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LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL POLICY: THE SINGAPORE EXPERIENCE

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"Instant Asia" is the catch phrase which the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board uses to entice tourists to visit Singapore. The Board is able to use this phrase because among the two and one-third million people who live in the island city-state of Singapore are large numbers of people representing the Chinese, the Malay-Indonesian, and the Indian races and cultures of Asia. Approximately 76% of Singapore's population is Chinese, 15% is Malay, 7% is Indian and 2% represents other races and cultures. (Richardson 1978: 31) Such cultural diversity offers the western tourist the opportunity for exotic experiences, but it also presents serious challenges to a government trying to achieve political unity amid that linguistic, racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. Language policy is probably the single most important aspect of the effort by the Singapore government to modernize the country, to unify the people, and to establish some kind of national (Singaporean) identity, as opposed to identity as a Chinese, a Malay, or an Indian.

Language planning is a very complex process, stretching far beyond merely linguistic matters. Governments which establish language policies

Must consider the relevance of economic variables and interests...; the relevance of social variables and interests (for example, the attitudes towards language and towards users of a language and the motivational links that relate sociolinguistic systems to other social phenomena. . .); the relevance of political variables (such as the expression of vested interests through problems of language); and the relevance of demographic and psychological variables.) (Rubin 1971:xvi)

Historically the role of the government in the United States in dealing with language policy has not been a significant one; however, in the past few years Congressional action and Supreme Court decisions dealing with language have concerned many. Some fear that policies are being established that threaten the melting pot theory in our country's development or that some decisions concerning bilingualism threaten to foster a separatist mentality among our citizens. In contrast to our experience, in third world countries, language policies are often among the most important that a government must deal with.

Despite the complexity of the linguistic situation in Singapore and the economic, social, and other variables present in language use in the country, the government has been remarkably successful in establishing and carrying out a firm national policy of bi-lingualism. Each Singaporean is strongly urged to learn English in addition to his native language.

Actually the language situation in Singapore is more complex than the above analysis of the population indicates. Of the 76% of the people who speak Chinese, very few speak Mandarin Chinese as their native language. Several dialects are spoken by the Chinese--Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew being the three most used dialects. The Indians mostly speak Tamil--a Dravidian language spoken in Southern India. But there are also significant numbers of Hindi and Punjabi speakers. All the Malays and Indonesians share in common the Malay language; the remaining 2% are mostly English speakers from the United Kingdom, America, Australia, and New Zealand. In effect then, the government's bilingual policy means that the Chinese must become at least tri-lingual, because the bilingual combinations the Government approves are Mandarin-English, Malay-English, and Tamil-English. Most Chinese learn one of the dialects at home (often picking up Malay and other dialects with their friends), and study Mandarin and English as second languages in the schools. All Singaporeans are encouraged to learn English. As one Singaporean educator has noted:

. . . English is promoted for its utilitarian functions and for its role in the development of a supra-ethnic Singapore identity, the ethnic languages are encouraged for cultural foundation and for the retention of traditional values. Here we find a dilemma between modern progressiveness and traditional values, between supra-ethnic identity and ethnic-cultural rooting. . .between instrumental association and sentimental commitment--all entangled in the language issue. (Kuo 1977:27)

The reasons for the choice of English as the dominant language are partly historical. Singapore was a British colony from 1819 when Raffles claimed it for the British crown until 1959 when it gained its independence as a part of Malaysia. Political and racial differences allowed the island to remain a part of Malaysia only until 1965, when it became an independent republic. For obvious reasons, during colonial times English was the dominant and prestigious language. When independence was achieved, The Republic of Singapore Independence Act of 1965 provided that "Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English shall be the four official languages in Singapore." (Malay, as a matter of political expediency, was established as the national language.)

In effect government policies attempt to create a multi-racial, multi-cultural society which is essentially an English language state with Chinese (Mandarin), Malay, and Tamil used to preserve the traditional cultures. The Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, has often emphasized the political, economic and social reasons for making English the language of government and commerce in the country. "We keep the English language for purposes of modern-day life. It provides continuity of administration, law, the sciences and technology, the way of the future." (Josey, 1976:313) In practice, since Singapore gained its independence, English has become the dominant language in the country. It is the language of the government bureaucracy; it is the language of the courts; it is the language of finance and trade; and socially it is the most prestigious language in the country.

