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STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AT THE OPENING CEREMONY  
OF THE RELC REGIONAL SEMINAR ON LANGUAGE EDUCATION  
IN MULTILINGUAL SOCIETIES: ITS CHALLENGES AND  
POTENTIALS 18 APRIL, 1977 AT 9.15 AM

I would first of all like to welcome this distinguished gathering of language experts to Singapore. Your presence here is an indication of the importance the various countries you are representing attach to language problems which have troubled mankind in most corners of the world. Your deliberations at this conference will, I hope, throw some light on some of the thorny and tricky language problems confronting various countries particularly the plural or multi-lingual societies.

Language was originally and essentially a means of communication. It provides the opportunity for engaging in social intercourse and is a vehicle that integrates him into a culture. Through a common language the common experiences, wisdom, cultural values and beliefs of a given society is gradually embedded.

The original role of language was as a tool of communication and expression of one's thoughts and ideas. It made life, culture and civilization possible. It is through the mother tongue that the child learns about himself, his family and environment. Through it, he is also exposed to the songs, the heroic tales, poetic description of the landscape and the traditional wisdom and achievements of his people. As the child cherishes the authentic evidence of the greatness of his people and cultural achievements, he quite naturally develops a sentimental attachment and also loyalty which he feels his duty to protect. People's love for their own language is as old as recorded history. It is not the language itself but the tampering and in most cases mishandling of this aspect of the sentimental and emotional attachment of a people to his language that has resulted in human conflict often leading to riots and bloodshed.

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Nothing in this world is static. So is the role of language. Language was developed essentially as a vehicle for the communication of ideas and thoughts between people. Throughout the centuries, people who spoke different languages have co-existed peacefully. Clashes and conflict over languages were seldom heard of. It was only after the emergence of nationalism when the political element was brought into language that it became a source of division between people. It was the attempt by a dominant group in newly independent countries to develop a national language that brought in the political role of language. In the years of the upsurge of nationalism in Europe (1900 - 1937) political factors began to play an important role in the development of national languages. This brought about language rivalry carrying with it language pride and prejudices which lingered on until today.

Similarly, the language problems in South East Asia and Asia generally experienced the same situation as that of Europe. During the period of colonial domination, the peoples of Asia co-existed peacefully amidst a diversity of languages. Language rivalry and conflict was rare if not non-existent. The imposition of the colonial languages, be it English, Dutch or French, as the dominant official language helped to keep those language rivalries latent at least temporarily. It was only after independence when the question of replacement of the colonial language by an indigenous language as the national or official language was raised that language became a political issue. In some independent countries like Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines, the problem of choosing a national language did not become a political issue because the dominant language, be it called Bahasa National or official language was not disputed. The significant thing about Indonesia is that historical circumstances have made it possible to make Malay which is in fact a minority language in the Indonesian racial context, the lingua franca of a country where the majority of the population are Javanese. It was fortunate that this far-sighted decision was made at the early beginning of the anti-colonial struggle. It was decided in an oath of the Indonesia Youth in 1928 which called for one fatherland, one nation and one language. Perhaps the simplicity of the Malay language compared to the sociolinguistic complexities of the Javanese language was one of the factors that had enhanced the use of it as a lingua franca.

The situation might have been more complicated if the people had not laid the ground for a national language and had to decide on one after the independence. The situation in other parts of this region such as India, Pakistan, Sri-Lanka and to some extent Malaysia however is less fortunate. India, despite all her great history and civilization has no one dominant language. She has 845 languages and dialects with only 30 per cent Hindi speaking population. The attempt to decree Hindi by constitution also as the national language and the only official language has not succeeded after so many years of independence and still meets with strong opposition especially from the Tamil speaking south. Linguistic diversity has existed in India from the beginning of her recorded history. What is new and significant is the mobilization of language groups for social and political objectives after Independence. Like India, civil riots and bloody clashes also took place in Sri-Lanka between the Sinhalese and Tamil-speaking population over an attempt by the Sinhalese-speaking majority to make their language the only official language. Pakistan, a country whose foundation was based on a common religion, could not escape the fate of separation into two states because of different language loyalties. Language riots are not confined to post-independent Asian countries. In Belgium, riots have occurred between French and Flemish speakers. The French language problem today in Canada is another example. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Irish Gaelic came to symbolise Irish patriotism and Irish independence from Great Britain.

