is, after all, an "important language within the national territory". However, the policy is one of elimination of the non-Mandarin *sub-varieties* of Chinese but it does not seek to eliminate the languages which are symbolic for each of the main ethnic groups. The common use of the term 'mother tongue' in Singapore for Mandarin, Malay and Tamil is in line with the concept of a language for each main ethnic group: Chinese, Malay and Indian.

In regard to Chinese, the Singapore policy is more similar to that of Taiwan than to that of the People's Republic of China where, according to Cheng (1979) "the regional dialect is used in schools, homes, communities, courts, and local government". Such a policy is feasible in a region such as Guangdong (Kwantung), where one dialect is overwhelmingly predominant but in Singapore, where no dialect group constitutes even 60% of the total Chinese population, it could be argued that this would not be appropriate.

The current Singapore language policy is summarised in Table 3.