

17

Singapore

Andrew Simpson

17.1 Introduction

Singapore is a small island state located at the southern tip of the Malay peninsula which has undergone tremendous economic growth and modernization since 1965, resulting in a per capita income which is second only to that of Japan within Asia. During the course of its recent dramatic development, Singapore has also had to face up to and deal with important challenges to its national coherence which are present because of two simple facts about the country. First of all, Singapore is a very new state, with no sense of collective identity among its inhabitants existing prior to the establishment of full independence in 1965. Secondly, the population of Singapore is highly mixed, being composed of the descendants of immigrants into Singapore from (primarily) southern China, India, and Malaya. Confronted with the problem of how to accommodate such a broad ethnic mix in a single society and also build up a national identity, the post-independence government of Singapore made the significant decision to attempt to maintain cultural and linguistic pluralism within Singapore at the same time as building up an overarching Singaporean identity based on broad, traditional Asian values, and supported by increased prosperity.

In the government's development of such a multi-ethnic, independent Singapore, one particularly critical component of its approach has been a strong, sustained programme of language management and planning, and a highly-publicized, cornerstone policy of multilingualism in society and advanced bilingualism in individuals. Such a policy has had significant and sometimes controversial consequences for the structuring of education in Singapore, and has also led to regular attempts by the government to direct and change the everyday language habits of the population in quite fundamental ways. Throughout this moulding of the linguistic and national identity of Singapore, the government has benefited from having greater financial resources at its disposal than most other Asian nations, and this has allowed for freer experimentation in the design of its education system and more materials being made available for the promotion of extra-educational language programmes. Post-WWII Singapore can therefore generally be described as the interesting story of how successful an ethnically mixed, economically



Singapore

developed, modern new state can be in the planned development of multilingualism, the maintenance of multi-ethnicity, and the (simultaneous) construction of a new national identity. In what follows, the chapter discusses the problems, tensions, and challenges which have been thrown up by these goals, beginning with a description of the general background to the official introduction of multilingualism in 1965 in section 17.2, an examination of how the policy of multilingualism subsequently unfolded in section 17.3, and an assessment of the present state of Singapore and the developing relation of language and national identity in the country in section 17.4.

17.2 The Creation of a New Nation and Policies of Accommodation

Prior to 1824 when Singapore was purchased by the British East India Company for its potential strategic value guarding the sea route between India and China, Singapore had been a largely undeveloped island with a very small local population. Following the arrival of the British, however, the island soon grew into an important international trading port and attracted a sizeable new workforce of immigrants from China, India, and southeast Asia. These early settlers came to Singapore with the idea

of making money and then returning to their homelands, and there was little mixing and cohesion amongst the various ethnic groups, and no development of any long-term allegiance to the territory of Singapore, right up until the end of World War II, when the realistic prospect of independence from the British began to loom on the horizon.

At this point, questions about the future shape of Singapore were considered for the first time, and the need arose to imagine how Singapore could effectively function as a unified society with a post-colonial identity of its own. In 1958 when self-government was achieved, it was very clear that it would not be easy to forge a national identity for the new state. Not only was there little common, binding history that could be called on to ground the new state in a positive and useful way, the composition and complexity of the population was such that there was no single ethnic group in Singapore whose language and culture could be realistically promoted as representative of the identity of the emerging new state. The Chinese were in the clear numerical majority in Singapore, making up approximately 75 per cent of the population, but the government realized that it would be highly unwise to attempt to develop an official Chinese identity for Singapore. Not only would this be resisted by the remaining 25 per cent of the population, it would also have been internationally unwise to promote a new Chinese state in the middle of the Malay-speaking world formed by surrounding Malaya and Indonesia. The Malay population, though having a locally 'appropriate' language and culture, were only 17 per cent of the population of Singapore, and so it did not seem realistic to attempt to develop a uniquely Malay state in Singapore either. The third significantly large ethnic group in the territory, those of Indian descent, were less in number than the Malays, and so similarly unrealistic as a choice for the primary foundation of a new national identity. In such a situation, the government decided on a policy of multiracialism and the guarantee of equality and official representation for all the three main ethnic communities in Singapore – the Chinese, the Malays, and the Indians. It was declared that Chinese, Malay, and Tamil (as representative of the Indian community) would all be registered as official languages of the new state, and that English would be added as a fourth official language for pragmatic reasons, English being the established language of government and administration and also being commonly used as a language of inter-group communication, alongside another lingua franca, Bazaar Malay. Furthermore, because it was widely anticipated that Singapore would be closely linked with Malaya at some point in the near future, the government declared that Malay would be recognized as the National Language of Singapore, in addition to being an official language.

As a result of the government's support for four official languages in Singapore rather than just one, schools were able to continue to teach in (Mandarin) Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English, but students and the general public were additionally encouraged to acquire a new/better knowledge of Malay, there being an expectation that Malay would in time take over from English as the common language of

administration and government affairs and indeed also function as a common language in all fields of everyday life (de Souza 1980). In 1963 the anticipated linking with Malaya then became a political reality, and the Federation of Malaysia was formed from the union of Malaya, Singapore, and the north Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah. However, after only two years, Singapore was forced to leave the Federation of Malaysia, as negative feelings and mistrust which had quickly emerged between the Malay majority in the Federation and the Chinese threatened to spiral out of control. The former suspected the Singapore Chinese of conspiring with Chinese in other parts of the Federation to increase their power and control of the state, while the non-Malay population in Singapore had become worried by the picture of a heavily Malay-dominated Malaysia which they felt was being promoted by certain leading Malay politicians.

