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**SPEECH BY BG (RES) GEORGE YONG-BOON YEO,
MINISTER OF STATE (FINANCE) AND (FOREIGN AFFAIRS)
AT THE LAUNCHING CEREMONY OF THE MALAY LANGUAGE MONTH
AT THE DBS AUDITORIUM ON FRIDAY, 2 MARCH 1990 AT 8.00 PM**

It is not by accident that the Malay language is today the national language of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. From the days of Sri Vijaya, the language spoken by the people living alongside the Straits of Malacca, the Straits of Singapore and the great rivers of Sumatra have been the major language of trade all over the archipelago. Because it is a language of trade, the Malay language has always shown great adaptability to changing conditions. It remains so today.

Although the English language is now the international language of trade, the Malay language will always remain an important language of trade in the region, especially in communication with our Malaysian, Indonesian and Bruneian neighbours. In this respect, the historical role of the Malay language in South-East Asia has not changed.

The role has not changed but the language itself must change to meet the challenges of modernization and the requirements of science and technology. While we treasure the past, we should also look to the future.

We have to strike a balance between two critical requirements. On the one hand, we want the Malay language in Singapore to be international. On the other, we want the Malay language to help us develop our Singaporean identity.

First: the international requirement. There are close to two hundred million Malay speakers in the world, which is a very large group compared to many other language groups in the world. Malay language development in Singapore must therefore keep in close touch with Malay language development in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. We must be broad-minded and learn from our ASEAN neighbours. It is the same with all the other language groups in Singapore. Singaporean English, Singaporean Chinese and Singaporean Tamil must not develop too differently from the way English, Chinese and Tamil are spoken and written elsewhere. We are after all a trading people. Our ability to communicate effectively with our trading partners is very important. This is the first requirement: to make sure that the Malay language in Singapore is international and an asset to our economic development.

The second requirement is to develop the Malay language in a way which also helps us build our national identity. After 25 years of independence, it is natural that the Malay language in Singapore should have its own distinctive character, and be a little different from Bahasa Malaysia, in the same way that Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia are distinguishable from each other. There is also a unique quality to Singaporean English, Singaporean Chinese and Singaporean Tamil. We are gradually becoming one people and one nation. The different language groups share much more in common today. This common experience is naturally reflected in the way the different language groups express themselves. In newspaper and TV journalism, the Singaporean element is very marked because the same events are simultaneously reported in four different languages every day. The same ideas are presented to the four language groups. This promotes mutual understanding and nation-building.

In literature and poetry, however, the style is as important, or even more important, than the substance. The

translation can never capture the full flavour of the original. But even so, a poor translation is better than no translation. And, in some cases, like the translation of holy books like the Bible and the Quran, the translation can come very close in beauty and inspiration. We should make this effort to increase the supply of translation of each other's important works. We need not do everything ourselves. Most of the translations can be imported from other countries. But they should be made widely available. In the literature and the poetry, we find clues to the soul of a people, the unspoken assumptions, the basic values. For example, it is very useful for Chinese and Indian Singaporeans to know some of the stories from Sejarah Melayu, in English translation or in Malay, and for Malay Singaporeans to know some of the stories from San Guo or the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, which is also available in translation. I have met Javanese who are familiar with the characters of Guan Gong and Liu Bei. Shakespeare has been translated into so many languages. Julius Nyerere translated Shakespeare into Swahili. The Japanese perform Shakespeare in their "noh" plays. Translations bring cultures closer together. Every culture has its good points. Through translations, the different language groups in Singapore will better understand each other, and better share each other's cultural inheritance. The whole society will thereby be enriched.

In short, we want the Malay language in Singapore to be international and Singaporean at the same time.

To achieve this, we must promote scholarship in the Malay language. Of course competence in EL1 is very important because we have to compete internationally, but we must not neglect ML2 because that is needed for the preservation of Malay culture and Malay self-esteem. For those who are very talented, we should consider teaching ML1. We must, however, be realistic. Most students are average. Most students can only cope with EL1 and ML2. To pressure them all to do ML1 is unfair and unwise. But we must try to find some with the ability and the interest. They

will make a big contribution to the community. It is vital for the morale of the whole community. In Malay, we say "bahasa jiwa bangsa".

I am optimistic about the development of the Malay language in Singapore because it has a long-term economic basis. The economies of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam are becoming more integrated. To be able to speak Malay is an economic advantage, and an advantage that will grow with time.

IDPM talked about the triangle of growth recently. Increasingly, Singapore, Johore and Batam constitute a single economic entity. In the past, Singapore, Johore and Batam were all part of the old Johore-Riau Empire, speaking the most standard form of the Malay language in the heart of archipelagic South-East Asia. As we shared a common past, so we share a common future. The Malay language is an inseparable part of this common past and this common future.

I congratulate the Malay Language Committee for the good work it has done and wish it every success in the future.

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