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**SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER ON
1 FEBRUARY 1992 AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY OF THE MALAY
LANGUAGE MONTH 1992 AT WORLD TRADE CENTRE AUDITORIUM AT 4.00
PM**

Modern man needs two kinds of languages. He needs a language of science and knowledge, a language of business and commerce. He also needs a language of the soul, a language for the "dear and intimate things" in life, a language of the hearth and home. In some countries, a single language serves both needs. Different languages are needed in most others. In Singapore, English fulfils the first need, while the mother-tongue of each ethnic group fulfils the second need.

Malay is the mother-tongue of Malay Singaporeans - in the true sense of the word. I have yet to come across a Malay who can neither speak nor understand a word of Malay. Malay is the principal household language of Malay families.

The Malay language has undergone considerable changes and development in the last few decades. Following independence from British colonial rule, systematic and concerted efforts were made to upgrade Malay into a language for modern communication. Today, Malay is a major language in Southeast Asia. It is one of our four official languages in Singapore. It is also our national language and the national language of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei.

A common view held by many Singaporeans is that the Malay population in Singapore is homogeneous, sharing the same

language, culture and religion. But this was not always so. The present Malay population is composed of people of varied Southeast Asian origins, the biggest groups being from the Malay Peninsula and from Java. At the time of Raffles' arrival in 1819, the indigenous Malay population of Singapore comprised only a few hundred sea-nomads, court personnel and some members of royalty. As Singapore developed under British colonial rule, economic opportunities here attracted indigenous Malay immigrants from Riau, Java, Malacca, Johore and other parts of Malaya.

As the various groups of Malay immigrants arrived, a Singapore Malay culture began to develop out of the conditions of life here. Some of the rural-based traditions that distinguished the Javanese, Malaccan, and other Malays from each other gradually eroded. The great court traditions of Java and Malaya also began to lose their relevance. But significant major traditions survived. They were adopted by all incoming Malay immigrants, and developed to new heights in Singapore. The features which positively characterise Singapore "Malayness" today are the Malay language and Islam.

When Singapore achieved independence in 1965, the Government adopted English as the working language of business and administration. This choice was not based on linguistic or ethnic grounds, but for practical and economic reasons. English is the language of international business and commerce in many parts of the developed world. It is also the most effective medium through which we can keep abreast of scientific advances and technological developments in the world. Moreover, the linguistic diversity of Singapore demanded a language that can bridge the inter-ethnic barrier, a language that will help break down communal exclusiveness. English serves that need.

While English is the working language of business and administration in Singapore, it is however not our mother-tongue. English cannot be a substitute for our mother-tongue. The best way for a society to preserve its culture and value system is through our mother-tongue because it is the language of our

home, our heart, and our soul. It is a language that has been used for generations in our community. That is why the Government adopted the bilingual education policy, which requires each child to learn his mother-tongue in addition to English.

In Singapore today, the use of English is becoming more common in almost every area of society and economic activity. This prominent presence of English can sometimes create an environment which may stifle the use of the mother-tongues. In fact, the latest population census shows that there is a trend toward greater usage of English instead of mother-tongues in many households. There is therefore a need for all communities to promote the use of their mother-tongues among themselves.

Among the different ethnic groups, the Malay community probably has the least problems getting their young to learn and use their mother-tongue. Nevertheless, I am pleased that the Malay community has taken steps to ensure that the Malay language will continue to play an important role in the Malay community.

There is a Malay proverb which says: "Hitam mata itu, takkan boleh bercerai dengan putihnya." (The black of the eye and the white, how can they be parted?). The Malay people and their language are just as inseparable as the black and white of the eye. I wish the Malay community every success in your efforts to promote the Malay language, and in all your future endeavours.

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21 February 1992

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