The government, which is a freely elected government, has defended its decision to make English the dominant language in an Asian, mostly Chinese,

country primarily on the grounds that use of the English language will enable this small nation more rapidly and effectively to become modernized. Singapore has achieved wonders in commerce and industry in the past two decades. With an honest, pragmatic, somewhat authoritarian government leading the way in working with industry, labor, economists, financiers, and others it has developed the fourth largest port in the world, established a position as a major financial and banking center in Asia, earned a reputation as having a disciplined, productive labor force, and achieved the second highest standard of living (second to Japan only) in Asia. The city of Singapore is a clean, modern city. There are no slums; 65% of the population live in public housing built in the last fifteen years. The streets are swept and the garbage is collected each day. A high standard of sanitation and hygiene is maintained. Pure water flows from the taps of the city and it is possible for tourists to eat not only in the restaurants in the big tourist hotels (which dot the landscape of the island) but also at the many hawker stalls which are everywhere throughout the city. Medical care in the city ranks with the best in Europe and America. The public housing estates and the family planning programs sponsored by the government have often been cited as models by the United Nations and envied by other third world countries. (Indeed, Singapore has been so successful in its modernization program that numerous international organizations no longer consider it as a "developing" but as a "developed" nation.) The Prime Minister attributes much of the success in Singapore's modernization to the people's ability to use English:

English has provided a neutral instrument all racial and dialect groups can learn to use with no unfair bias. English has given us direct access to the knowledge and technology of the industrialized West. Without the continued use of English, Singapore would not have secured a new base for her economy, and brought up to date her role in the international and regional economy. ("Lee on Urgent. . ." 1977:14)

Although Singapore had been phenomenally successful in achieving modernization, its progress toward achieving national unity has been more difficult. Language can be an emotional issue. A person's language is a significant aspect of his culture. With 75% of the population being Chinese with a deep commitment to the Chinese language and Chinese culture, the government recognized the problems inherent in proposing that English, a Western language and the native language of only 2% of the population, become the dominant language of the country. "If you make the Chinese feel that the Chinese language and culture will disappear, or worse, that the Government is suppressing it, there will be an explosion," the Prime Minister accurately noted in a speech in the early 1970's. (The Best of Times 1980:36)

In its efforts to persuade its citizens that English should be learned by all, government spokesmen have stressed that the motivation was instrumental--that for the individual, English was the language of good jobs; that for the nation the language provided access to the knowledge of science and technology and a higher standard of living. Citizens were urged to become effectively bilingual. However, much patience has been exercised in encouraging citizens to learn English. The government persuaded the governing board of the only Chinese university in Southeast Asia, Nanyang University, to switch to English over a ten year period. Parents enrolled

their children in English medium schools only as they were convinced that it would be to their advantage to do so. However, the language policy has been divisive in the short run.

The "English educated" and the "Chinese educated" separated into two groups. Stereotypes of the two groups grew in the country. Government leaders in public speeches often referred to these two groups; they were frequently mentioned in the mass media. One writer noted that

The difference is so great that the English-educated are believed to possess different personality characteristics from the Chinese-educated . . . With the English language playing a dominant role in Singapore, it is common concern among parents with Chinese educational background that the Chinese educated are being assimilated or "corrupted." Typical comments from them--which may or may not be valid--regarding the English-educated are that they are naive, proud, selfish, immature, and unstable, with no respect for parents and elders.

The stereotype in fact is so well accepted by the Chinese-educated community that being English-educated has come to mean being out-going, care-free, fun-seeking, irresponsible and even hedonistic. In contrast, being Chinese-educated implies shy, introvert, withdrawn, but diligent, hardworking, and mature personality. (Kuo 1977:26)

Again and again in my association with the Chinese-educated students at Nanyang University in Singapore, I heard them describe their English-educated brothers and sisters and friends in terms of this stereotype.

In the long run, however, it is anticipated that the English language will be a unifying force. The "neutral" English language provides a way for the people to identify themselves not as Chinese, Malay, or Indian, but as Singaporean. The statistics reporting enrollment in schools seem to promise that the role of English in building a national identity will be significant. In 1968, 45.3% of the Chinese students enrolling in the elementary schools of Singapore enrolled in Chinese language schools, with 54.7% enrolling in English medium schools. ("Lee: Aspiring. . ." 1977:6) In 1980 only 17% of the Chinese students entering elementary school enrolled in Chinese language schools; 83% enrolled in English language schools. (Ho 1981) During the 1960's Malay students shifted from 50% in Malay language schools and 50% in English schools to almost 100% in English medium schools. Indian students have traditionally enrolled in English schools. Two studies conducted during the 1970's reveal that English speakers tend to think of themselves more as Singaporeans and less as Chinese, Malays, and Indians than do students who had been educated in their native languages. (Llamzon 1977:37)

Also a Singapore dialect of English seems to be developing. The former Singapore Representative to the United Nations once commented,

The litmus test . . . is when one is abroad, in a bus or train or aeroplane and when one overhears someone speaking, one can immediately say this is someone from Malaysia or Singapore. And I should hope

that when I'm speaking abroad my countrymen will have no problem recognizing that I am a Singaporean. (Tongue 1974:7-8)

The Singapore-Malaysia "dialect" of English was described in a small book published in 1974 entitled The English of Singapore and Malaysia by R. K. Tongue. Singaporeans often feel self-conscious about their use of English, but it is conceivable that such English could be accepted as the standard in somewhat the same way that a Filipino standard of English seems to be emerging in the Phillipines.

