

SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW  
AT THE MANDARIN PROFICIENCY CERTIFICATES  
PRESENTATION CEREMONY AT THE  
SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL ON 25 OCT 81

Sixty-seven per cent of Singaporeans, aged 5 and over, talk to their parents in Chinese dialects, 6% in Mandarin, and 6% in English, according to the 1980 census.

It is an enormous task to get Chinese Singaporeans, whose mother tongues are some 12 dialects, to make Mandarin their mother tongue. It is probably the most difficult task we have embarked upon in the last 22 years of PAP Government. Yet without making Mandarin the mother tongue in place of dialects, our policy of bilingualism will not succeed. Dialects will be crossed and mixed into a Singapore creole or pidgin.

The increase in the use of Mandarin, since the campaign opened two years ago, gives hope that Chinese Singaporean parents are aware that however uncomfortable, however awkward, however unnatural it is at the beginning for them to speak in Mandarin, they must, for it is a valuable gain for their children and our society.

The government is not giving anyone an excuse to speak in a dialect when dealing with government servants. All government officers who have contact with the public can speak Mandarin or is learning to do so. If we achieve the same rate of progress in the next four years, as in the last two, we can tip the scales in favor of Mandarin by 1985. The ultimate test is whether Mandarin is spoken at home between parents and their children. That is the meaning of mother tongue. That is why mother tongues, learned when very young, are so strong in memories and emotions of all people the world over.

Language is heard and spoken long before people learn to write and to read. The more frequently one uses a language, the easier it is to express one's thoughts in it. The younger one learns to speak a language, the more permanently it is remembered.

In presenting these certificates to officers who have mastered and passed their examinations in Mandarin, I underline the government's determination that nobody should use dialects. Indeed, wise parents will never let their children speak dialect at all. No child, however intelligent, has unlimited data storage capacity. The memory space is finite, be it for words, for facts, or for figures. And the more one learns dialect words, the less space there is for Mandarin

words, or English words, or multiplication tables, or formulas in mathematics, physics or chemistry.

I speak from experience as one who has had to learn and to use three languages and a dialect. The more I use of one language, the less I use of the others. The more we all speak in Mandarin, not dialect, the better for the next generation. Let us persevere and achieve this.

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