

**TWO SPEECHES (COMBINED & EDITED) BY THE PRIME**  
**MINISTER, MR. LEE KUAN YEW, AT (1) ISTANA CHAP GOH MEI**  
**RECEPTION, 21 FEBRUARY 1978, AND (2) TANJONG PAGAR**  
**COMMUNITY CENTRE SCHOLARSHIPS PRESENTATION, 4**  
**MARCH 1978**

First, allow me to thank the associations and persons who have donated to the scholarship fund.

One great strength in our society is the strong support for education. It springs from the conviction of our people that our children's future depends on education.

The generous support from wide sections of the community for education springs from our tradition, founded on our history and culture. Whether we are ethnic Chinese or Indian or Malay, history tells us that through education we can improve our children's future. The history of the Chinese imperial examination system, which produced a meritocratic Mandarinate, has left its imprint on the Chinese who have great respect for scholarship. The Indian Civil Service Entrance examination system the British instituted allowed poor but able Indians

to climb up to the top through education. The Malayan Civil Service started before the war was based on merit, following the Indian Civil Service pattern.

Whilst the 20 students cannot wholly depend on constituency scholarships, these scholarships emphasise on all our students the importance of education, and the support able and industrious students will always receive.

Our task is to create an enduring society. It must have some essential common features. One of these is at least ability and ease in communicating with one another through the use of one common language in our multilingual, multicultural society. Hence our bilingual policy in education. But, in fact, for most Chinese students, bilingualism in school means trilingualism in practice. Ninety percent of parents have chosen the English stream schools. Chinese students spend 30-40% of instruction time learning or being taught in Mandarin. Except for a few, it is not their mother tongue. At home, mothers speak to children in one out of over a dozen Chinese dialects. The result is that when a boy meets friends from an English school, he speaks to them in English. Or he may speak Singapore Hokkien if his own English, or his friends' English, is not good enough.

The average student finds it difficult to master three languages – dialect, Mandarin and English. It is not easy to master even two languages well. Americans have spent about 20 years, and many millions of dollars, trying to get computers to translate from Russian to English and vice versa. They can use this for their Washington-Moscow hot line. Whole teams of computer scientists and language experts in English and Russian have not yet succeeded. It has not proved possible to translate from one language to another with satisfactory results. The fault lies not in the computer, but in the failure to provide it with sufficiently accurate instructions. No team of computer scientists has yet been able to think out the formulae how to teach, or to “programme”, the computer to convert or translate from one language into another.

First, they have not yet been able teach the computer the complex rules of grammar, or syntax, or how to make accurate sense of anything but a very short and simple sentence. Each language has its own way of using pronouns, adverbs, prepositions, and so on.

Secondly, to “programme” the computer, one must teach, not one, but two languages with vastly different, complex systems of grammar and syntax. There is no one-to-one relationship between sound and meaning. That is why languages differ. And they differ most of all in their grammatical structure.

Thirdly, whilst they can teach the computer to translate individual words – “dogs” “狗” “anjing”; “eat” “吃” “makan”, “dog eat dog” has a meaning deeper than the literal. There is a story of one computer that translated “out of sight, out of mind” as “invisible, idiot” – doubtless apocryphal. May be one day they can teach or “programme” thousands of such deeper meanings of combinations of words to the computer.

But let me reassure all parents: your child has a brain bigger than the biggest computer man has ever built. Whilst the world’s biggest computer cannot handle two languages, most human beings can, especially if they are taught when young. Every human brain, unlike the computer, has an innate sense of language and syntax. The brain has been “pre-programmed” to understand language. Some brain and linguistic experts have concluded that all languages have common “deep structures” because of the structure of the human brain. Others believe that communicating human thoughts is so elaborate that only one solution is possible, and that this one solution has been independently reached by

all societies speaking all languages through cultural transmission, and not through inherited genes or brain characteristics. Whichever is the explanation, the fact is that your child has a brain which can use two languages, whilst the computer as yet cannot.

If you expect your children to go to school, spend 70% time on English, and 30% time on Mandarin, and then use dialect at home and with their friends and neighbours, then their time and effort learning Mandarin will be wasted. If they can get through the day without speaking Mandarin, then it is not relevant to their lives. They will end up using English and dialect. So Mandarin, especially in English schools, will become a classroom and examination language. It will not become part of their lives, something they use at home with the family, at play with their friends, in the shops, cinemas, swimming pools and playing fields. Mandarin will become like Latin which I learned in school. I had to study it

because I wanted to study law. I passed my Latin examinations. I have forgotten nearly all I had learned, because I did not use it once I had passed my Roman

Law examinations.

That is what may happen to Mandarin if we do not encourage our young to make Mandarin a part of their lives. They will learn Mandarin for passing examinations. Then they will forget it.

If you really want your son or your daughter to speak your own dialect, then the government will seriously reconsider and re-examine our whole education policy. If you sincerely want your son to speak good Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka or Hainanese between members of the family, then perhaps the schools should teach him through good Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka or Hainanese teachers. Then, by secondary 4, he will speak better Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka or Hainanese than his parents or grandparents. But is that what you want your son to do? And the written Chinese, now used in books, newspapers and taught in school, will not be the written form of the dialect he speaks. He will have to learn 文言 (literary Chinese), for that was how Chinese was written, the common written form of all Chinese dialects and Mandarin before the revolution to simplify written Chinese by using “bai hua” writing in the same form as the language is spoken by the Peking dialect, but using a neutral form of the Peking pronunciation, and cutting out the Peking slang and colloquialism.