If the government's goals are realized, not only will most Singaporeans share in common the English language, but they will take pride in sharing a particular (accepted) dialect of that language. Mr. Lee Kuan Yew voiced this hope when he predicted "gradually we shall have a population which will react instantaneously, laugh, and cry and be angry together at the same time. We will share a common language--nearly." (Richardson 1978:32)

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the impact of language policy on Singapore life is its impact on the cultures of the people. What kind of person will this bilingual Singaporean be? As suggested above, Singaporeans have been keenly aware of the dangers of importing Western values and lifestyles along with the language. Hippyism, the drug culture, violence, western attitudes toward sex, permissiveness, and materialism have constantly been inveighed against by government leaders. Speeches lauding the "Ideal Singaporean" and decrying the "Phoney Singaporean" periodically make the headlines in both the Chinese and English language papers in Singapore.

A German scholar, in the year Singapore became an independent republic, forcefully pointed out the danger.

The main result of English education--if it is not coupled with a fairly thorough Chinese education at home or elsewhere--is the uprooting of the Chinese humanistic tradition. The English education--even if it lasts for thirteen years--usually remains superficial. . . . Spiritually these Chinese are adrift on the waves of material comfort without having any fixed cultural or moral standards. . . . Physically and emotionally they are Chinese; but culturally and spiritually they are neither Chinese nor English nor Malay. They do not know themselves what they are. (Quoted by Kuo 1977:25)

Government officials, particularly the Prime Minister, have been very much aware of this danger of deculturization. On one occasion, after reaffirming the need for English as the language of modernization in order to gain material things, Mr. Lee noted that there is

The other part of man, his culture, his values, his accumulation of wisdom in cultivated living over hundreds and thousands of years. It was embodied in folklore, in proverbs, in aphorisms, in literature. "And if you yank a man out of his cultural milieu, and you are unable to get him to take root in a completely different milieu, then he is lost betwixt and between." Lee said he had seen the products of deculturised people: they were

enervated. They lost their drive, their thrust, their confidence.
(Josey 1976:313-314)

With this danger in mind, the government's policy has followed an old Chinese saying:

Chinese learning as foundation.
Western learning for use.

Policy has strongly stressed the need to be bilingual with a thorough knowledge of the native language: "We want to give our children the best combination of languages for their future--Chinese, or mother tongue, for their ethics, values on work, and discipline in an orderly society, and English for access to new knowledge for jobs," stated the Prime Minister. (The Best of Times 1980:29)

By enacting stern laws against drug sale or use; establishing heavy penalties for ownership or use of guns; publishing edicts that people with long hair or grubby clothes will be considered last for jobs, waited on last in all public offices; and by carefully monitoring the material appearing in the mass media, many negative western influences have been minimized in Singapore. But keeping such things out of the society is perhaps an easier task than maintaining the traditional values represented by the home languages of the people or creating a new Singaporean identity. With a tremendous scientific, technological, commercial revolution going on in the country, many of the traditional patterns of culture and religion are being abandoned by the younger, English-learning Chinese, Malays and Indians. Whether it will be possible for the older values of hard work, respect for elders, discipline, and so forth, to be retained is a question that will be answered only as the youth of the country mature and assume positions of power and influence in Singapore society. The character of the "new" Singaporean can not yet be predicted with confidence.

It should perhaps be noted here in concluding that language policies have, for the most part, been formulated and defended on the basis of political, economic, and social needs. Pedagogical concerns have not played a prominent part in shaping the policies. Over the past fifteen years various approaches have been tried, numerous false starts have been made in attempting to implement the policies in the school room. It now appears that increasing attention will be given to pedagogical concerns, if not in formulating the policies, at least in establishing time frames for carrying them out and in setting goals for all citizens to achieve.

Though remarkable progress has been made in the modernization of Singapore and significant strides have been made in achieving national unity, there are yet a number of questions about what the "new" Singaporean will be. The pride, the uncertainty, the uneasiness, the mixed feelings about language and identity felt by many are expressed by a Singapore poet Lee Tzu Pheng in a poem she titled "My Country and My People." I should like to conclude by reading some lines from that poem:

"MY COUNTRY AND MY PEOPLE"

My country and my people
are neither here nor there, nor
in the comfort of my preferences,
if I could even choose. . . .

I came in the boom of babies, not guns,
a 'daughter of a better age';
I held a pencil in a school
while the 'age' was quelling riots
in the street, or cutting down
those foreign 'devils',
(whose books I was being taught to read).
Thus privileged I entered early
the Lion City's jaws.
But they sent me back as fast
to my shy, forbearing family. . . .

They built milli-mini-flats
for a multi-mini-society.
The chiselled profile in the sky
took on a lofty attitude,
but modestly, at any rate,
it made the tourist feel 'at home'.

My country and my people
I never understood.
I grew up in China's mighty shadow,
with my gentle, brown-skinned neighbours;
but I keep diaries in English.
I sought to grow
in humanity's rich soil,
and started digging on the banks, then saw
life carrying my friends downstream.

Yet, careful tending of the human heart
may make a hundred flowers bloom;
and perhaps, fence-sitting neighbour,
I claim citizenship in your recognition
of our kind.
My people and my country,
are you, and you my home.
(Thumboo 1976:161-162)

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