

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. LEE KUAN YEW, AT
THE MALAY TEACHERS' UNION SEMINAR ON "FACING
EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE 1980's" AT DBS
AUDITORIUM ON 31 MAY 1978

Recently, I discussed with Malay MPs the question whether I should have a Malay TV forum on bilingualism. Some were in favour. They agreed that bilingualism for the Malays is not the difficult problem it is for Chinese, but nevertheless they thought a forum would be useful. Others thought a forum unnecessary, since the problems I had discussed in the Chinese TV forum were peculiar to the Chinese who speak many dialects instead of Mandarin which is one of Singapore's 4 official languages. Malays, whether originally from Malaysia or Indonesia, seldom speak Javanese, Boyanese, Sundanese or Bugis.

All now speak Malay.

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I decided on a middle course to set out my views in a speech in Malay.

The implications of bilingualism for the Chinese have cropped up because Nanyang University as from 1978 will use English, not Chinese, as the medium of instruction. Thus, it is necessary for Chinese schools to make adjustments

from pre-university two down to secondary one. They have to prepare their students for English-medium teaching at junior colleges and the universities.

This question has been resolved in the Malay community many years ago. By 1970, 92% of Malay parents had opted for the English stream. By 1977, 99% had opted for English.

Malays are fortunate that English is our common working language. The Malay script, in Rumi, is the same as English. Second, many words, 10-20%, in Malay have come from English or American. Although the spelling may be slightly different, the words are easily recognised as the same. This makes bilingualism Malay-English much easier than bilingualism Chinese-English or Tamil-English. The Chinese and Tamil scripts are completely different from the English or Rumi alphabets. English-Malay is such a convenient combination that many Chinese and Indian students have opted for Malay instead of Mandarin or Tamil. This has created allegations of unfair treatment, unfair to Chinese students who have to do Mandarin as their second language. Since our bilingual policy is mother tongue and English, we had to discourage this combination except for those students who speak Malay at home, i.e. whose mother tongue is Malay. However, Singapore needs sufficient numbers of Chinese and Indians competent in Bahasa Malaysia.

To illustrate to Malays how difficult bilingualism is for the Chinese, let me ask you to imagine what the difficulties would be if, instead of English, we had Japanese as our common language. Then Chinese students learning Chinese-Japanese will have a clear advantage over Malay students learning Malay-Japanese. Malays will have to learn a completely new script of about 3,000 Kanji characters. Chinese students would have already learnt them. However, the world that emerged after World War II made English the world's second language for the non-English speaking peoples. This was the curious result of history. The English-speaking colonies in America, founded three hundred years ago, have gradually grown and developed absorbing large numbers of immigrants from Europe. They all became English-speaking. They have transformed an undeveloped continent into the world's foremost technological and industrial power.

Most scientists in Japan, Europe, the Soviet Union read and write English to keep up with scientific research done by the Americans. The widespread use of the English language, as used by the Americans, is obvious from the number of TV programmes RTS shows from America, as compared to those from Britain, Canada, Australia or New Zealand.

This is the reality of the world today. Even big countries, like China, have to face this reality. So one of the changes after the “gang of four” has been purged is that scientists and students in China are once again busy learning English to catch up in their reading of the latest scientific publications.

As parents, you should encourage your children to use English with their friends. This will help them develop fluency and a facility for the right words for every occasion. Daily use of a language can guarantee that they will have no difficulty in expressing themselves in English. Malays have no difficulties over learning and speaking Malay. Indeed, Malay has always been widely used in Singapore. Bazaar Malay is better established than English.

To have English accepted as our working language is not as easy as it seems to be today. If we had tried to suppress any language, the consequences would have been disastrous. Suppression of any people’s mother tongue leads to resistance and antagonism to rational action on language learning and user.

If I were a Malay, and I can speak English, I will make it a point of speaking English to my children, and let my wife speak to them in Malay. In my own home, my wife and I made a habit of getting the children to speak good

English, Mandarin and Malay, right from their earliest childhood years. As a result, they have no problems switching over any of the three languages.

The government's bilingual policy will be fairly and equally implemented for all races. Every Malay will learn English and Malay. No Malay has to learn Chinese. Malays do not have any difficulty of learning Malay as the second language in the English schools. What you must make sure is that your children master English for a good education and later a good job.

When I went to Nanyang University in February this year, to emphasise the government's stand on bilingualism, I spoke in Chinese and English. Let me now do likewise in this speech and speak in English for the second half of this speech.

