

Reflections on Singapore's Speak Mandarin Campaign

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Abstract

Language planning is timely and society-specific activity; any inquiry into the practices of language planning requires an awareness of the peculiar and historical context in which language-planning measures emerged and were implemented. The purpose of this paper is to describe and explain a language planning initiative undertaken by the Singapore government, the Speak Mandarin Campaign. An overview of the Speak Mandarin Campaign will first be provided, followed by a discussion of the rationale for the implementation of the campaign and its impact within the Chinese society in Singapore. There will also be a discussion on the critiques of the campaign by different scholars. In addition, the importance of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in the context of nation building of Singapore will also be discussed. In conclusion, the paper will discuss the challenges for the Speak Mandarin Campaign in its efforts to persuade dialect speakers to switch to speaking Mandarin.

Key words: language planning, Speak Mandarin Campaign

1. INTRODUCTION

Singapore is a small island state (633 square km) located at the tip of the Malay peninsula. With a population of approximately 5 million (Department of Statistics, 2010), it is a young country of many races whose forefathers are from Southeast Asia, China, India and the European countries. According to the 2010 census, the four main races in Singapore are the Chinese (74.15%), the Malays (13.4%), the Indians (9.2%) and Others (3.3%) which include Eurasians and other foreign workers (Department of Statistics, 2010). The dominant ethnic group is the Chinese community which comprises more than 76% of the Singapore resident population (Department of Statistics, 2010). Although the Chinese in Singapore form a large demographic majority, they are far from being culturally or linguistically homogenous. The local Chinese community is itself made up of a heterogeneous mix of peoples whose ancestors came from different parts of China and spoke a multiplicity of 'dialects'. The different dialect groups within the Chinese community include the Hokkiens (41.1%), Teochews (21%), Cantonese (15.4%), Hakkas (7.9%), Hainanese (6.7%), Foochows (1.9%), Henghua (0.9%), Shanghainese (0.9%), Hockchia (0.6%) and Others (3.7%) (Department of Statistics, 2010).

However, the governmental leaders in Singapore have fervently argued that linguistic diversity is incompatible with nation-building (Kuo and Jernudd, 1994). From the perceptions of the government, too many Chinese dialect groups within the Chinese community would hinder communication among the Chinese. A common language was needed and Mandarin was ascribed the mother tongue of all Chinese dialect speakers to strengthen the bond between different dialect groups in Singapore. The Speak Mandarin Campaign (henceforward SMC) was launched in 1979 by the Singapore government with the specific objective of making all Chinese Singaporeans discard the habit of speaking Chinese dialects and adopt Mandarin as a language of use and preference. Thus the SMC is a deliberate language-planning move aimed at changing a deeply entrenched sociolinguistic habit of Chinese Singaporeans who are long used to speaking Chinese dialects (Pakir, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is to describe and explain a language planning initiative in Singapore. An overview of the SMC will first be provided, followed by a discussion of the rationale for the implementation of the campaign and its impact within the Chinese society in Singapore. There will also be a discussion on the critiques of the campaign by different scholars. In addition, the importance of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in the context of nation-building of Singapore will also be discussed. The paper concludes that language planning in Singapore is primarily motivated by the view that language is both an economic resource as well as an emblem of culture that necessitates careful planning by the Singapore government. This paper will enhance our understanding of the interrelation of goals, outcomes and strategies of language planning in a multilingual setting.

2. THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN IN SINGAPORE

The Speak Mandarin Campaign is the longest campaign in Singapore, spanning three decades since it was initiated in 1979. As stated earlier, the SMC is aimed at the largest ethnic community in Singapore, the Chinese, and its primary objective is to stimulate the use of one standardized language variety, Mandarin rather than the dialects spoken within the Chinese community. The then Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew explained the reason for the initial launch of the campaign:

Thirty years ago, I launched this Speak Mandarin Campaign. Chinese students learn Mandarin in school. Unfortunately, they used to speak dialects among themselves and at home. When I watched interviews on our Chinese TV channel in the 1960s and '70s, I found students and workers speak Mandarin haltingly. They have not used Mandarin often. Mandarin has to be the common language of Chinese Singaporeans, regardless of their dialect groups. If the government had left language habits to evolve undirected, Chinese Singaporeans would be speaking an adulterated Hokkien-Teochew dialect. (Lee, 2009).