The problems presented by language since it took a political role have become so acute and explosive that it resulted in tension and chaos hindering the progress of national economic development. Failure to meet the challenges presented by language issues has been one of the biggest stumbling blocks to political stability in many independent countries after the second world war. A solution to those problems of language is urgent for they are hindering political stability and economic development. The seminar is meant to look for solutions to language problems. Ironically speaking, experience has shown that there are no lack of solutions to national and international problems which have created tension including the language issue. In most cases, the solution to a problem seems simple enough to level-headed spectators who are emotionally detached and who have no vested interest. The greatest difficulty is to get the parties involved to implement available and sensible solutions.

I am not a language expert but I do know and have personally experienced some of the problems which fall on us. Singapore is a multi-lingual, multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious society and naturally we also have a fair share of such troubles.

During the earlier period of our independent struggle, anti-colonialism was in some way or other associated with the English language because it was considered a colonial language. Only the English-educated elites rose to the higher positions and got all the benefits of employment. There was virtually no outlet for the Chinese-educated or Malay and Tamil-educated in government service. The first elected government felt that the role it had to fulfil was to carry the social revolution one step further by extending the rights and privileges more equitably to the non-English educated elites. It meant working out a system of education where the products from all the schools have not only common values and ideals but more equal opportunities and privileges in a fair and open competition. In 1961 when we tried to do this by re-organising the education system for the Chinese secondary schools, the Communist-controlled Chinese students Union exploited the situation and stirred up the chauvinistic sentiments of the Chinese and staged a camp-in demonstration. It could have led to riots and bloodshed but for the fact that it was handled with tact. Through persuasion and reasoning, we succeeded in isolating the communists and chauvinists and made the parents of the Chinese-educated who were affected realise the danger and futility of playing with emotions. We explained to them the actual intention of the government providing more equal opportunities to the Chinese-educated.

But that was not the end of the language issue. In early 1971 racialists were still trying to play around with language sentiments through the newspapers of different languages. A Malay newspaper for a period talked of nothing else but Malay problem and advocated "bumiputra" (son of the soil) policies in a multi-racial society where the Malays are a minority. A Chinese newspaper drummed up Chinese chauvinist sentiments working up the Chinese language issue and glorifying the achievements of the People's Republic of China. An English language newspaper financed by foreign capital went to town the hippie-way with alluring news and pictures magnifying permissiveness in sex, drugs and dress style. It also threw in a jibe here and there on the futility of Singapore's effort to build her own defence.

During the recent December general elections, opposition party leaders still harped on the hoary question of the government "killing" Chinese education. Our Prime Minister had to warn that the government would take action against anyone inciting Chinese chauvinism for that could lead to bloodshed. One or two persons were taken to task after the elections. One had disappeared mysteriously.

In a multi-lingual society, the population is susceptible from time to time to different pulls in contrary directions. In the process of nation building, such pulls when they are of a political nature coloured with extra-territorial loyalties could tear the nation asunder if they are not adequately checked. Any government of Singapore that does not keep these divisive and disruptive activities under proper control is guilty of dereliction of duty. The question is a realistic approach to language problems. In the case of Singapore, we recognise the existence of our multi-lingual society. We introduced a multi-lingual system in our Parliament and recognise the four major languages - Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English as our official languages. That would mean that any citizen who speaks any of the languages can aspire to be a member of Parliament. But for the purpose of efficient administration and the economic well-being of our people, we continue to use English - the language of Science and Technology as the main language of administration and legal proceedings.

One important factor in our language policy is our deliberate attempt to make bi-lingualism work in our society for, in our opinion, this is the best policy for the given situation. Our bi-lingual policy will bring about a situation when a person who is a monolingual competent only in one language will find himself a problem to himself and to his society. Our educational system encourages our children to be bi-lingual, if possible tri-lingual so that their minds are opened to other views and perspective of life from other cultures. This will make them more tolerant and aware of their emotional, cultural or religious sentiments and thus in a better position to live more harmoniously together.