We will never completely and finally settle the problems of our bilingual and bicultural society. There is always an undercurrent of competition for dominance between languages and cultures. Our special circumstances lead us rationally to accept the fact that English is the working language of our society. However, we all want the culture, values and philosophy of life to remain dominant over that of America, Britain or other parts of the English-speaking

world. This requires that we know enough of our own mother tongues to appreciate our own traditions and approach to life.

It is not easy to achieve this balance. And it is aggravated by the vested interest of the monolingualists in each of the language groups, whether it be Chinese, Malay, Tamil or English. Each group believes that emphasis on its language gives the teachers, newspaper editors and reporters, and students and graduates of that language, an advantage over the others.

From my observation, the monolingualist is more likely to be a language chauvinist and a bigot. He only sees the world through one eye. He does not have binocular vision to see the world in depth, to realise that there are as rich, if not richer, worlds of human experience and knowledge, all expressed in beautiful words, elegantly, vividly and fluently in other languages. He does not understand other great civilisations which have expressed themselves in other languages.

Bilingualism gives a more balanced and rounded view of the world. The Chinese who only reads and speaks Chinese has only a sketchy view of the real history of the world outside China. He has little conception of what was happening outside China in the Han and Tang dynasties when equally great civilisations like Greece and Rome had emerged in Europe, from 500 BC to 500

AD. He does not understand how it happened that Europe and then America, through their scientific discoveries and, more important, the practical application of these discoveries to methods of agricultural, transportation, industries and weaponry, enabled the Europeans and Americans to catch up, and overtake the Chinese civilisation. He does not know how the Arabs preserved the science and mathematics of the Greeks and Romans, and developed them further in astronomy and navigation. All the monolingual Chinese knew was that suddenly, in the 19th century, the white man came with superior weaponry and manufactured merchandise and carved up China into spheres of economic and political influence, exploiting them from extraterritorial concessions in treaty ports.

The bilinguist sees both sides. A bilingual Chinese Singaporean knows that there was deep wisdom in Chinese culture and philosophy, a result of 4000 years of periods of great achievements and in between long years of chaos and disaster, through wars and foreign conquests, plagues, floods, drought and famine. At the same time, he is also aware that the ritualised, conformist approach to thinking and learning, which was designed to secure the stability of successive dynasties, had prevented innovations in human thought and the discovery of further inventions. The result was that a great civilisation had

become stagnant. It failed to rejuvenate itself in time to face the strength of an industrialised Europe.

We all have seen how given the will to organise themselves, and to learn science and technology of the West, the Japanese, united in their efforts within the framework of a stable administration, have in just over 100 years, caught up with the West in many fields. They made original scientific discoveries. They have encouraged this inquisitiveness so crucial to mankind's progress. They have learned the techniques of mass production, management and marketing. Today, Japanese production and export of steel, ships, cars, TV, VTR, cameras, watches, and so on, are almost unbeatable.

If we are to modernise and industrialise, we must be bilingual. If we are to teach the next generation bilingualism effectively, and minimise, even though we may never eliminate language rivalries and prejudices, we must have more teachers who are bilingual. It is not possible to get teachers who are perfectly bilingual. Moreover, we want teachers, not interpreters or translators. But however imperfect their second language, the bilinguist will be a better teacher because she better understands her students and will be a better model for her students. Those of you who make the effort to try and learn English will advance the interests of your students and yourselves. For you will understand what your

students have to learn and, by your example, encourage them to be bilingual and get out of the blinkers of monolingualism.

The more bilingual our teachers are, the more bilingual the next generation will be. Which is the more effective language, the dominant language, may vary from individual to individual. But however inadequate the command of the second language, a teacher or a student is better for knowing some second language. To achieve this, I am asking the Ministry of Education to provide opportunities for second language learning and to consider giving monthly allowances for adequate mastery of the second language, English for the Malay, Chinese and Tamil stream teachers, and Malay, Mandarin and Tamil for the English stream teachers. I know that lurking at the back of the minds of every monolingual teacher is the hope that his language can become the dominant language, and be the common language. Then he does not have to learn another language. The others will learn his.

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Let me scotch this silly delusion. No one wants to give up his own. For the average Malay, bilingualism, Malay and English, is practical. For the average Chinese, Mandarin-English. So too for the Indians. A few can be trilingual. Some can and should be encouraged to learn foreign languages like

Japanese, French, German or Russian. We need to have some specialists in each of these languages.

For all of us, let us press on with English. It is our common working language. It cuts across all racial and linguistic groups. It provides a neutral medium, giving no one any advantage in the competition for knowledge and jobs.

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