There were also other speeches by other politicians but most of the speeches were almost messianic in their warning of impending crisis should the Chinese fail to embrace the SMC. Over the years, the SMC went through the following phases:

- 1979-1984: The campaign targeted at all Chinese Singaporeans and the aim was to break dialect barriers and to encourage all Chinese Singaporeans to speak a common language . The campaign slogan was: *Less Dialect. More Mandarin.*
- 1985-1990: The target of the SMC was Chinese parents. The cultural and emotional importance of Mandarin were emphasized to encourage Chinese parents to speak Mandarin to their children. The slogan of the campaign was: *Mandarin is for Chinese.*
- 1991-1997: The target of the SMC was the English-educated Chinese whom the government perceived were losing their Chinese cultural heritage as a result of their inclination to speak English. The campaign's slogan was: *If you are a Chinese, make a statement in Mandarin.*
- 1985-present: From 1985, to further establish the benefits of the SMC, the government promoted Mandarin as a language for economic ties with China. Mandarin was actively promoted as a language that would give Singaporeans an edge in establishing commercial ties with China. The slogan of the campaign was: *Speak Mandarin. It's an Asset.*

Through the various campaign's slogans, the Singapore government tried to convince Chinese dialect speakers to abandon the use of Chinese dialects for the sake of their community and for the nation.

When the SMC was first launched in 1979, it was spearheaded by the Ministry of Information and the Arts. However, the promotion of the SMC also involved various grass-root organizations such as Citizens' Consultative Committees and their Advisors, the Community Centre Management Committees, Residents' Committee and Chinese civic/clan organizations.

In the first stage of the campaign, from 1979 to 1989, the main strategy adopted by the SMC was to phase out Chinese dialects in Singapore. Dialect programmes that were broadcast over radio and television were phased out, except for some news broadcasts on radio for those who did not understand Mandarin. The aim was to persuade Chinese Singaporeans to discard dialects and to speak Mandarin so that they could better understand and appreciate their culture and heritage. Throughout the years, the mass media, including local newspapers, radio and television networks, were used to promote the campaign. In addition, publicity materials such as posters, stickers, television commercials and music videos were also used to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to discard the use of dialects and speak Mandarin instead. In addition, the Singapore government also adopted other administrative measures to promote the use of Mandarin. Conversational classes were conducted for Chinese officers in the public service who needed Mandarin to converse with members of the public in the course of their work. The use of *Hanyin Pinyin* (which is a system of Romanization for Standard Mandarin used in the People's Republic of China) names instead of dialect transliterations in English were also encouraged for food items on signboards, new companies, newborn Chinese babies' names and new street and estate names.

3. RATIONALE FOR THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN

In an attempt to persuade dialect speakers to embrace Mandarin as language of habitual use and preference, the government proposed three official arguments for the SMC in Singapore: the educational, communicative and cultural arguments (Bokhorst-Heng, 1998). In regards to the educational argument, it was believed that the continual use of dialects in the homes would hinder the learning of Mandarin in schools. The Singapore language educational policy was that Chinese dialects should have no place in the education system. As a result, the then Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, kick-started the SMC in 1979 by proclaiming that within five years, the campaign aimed to make all young Chinese, students discard the use of Chinese dialects and speak Mandarin instead.

The communicative argument was provided as another reason for the implementation of the SMC. The government launched the SMC believing that it

would foster the use of Mandarin as a media of inter-dialect communication within the Chinese community. The government felt that there were too many dialect groups in Singapore which hinder communication among the Chinese. Dr Ow Chin Hock (then Parliamentary Secretary for Culture) explained in Singapore, about eighty six percent of the Chinese speak not just one but twelve dialects. He pointed out that there is no lingua franca among Singaporean Chinese and thus there is a need for Chinese Singaporeans to speak Mandarin as a common language for effective communication ("The tongue surgeons," 1980, p. 14). From the perceptions of the government, language diversity is problematic in Singapore as linguistic identity is associated with ethnic and cultural identity. Kuo and Jernudd (1994) state that the Singapore government believed that language loyalty could lead to inter-ethnic conflict when the functional status or sentimental values of one's own ethnic language were at stake. In addition, the government also felt that language diversity weakened communicative integration and generally implies inefficiency in the management of the social, economic and political development of the nation. In response to such perceived problems, the government launched the SMC to unite all Chinese dialect speakers through Mandarin.

A cultural argument was also advanced for the rationale of the SMC. It was perceived that the campaign would encourage more Chinese to retain the Chinese cultural heritage to counterbalance the effects of Westernisation and the dominance of English. According to the Singapore government, Mandarin is needed to protect Chinese identity as it was perceived that Chinese Singaporeans were dangerously vulnerable to Westernisation and the negative effects of English dominance. Mandarin is needed as a cultural ballast to protect the Chinese identity of Chinese Singaporeans (Bokhorst-Heng, 1998)

Chua (1995) reported that some of the undesirable Western lifestyles brought about through the dominance of English included drug abuse, sexual permissiveness and political liberalism. In response to the dominance of English, the SMC was launched to restore to the Chinese community its ethnic identity under the banner of 'Western Science, Asian values' (Chew, 2007) and to avoid the excesses of westernization and hopefully preventing deculturalisation (Gopinathan, 1998). Through Mandarin, Chinese Singaporeans would be re-ethnicised through Mandarin which would act as a cultural ballast (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999). Since 1985, an

additional goal of the SMC was to promote Mandarin as an economic tool for business dealings with China.