Going back to teach dialect is not as absurd as it sounds. It is done in Hong Kong, where Cantonese is taught in the schools and the Hong Kong Chinese University. The British left dialects alone. The result is the overwhelming majority speak Cantonese, as they have done from 1840 when Hong Kong became a colony. Chinese from Shanghai, Peking, Foochow,

Swatow, all speak Cantonese, in the shops and markets. Otherwise they get no service. The television uses only Cantonese or English.

The choice for Singapore is simple – continue with dialects, and we will end up using only dialects and English. We will continue to have a fractured multilingual society. Some 30% in our primary schools, including the Chinese-stream schools, fail the PSLE. Those who fail have not been able to master English. But if they continue to use Mandarin, they will soon become literate. Language lives by daily use. The more we use 12 or more dialects, the less we use Mandarin. This is the choice parents must make for their children.

Our problem is how to find a solution that meets the needs of the older generation who do not speak Mandarin or English, and yet does not perpetuate dialects with the younger generation. Television and radio programmes for the older generation will be transmitted late, after 9.00 or 9.30 p.m., after the young have gone to sleep. Those over 40 will continue to use dialects.

If you speak dialect, never fear that your child will lose the dialect you spoke to him as a child. He needs no encouragement to speak dialect. He will speak it because he learnt it from birth. That is the original meaning of mother tongue. But unless you encourage him to use Mandarin, he will lose it. The overwhelming majority are now in English schools where they are using English more than Mandarin. There is no danger of dialects being killed. The danger is that Mandarin may be just a school subject, instead of a live and vital part of our daily lives.

In Taiwan, 80% of the radio and television programmes are in Mandarin. Hokkien is still used by the older generation when speaking to the younger generation. But young people have bigger vocabularies in Mandarin, over 3,000 words, and are fluent in it. To speak to their parents, the young need a smaller vocabulary.

## National Archives of Singapore

A limited dialect vocabulary we must accept if our children are to be bilingual in Mandarin and English.

Twenty years ago, if you could not speak Mandarin, if you spoke only dialect, you were ashamed of yourself when you went into educated places like bookshops. It is less so now. This is retrogression.

The government has a responsibility to solve this problem. But the government cannot solve it without parents helping to encourage their children to use Mandarin. This decision every parent must take for his or her child. There are 365 days in a year. A child goes to school for 200 days. Of 24 hours in each of the 200 school days, the child spends only 5 hours in school. The school cannot compete against the home, if parents encourage the use of dialect.

These problems derive from our past. Our forefathers came to Singapore speaking different dialects, because they came from different provinces, and from different districts in a province. The British left all dialects alone. The problem of many dialects cannot be solved in 4-5 years. It will take 10-20 years or longer. If we start now, those in primary and lower secondary schools have a better chance of effective bilingualism.

## National Archives of Singapore

Parents who are able to speak Mandarin should use it with their children.

Those who cannot speak Mandarin, but can speak English, should use English.

Parents who cannot speak Mandarin or English have to converse with their children in dialect. But they will be wise to actively encourage their children speak to their friends in either English or Mandarin, and do not use dialect to other school friends, or in shops, buses, taxis and markets. Why weigh your

child down with three languages? He will lose the Mandarin he is learning in school. Why cut him off from the wider world of Mandarin speakers and workers beyond Singapore?

We can solve this problem without throwing any dialect away. But we must limit the vocabulary of dialect from only home needs, and only in homes where parents cannot speak Mandarin or English. I am certain your child will pick up enough dialect to satisfy his grandparents. But I am equally sure that learning Mandarin is an unproductive exercise, unless we make the younger generation Chinese Singaporeans use it outside the schools, in the shops, markets and playing fields.

Our Chinese educated are using less Mandarin in their daily lives and more dialects. They are gradually speaking more Hokkien, speaking to friends from English schools of the 1950s and 1960s when they did not learn enough Mandarin in English schools, and were Hokkien and English speaking.

Short-sighted considerations cannot be allowed to decide this vital question of the kind of people we are to be. We must be an educated people. Educated in our own cultures and our own languages. We must also be educated in science, technology, economics, banking, commerce and the contemporary

social and political thinking of the English-speaking world, of America, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the rest of the English-speaking Commonwealth, or American-speaking Philippines. Heaven forbid that we lose our own cultures, and fail to absorb the culture, the spirit, the values, the philosophy of life of the English-speaking civilisations. Then we will only adopt the caricatured, and the superficial manners and mannerisms, the popular trivia we see on television. We must keep the core of our value systems and social mores. To do that, we must have our children literate in Chinese and English. To be literate, they must be Mandarin speaking, able to read the books, the proverbs, the parables, the stories of heroes and villains, so that they know what a good upright man should do and be. Hence the Mandarin part of our bilingual policy must succeed. To succeed, Mandarin must be used between those who have been educated in our schools, whether English or Chinese stream. It must gradually take over the role of dialects as the lingua franca of Chinese

Singaporeans.

National Archives of Singapore

---