

To:
cc: (bcc: NHB NASReg/NHB/SINGOV)
Subject: (EMBARGOED) Speech by Minister Lee Yock Suan, 26 May 00, 9am

Singapore Government

MEDIA RELEASE

Media Division, Ministry of Information and the Arts, 140 Hill Street #02-02 MITA Building
Singapore 179369. Tel: 837 9666

EMBARGO INSTRUCTIONS

The attached press release/speech is **EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY**.
Please check against delivery.
For assistance call 837 9666

SPRInter 4.0, Singapore's Press Releases on the Internet, is located at:
<http://www.gov.sg/sprinter/>

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY
PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY MR LEE YOCK SUAN, MINISTER FOR
INFORMATION AND THE ARTS AND MINISTER FOR THE
ENVIRONMENT, AT THE COLLOQUIUM ON THE
TEACHING AND USE OF STANDARD ENGLISH ON 26 MAY
2000 AT 9.00 AM AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL, ISLAND
BALLROOM**

National Archives of Singapore

I wish to thank the Singapore Teachers' Union and the Singapore Association for Applied Linguistics for inviting me to open this Colloquium on the Teaching and Use of Standard English. It gives me an opportunity to share some thoughts with you on the efforts of the Speak Good English Movement to promote the use of good English in Singapore.

2 Whilst the importance of speaking and writing good English is widely recognised, some segments of our population were disappointed when the Government decided to send Phua Chu Kang to attend BEST

classes to improve his English. They thought we were taking the fun out of speaking Singlish.

3 In case our foreign visitors are not familiar with Phua Chu Kang, he is the popular character in our TV series by that name. An irrepressible personality with his mole, his loud mouth and his yellow boots, contractor PCK has a big following amongst Singaporeans both young and old who laugh at his jokes and his brand of Singlish, including expressions like 'Don't pray pray'. Unfortunately many students are already habitually speaking Singlish amongst themselves and the concern is that popular PCK will further accentuate that habit.

4 Last Tuesday, I made sure to tape the start of the new season of PCK, now that he has been through BEST classes, so that I could watch it after my evening function. My family and I enjoyed it thoroughly and I feel certain that PCK will continue to enjoy one of the highest ratings in Singapore.

5 Among non-native-English countries, Singapore is unique in adopting English as the common language of communication among Singaporeans and with the outside world. Our children are taught in English from kindergarten to university level, with the mother tongue as a second language subject. In spite of this intensive concentration on English, there is room for improvement in Singaporeans' general level of competence in the language.

6 When I am in England or Australia, I am impressed with the general level of fluency of spoken English across a wide spectrum of the society. People are generally more communicative and they express themselves well in English. It is after all their mother tongue and native language. This is in spite of the reported decline in the ability of their youths to write properly structured and grammatical English as a result of their long-held belief in free expression and exploratory learning. Their education authorities are now moving to a more structured system of teaching and learning and of periodic assessments to redress the situation.

7 In Singapore our education system is highly structured. However for many years there has been a reduction in emphasis on the teaching of grammar. Students are expected to learn by following various forms

of expression without a clear understanding of sentence structure and the functions of different words in a sentence. I am glad the Ministry of Education is taking action to rectify the situation, including remedial classes for our English Language teachers.

8 Despite our exposure to English from infancy, English remains a foreign language to many Singaporeans. In the HDB estates, most older Singaporeans converse in their mother tongue. This provides an environment in which their children are also more comfortable in the mother tongue. Although younger Singaporeans have been educated in English and many speak to their children in English, their own knowledge of the language impinges on their children's learning. There is also a tendency for Chinese Singaporeans to speak English with a Chinese syntax, especially in casual conversation. This is a common form of Singlish.

9 Singaporeans who have a good command of English have little difficulty switching from Singlish in casual conversation to standard English in a more formal setting or when talking to foreigners. They find Singlish colourful and a form of identification with fellow Singaporeans.

10 However these are not targets of the Speak Good English Movement. The concern is with young Singaporeans who are not yet competent in English and who may be affected by peer pressure or other sources of influence to speak Singlish as a fad and later as a habit. Schools play a key role in teaching these youths proper English so that they are able to correct themselves if they lapse into Singlish. The environment, including the media, has to reinforce what is taught in the schools.

11 It is clearly very important for Singaporeans to have a high standard of general competence in English of a standard form which foreigners can readily comprehend. Singapore is an international business hub which thrives on our growing network of international links. Our ability to communicate well and effectively in English is a key advantage.

12 English has become an international language which is widely used throughout the world. When I visited Vietnam almost a decade

ago, I found the Vietnamese busily learning English and computer applications. They were anxious to make up for lost time and catch up with the world. The affluent Japanese are also eager to improve their English. Many Europeans study English as their second language.

13 Current estimates are that in China and India alone, there are 200 million and 333 million people respectively who speak English with varying degrees of proficiency. Their total number surpasses the combined population of the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada who are the native speakers of English.

14 With so many different races and communities speaking English, it is inevitable that different variants have emerged, with their local flavours. Not only are pronunciation and accent different but sentence construction and local expressions also vary. An extreme form is pidgin English spoken by tribes in Papua New Guinea, perhaps the result of inadequate learning of English in the past from English missionaries. On the other hand certain African and Caribbean countries speak good English.

15 To communicate effectively, Singaporeans need to master a form of English which can be readily understood by the international community. Whilst it does add colour and local flavour if we sprinkle our conversation with local terms like 'pasar malam' and 'cheem', we should be conscious when talking to foreigners that they are unlikely to know these terms. In the same way English expressions often contain French, Latin and other phrases like 'lingua franca' but these are widely known.

16 As a widely used language, English is alive and changing with time. For example a popular expression that is widely used is "going forward". Now that certain things have been done, going forward we shall do this and that. I remember not long ago Singaporeans used to pepper their speech with the term 'paradigm' as in 'paradigm shift'. Now many prefer to say 'sea change'. One of the most archaic forms of English is used in Parliament. When an MP proposes that a certain resolution or motion be adopted, he says "Mr Speaker Sir, I beg to move, etc." Perhaps one day, such expressions will disappear into the archives like judges' wigs.

17 We should encourage all Singaporeans to speak good English and do it in a light-hearted and fun way. This is a challenge for our teachers. The teaching of grammar for example can be a very dry subject but it is important to master it well. It is jarring to detect obvious errors in an otherwise good speech or essay.

18 We should also be aware that there are older Singaporeans who have not learnt English in school but who are nevertheless trying to speak English. We should encourage and assist them where we can. Similarly movies which depict such Singaporeans will realistically show them speaking that way. Whilst we may empathise with them and laugh at their expressions, we should be mindful that they are not speaking standard English.

19 I hope our teachers will find it rewarding and enjoyable to teach our students good English. Encourage them to read widely and to read aloud. The art of good speaking and good conversation needs to be nurtured.

20 Finally may I wish all of you a stimulating and fruitful Colloquium.

National Archives of Singapore