We also recognise the necessity for each child to preserve his own cultural roots. Whilst we give our children an awareness of the roots of their language and culture, we also try to detach them from outdated language loyalties. Instead, through the medium of the mother-tongue, we instil into them a Singapore-oriented sense of loyalty and national consciousness. Our attitude towards the study of language is based on its

utility. It is a tool to unlock the treasures of a culture and civilization attached to it. Throughout the process of education, we have been able gradually to whittle down the emotional attachment to a language. We believe that studying the Chinese language does not necessarily lead a Chinese to be loyal to China, just as studying English does not make a person loyal to England or French to France.

We are attaching some importance to the study of the mother tongue because we are aware of the dangers of a de-culturalisation. We have witnessed how people could be devitalised and emasculated as a result of de-culturalisation. It was the policy of a colonial education to pump a completely English or for that matter French or Dutch set of values and ideals into their Asian colonials through the syllabus of their colonial type schools. The colonialists preferred to deal with people who could speak their language and who understood their manners and mannerism. Those who became monolingual in the colonised tongue have naturally lost their own set of values and the ideals of their own Asian cultures. They normally suffer a certain loss of confidence in themselves. Lack of knowledge of their mother tongue put them at a disadvantage when the British pulled out and they have to deal with socio-economic and cultural problems affecting the vast majority of the population who do not speak the colonial languages.

I would like to quote what our Prime Minister has said at a Seminar on Education and Nation Building in December, 1966 to illustrate the attitude government has taken vis-a-vis the study of mother tongue. "He (the child) must know from whence he came and how it is that he is where he is before he is able to meet the problems and make the decisions which he must make to adjust himself and his family in the society in which he has decided to make a home."

In Singapore today a growing number of students are now bilingual as a result of our bilingual language policy. More and more parents are realising the value and importance of bilingualism. Through the bilingual policy, we shall have less problems in reconciling different cultural values and attitudes. Our society will become more cohesive. We shall have a people rooted in their traditional value, culture and languages, but also effective in English, a key to the advanced technology of the West from where nearly all our new and more advanced industries come. Through these industries and technology, our people are provided with better opportunities and better paid jobs. We are now in the process of experimenting with this system of bilingualism which we hope will help us shape a new and stable

society in which people of diverse languages and cultures will find common denominators and will develop a common loyalty. To make any experiment of this nature succeed, it is necessary to bear in mind two important factors.

Firstly, it is essential that the language issue be taken out of the political arena. Language is an explosive emotional issue. The less this is made a political issue, the happier and healthier the society will be. In Singapore today, we do not allow the issues of language, race or religion to become political issues. There is no reason for anyone to do so for no sensible person here can claim that his right to study his own language or cultural self-development has been denied.

Secondly, the study of language is purely functional and that it is an effective instrument for anyone irrespective of race, religion or linguistic group to advance his own socio-economic needs and interest. In other words, there is no compulsion in the study of a language or a second language such as English except that it provides him an opportunity to compete for better jobs and better positions in society. This functional approach to the study of language gives everyone an equal opportunity to participate in the running of the system and in sharing its benefits.

I have outlined to you our attitude and our approach towards the language problems which is one of the salient characteristics of South East Asian countries today. I am not trying to say that the Singapore way holds the key to all solutions, for different countries have different circumstances because of different historical background and therefore may try to have different experiments.

In the modern Technological age of interdependence whatever language policy a nation may experiment, it cannot afford to ignore the language of technology and modernization, without having to face the peril of economic isolation and serious injury to the well-being of the country and people. Language policy makers can sometimes overlook such a danger when they are too eager to bulldoze a national language or too ruthless and dogmatic in their means to achieve ideological aims. In Asia, fortunate is the nation which can make its people retain their Asian values and way of life, and yet match if not compete with the West in the field of Science and Technology, trade and industrial development. How to maintain a happy balance between Eastern cultural values and Western technological expertise is a difficult but important task facing many of us who are concerned with language problems. The deliberations at this seminar I am sure will touch on some of these problems. I wish the seminar every success.

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