4. CRITIQUES OF THE OFFICIAL ARGUMENTS OF THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN

Since the launch of the SMC, there have been several critiques by both politicians and academics about the official arguments and the strategies adopted by the government in promoting the campaign. Newman (1988) points out that one major problem with the educational argument is the assumed subservience of the society at large to the demands of the education system, leading to a conflict between an established pattern of behaviour in society (the use of dialect) and the education policy. Newman argues that the solution being advanced is not to tailor the education policy to suit society, but to transform society so that education policy can be made effective. Another issue of contention in the educational argument revolves around the mother tongue. According to Gupta (1994), in Singapore, one's officially allocated 'dialect group' normally corresponds to one's *paternal ancestral language*, although it does not necessarily correspond to the individual's *personal experience*. However, the SMC promotes Mandarin as the official mother tongue of all Chinese in Singapore. Gupta (1998) argues that Mandarin, the mother tongue ascribed by the government, corresponds neither to the individual's childhood languages nor to the individual's ancestral language. This is because a majority of Singapore Chinese are descendants of immigrants from Southern China, and hence many Chinese will naturally embrace the Southern Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and Hainanese as their mother tongue. Wee (2005) observes that linguistic ownership in Singapore is defined in terms of the notion of mother tongue rather than native speaker. This has resulted in an official language planning policy that ignores an individual's linguistic experience in favour of a community's historical association or heritage. As Mandarin is ascribed the official mother tongue of all Chinese, an anomalous situation arises where some Chinese might be unwilling to acknowledge themselves as native speakers of Mandarin. This is because some Chinese grew up speaking dialects instead of Mandarin.

However, some scholars disagree with the communicative argument that a common language is needed to facilitate communication among the Chinese in

Singapore. Platt (1980) states that it is wrong to assume that Chinese Singaporeans who speak different dialects are unable to communicate effectively with each other. Platt studied the verbal repertoire of Chinese Singaporeans and discovered that a Singapore Chinese can speak not only his/her own native Chinese dialect spoken at home but also the dominant Chinese dialect (Hokkien) and an additional Chinese dialects acquired from friends or relatives.

There were also disagreements with the cultural argument that the SMC will enable Chinese Singaporeans to retain their Chinese cultural heritage to counter-balance the effects of Westernisation and the dominance of English (Bokhorst-Heng, 1998). In an article in *The Straits Times*, a member of parliament of the ruling PAP party, Walter Woon, pointed out that the Eastern versus Western values debate is “sterile” and “dangerously simple-minded” (Woon, 1992, p. 3). Woon argued that there can be both good and bad things in every culture, and Singapore, being a cosmopolitan society, is in a position to pick the best from both East and West. The real question is how to promote good values while suppressing bad ones. In addition, some scholars observe that it is through the dialects and not through Mandarin that the Chinese community finds its cultural heritage. Kuo (1985) suggests a great part of Chinese cultural traditions and values in Singapore are associated with and transmitted through the use of dialects and not Mandarin. He believes that a weakening of dialects may in fact mean the weakening of the cultural base.

Despite the Government’s reluctance to acknowledge the role of Chinese dialects in the Chinese community, Chinese dialects continued to flourish and electorate candidates continue to use Chinese dialects during their election rallies (Tan, 2007). Within the Chinese community, dialects are still used in events such as birth rites, wedding and funeral customs, and these best find expression in the dialect. For most Chinese, losing the dialect will mean losing their Chinese roots (Kuo, 1985). Obviously, this desire to affiliate with Chinese dialects is contrary to the SMC goal to eliminate dialects. Thus, not all dialect speakers will agree with the government that speaking Mandarin will help them retain their Chinese cultural roots.

5. IMPACT OF THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN

The promotion of the SMC has been rather forceful in the past decades and its success is felt within the Chinese community. Gupta (1994) observes that Mandarin is heard from the Chinese in Singapore in “volumes unimaginable” in the 1970s. However, the success of the SMC has also resulted in several problems. With the successful unfolding of the SMC, a majority of the younger generation of Chinese are unable to converse in dialects with the elderly (Gupta and Siew, 1995). The promotion of the SMC has led to a “linguistic sacrifice” (Rappa and Wee, 2007) of the mother tongues (the various Chinese dialects) of the early immigrant Chinese, resulting in a loss of the “precious assets” they have brought from their motherland. Rubdy (2005) points out that the loss of Chinese dialects has resulted in a reduction of linguistic diversity in Singapore, even though the intention of the Singapore government is to shape a specific linguistic reality within the Chinese-dialect communities.

