

LEEKUANYEW

# In his own words: English for trade; mother tongue to preserve identity

This speech in its entirety, made in support of a revised, more flexible Chinese-language curriculum while he was Minister Mentor, is one of the most complete statements of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's views on bilingualism and language policy.

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BILINGUALISM

"Start off from where we were, let us say after the war, 1945, or even 1965. We were in different communal groups - Malay kampungs, Chinese villages. You would see Hainanese at Lorong Tai Seng, Malays in Kampong Ubi, and so on.

(My Old Guard colleague) Mr (S.) Rajaratnam was the exponent of "we can create a race of Singaporeans". Idealistically, I would go along with him. But, realistically, I knew it was going to be one long, hard slog; maybe we'll never get there, but we should try.

Ask yourself this question. If your child brings back a boyfriend or a girlfriend of a different race, will you be delighted? I will answer you frankly. I do not think I will. I may eventually accept it. So it is deep in the psyche of a human being.

Before we entered Malaysia when we negotiated the terms of entry, education, language and culture were such important subjects... Right from the start, education was already a red-hot issue.

What did we do as a Government? From 1959 to 1965, we had a laissez-faire policy. We inherited from the British, English schools, Malay schools, Tamil schools and other schools.

When we became independent in 1965, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce committee came to see me in my office, then at City Hall. They urged me to have Chinese as our national and official language. I looked them in the eye and said, "You must be mad, and I don't want to hear any more of that from you. If you do, you are entering the political arena. I have to fight you. Because Singapore will come apart."

Supposing I had been otherwise inclined, which my colleagues would not have allowed, and had said, "Yes, okay." What would have happened to Singapore? Where would the Malays be, and the Indians, what future would they have? The English-educated Chinese would also be against us. The country would fall apart.

Let us assume that we were all Chinese, no Malays, no Indians. Could we make a living with Chinese as our language of government and our national language? Who is going to trade with us? What do we do? How do we get access to knowledge? There was no choice.

Having made English the working language of government and administration, what do we do about the mother tongues? If we had no set policy and allowed free market practices, free choice, all mother tongues would have eventually vanished. Because the first business of any parent is to make sure that his or her child can make a living.

Therefore, we decided that, however unpleasant, however contrary to the concept of a homogeneous society, each racial group would learn his mother tongue as a second language. Most unhappy for English-speaking Chinese homes and, I am sure, also for Indian homes. For Malays, nearly all of them

spoke Malay at home; so they were happy.

Was that policy right or wrong? If you bring me back to 1965, I would say that is the policy I would still adopt... Did I legislate it; (tell Chinese-medium school students) you go to English school, and (learn) Chinese as a second language?

I think we would have lost the next election. Because after Independence, the enrolment for Chinese schools increased; 1966, over 55 per cent. Many parents thought, "Yes. Let's do Chinese now. We are out of Malaysia."

I left it alone. By the 1970s, the job market decided what parents chose, and the rush began to English schools... It became so rapid that I had no choice but to urge parents to go slow, because we could not produce enough English teachers.

So I faced the problem of (the Chinese-medium) Nanyang University. By 1978, Nanyang University was in dire straits... It was so bad that when a Nanyang graduate applied for a job, he would produce his school certificate. Because employers knew that the Nanyang graduates of the 1950s and 60s were not the same as the Nanyang graduates of the late 70s. The (good) students had moved across to English schools.

Do we allow this to go on? What was the solution? We tried to convert Nantah from within, get the teachers to lecture in English because they all had American PhDs. They could not. They had lost their English fluency. So we moved the whole campus into University of Singapore... We decided to merge the two universities and made it the National University of Singapore.

I have been berated all these years by the Chinese-educated in Malaysia for having killed Chinese education. I am a convenient excuse for letting off their frustrations. They are not really hating me. They are saying, "Look. Please don't go that way in Malaysia."

If you have a unified system based on the national language, that will be a big problem for the Chinese community. It is not a problem here because I never forced anybody into the English stream. They could have chosen Chinese as their primary language and English as a secondary language. But career prospects determined what they chose.

Will we ever become completely homogeneous, a melange of languages and cultures? No. Why did we take this route? Because we have no other choice. If we have only English and we allowed the other languages to atrophy and vanish, we face a very serious problem of identity and culture.

How do I know this? Because I learnt Chinese late in life, and I rediscovered snatches of what I heard when my parents, my grandparents spoke: "Ah! yes, that was what they meant." It resonates, pulled at my heartstrings. Would I want to see it lost? Absolutely not!...

I tell all parents, "Look at your child carefully. Consider how much he can take - one or the other - and decide what you want." I will give you a series of options. You want Chinese as your master language, go ahead. You want English, how much. And how much Chinese. A series of options. But remember the choice is yours. If you make the wrong decision over your child's capability, do not blame the Government.