The SMC has also resulted in resentment among some dialect-speakers. Shepherd (2003) reported that there was resistance by some local Chinese to the strategies adopted by the government to eliminate Chinese dialects within the Chinese community due to the top-down approach adopted to implement the SMC. Decisions about language planning policies were made with little consultation with the Chinese community. For instance, in the initial stage of the campaign, the government adopted a drastic move to phase out TV programmes in Chinese dialects despite protests from the public. Bokhorst-Heng (1999) states that members of the Chinese community took strong offence to the call to eliminate dialects although they supported the call to embrace Mandarin as a language of use and preference. To discourage the use of dialects within the Chinese community, the government has described dialects as vulgar, divisive which have no value either culturally or economically. In contrast, some dialect speakers feel that dialects are necessary for the maintenance of their Chinese cultural heritage, and thus they consider dialects as their true mother-tongue (Bokhorst-Heng, 1999).

6. THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR NATION-BUILDING

Although the SMC aims to change the linguistic habits of the Chinese community in Singapore, there are other implications involved in nation-building if it is successfully implemented. A major implication of the success of the SMC is that it may cause unease among other ethnic groups in Singapore. Quah (1990) suggests that the arduous task of building a Singaporean national identity will become more difficult when the Chinese ethnic group is made even more conscious of their ethnic identity. This will reinforce the divisions between the various ethnic groups in Singapore. In a similar vein, Zainuri (1998) argues that given Singapore's multi-ethnic composition, the implementation of the SMC policy directed at the majority of Chinese will inevitably bring about inter-ethnic implications. To a great extent, this is true because as more Chinese choose to identify their ethnic identity through speaking Mandarin, Singapore will be divided into two blocs: Mandarin-speaking and non-Mandarin speaking. This may create tension among the non-Mandarin minority racial groups, such as the Indians and the Malays, and the Mandarin speakers. The Indian or Malay Singaporeans may feel more threatened by the increasing domination of Chinese over them and would rather deal with the Chinese community as a fragmented rather than a united group. If all dialect-speakers in Singapore speak Mandarin as a common language instead of their dialects, the non-Mandarin groups would feel threatened and become marginalized. In the long-term, the promotion of the SMC might even have the effect of tearing at the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural fabric of Singapore's sociological make-up.

7. CONCLUSION: FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN

Much still remains to be done to promote Mandarin in all domains of language use especially within the dialect-speaking Chinese community. There are several challenges for the SMC. A major challenge of the SMC is to ensure that Mandarin is able to hold its own against the encroachment of English in the home. Lee (2004) observed that Mandarin is gradually losing out to English in the homes. Almost half of the Chinese children entering elementary schools in Singapore now speak English

at home, overtaking those who speak Mandarin. According to Lee, children in young Chinese families tend to speak more English than Mandarin, and as a result, the number of elementary school children from English-speaking homes has risen to 49.8%, more than those speaking Mandarin. This is a worrying trend as English is already the lingua franca of vast swathes of Singapore life. English-educated parents who maintain that learning Mandarin is an extra burden for their children will resist the campaign, and this will also affect the attitude of their children in the learning of Mandarin. Thus, for Mandarin to survive in the dialect-speaking communities in Singapore, it has to be a natural mode of communication for the younger generation of Chinese at home.

In addition, the globalization of Singapore's economy may also hinder the efforts of the government to promote the SMC. As a result of globalization, the government has repeatedly emphasized the need for higher standards in English in order for Singapore to attain world-class economic levels and to present Singapore as a "world-class" participant in the global economy (Shepherd, 2003). Speaking at the National Day Rally in August 1999, former Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, announced that English is needed for Singaporeans as the language for access to high-tech industries and sophisticated services. Thus English is required for Singapore to remain competitive in the world (Shepherd, 2003). The younger generation of pragmatic Chinese Singaporeans would prefer to embrace English rather than Mandarin, the former allowing them to plug into the world economy. In addition, the importance of English as an international language will continue to grow as more and more mainland Chinese are now learning English as a result of rapid globalization of the Chinese economy.

Another challenge of the SMC is to ensure that the standard of Mandarin spoken is acceptable within the dialect-speaking communities. At the moment, a majority of dialect-speakers can merely speak sufficient Mandarin for ordering food in the hawker centres and in the coffee shops. However, most are unable to speak Mandarin on formal occasions or use Mandarin to write essays in Chinese. As stated by the Chairman of the Promote the Mandarin Council, Wee Chow How, the council will have to improve the quality of the spoken Mandarin (Ho, 2004). However, high levels of Mandarin can only be attained if there is an environment for naturalistic interactions in Mandarin. It is uncertain whether in the future there will be sufficient fluent Mandarin speakers to sustain Mandarin in the linguistic ecology of dialect-

speakers. The challenge for the government is to ensure that the linguistic ecology for the use of Mandarin is maintained beyond the superficial level.

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