The separation of Singapore from Malaysia was seen as a disaster by many in Singapore, as there was a strong belief that Singapore was simply too small in size to be able to prosper alone, and therefore needed to be part of a bigger political unit. There were also worries that Singapore would suffer commercially from anti-Chinese feelings assumed to be present among the inhabitants of its natural local trading partners, neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia. The government therefore realized that it needed to rapidly rethink its plans both relating to the economy and the national identity of a Singapore not incorporated into Malaysia, and despite the problems of initial high unemployment and the loss of revenue from support of the British military presence in Singapore, the government was very successful in attracting foreign investment and getting the Singapore economy moving in a positive direction again.

Concerning the development of a national identity, because there was no long history associated with Singapore, nor any recent history of a people engaged in a joint struggle for independence, the natural historical means to construct a shared identity was not available to the government. As it was also not appropriate to promote a common identity based on the heritage of any of the major racial groups in Singapore by itself, the government instead used the vulnerability of Singapore and the need for survival of the nation in the face of economic challenges as a means of creating a common, binding identity. The government maintained its previous strong commitment to Singapore as a multiracial nation-state and then stressed the goals of economic growth and equal rights and opportunities as uniting Singapore (Kiong and Pakir 1996). Such themes have continued to be emphasized during Singapore's development and have acted as an effective substitute for the lack of other cultural and historic symbols that could immediately be used to build up a sense of shared identity.

In the area of language policy, the government also reconfirmed its commitment to multilingualism and its earlier decision not to attempt to make one language the sole promoted, official language of the state. Mandarin Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English therefore remained the four joint official languages of Singapore, and were

guaranteed equal treatment in education, government administration, the media, and other areas of public life. The system put in place in 1958 to cope with the mixed ethnic population of Singapore and minimize confrontation arising from linguistic issues was therefore retained in 1965 as a key element of the new, fully independent nation, and the government saw its future goal as the building of an overarching national identity which would *include* the various ethno-linguistic, cultural identities of its inhabitants, rather than displace these. Concerning Malay, this was maintained as the National Language of Singapore, primarily as a political measure, to demonstrate to its neighbours that Singapore willingly recognized it was located in the Malay-speaking part of Southeast Asia. When it became clear that Singapore was going to be permanently separated from Malaysia, however, earlier plans to develop Malay as a more widely used language of inter-group communication and government administration were discontinued, and the role of Malay as National Language has since been largely symbolic and restricted to ceremonial use (e.g. occurring in the national anthem).

By way of contrast, English came to assume an increasingly greater importance in post-1965 Singapore, though technically being of the same official language status as Malay, Tamil, and Chinese. The inclusion of English as an official language was originally justified on the grounds that it was already widely used in the areas of commerce, industry, politics, and law, and was the lingua franca of the Commonwealth union of nations that Singapore was joining. It was also vigorously argued by leading members of the government that knowledge of English was necessary for the access it provided to advances in science and technology critically important for the development of Singapore's economy. Furthermore, English had come to be quite widely used as a lingua franca within Singapore already by 1965 and allowed for Singaporeans of different ethnic backgrounds to communicate with each other without favouring any particular group. Such arguments were suggested to outweigh objections that English should not be an official language of Singapore due to having been the language of the earlier colonial power, and very much set the stage for the further growth of English through the 1970s.

In the education system, in an effort to improve communication between the different ethnic groups of Singapore, mandatory bilingual education was introduced by the government, commencing in 1966. Previously, schools had all predominantly provided education via a single language medium, Chinese, Malay, Tamil, or English. From 1966 onwards this situation changed and schools were obliged to provide the teaching of various subjects in the other three official languages of the nation as well. Students at all levels were required to select two of the four official languages, and designate one of these as their first language (L1), and the other as their second language (L2). They were then taught via both languages as mediums of instruction, with more subjects being taught in the first language and fewer in the second language (an approximate L1 to L2 ratio of 60 per cent to 40 per cent: Bokhorst-Heng 1998). Choice of the L1 also normally determined the particular school that the

student attended, with students nominating Malay as their first language going to one of the more specialized Malay-medium schools (which now also had to provide teaching in the other three languages), and students selecting Chinese as L1 going to a more heavily focused Chinese-medium school (where they would get classes in their designated L2 as well).

Within the new bilingual education system, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil were also commonly referred to as the 'mother tongue' languages of students, and it was anticipated that students would select their stronger 'mother tongue' as L1 and then a second official language as L2. However, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil were actually not real mother tongues for the vast majority of students (89 per cent, according to Kuo 1980), in the sense of being languages acquired with native-speaker skill from an early age, and children in Singapore mostly grew up speaking other, related languages in the home. For example, amongst the Chinese community, Mandarin was a native language for only 0.1 per cent of Chinese-speaking people at the time of independence (Kuo 1980), whereas other mutually unintelligible varieties of Chinese were the real mother tongues of people in Singapore, particularly Hokkien (30 per cent), Teochew (17 per cent), Cantonese (15 per cent). Similarly among the Indian community, although Tamil-speakers were in a significant majority, there were also speakers of Punjabi, Bengali, Malayalam, Telugu, Hindi, and Gujarati. The 'Malay' group furthermore included speakers of other Austronesian languages such as Buginese, Javanese, Banjarese, and Baweanese. The establishment of four official languages for Singapore therefore partially concealed a much greater underlying linguistic variation, and relates to a general simplification in the way that divisions between races were (and still are) conceptualized by the government in Singapore. All citizens of Singapore are officially categorized as belonging to one of four racial types: Chinese, Malay, Indian, or 'Other', with this information being formally included on the identification cards which need to be carried by individuals, and being used for a whole range of statistical and administrative purposes relating to the official insurance of equality amongst the different races of Singapore. Though such categorization of related subgroups into larger ethnic categories tends to ignore and smooth over possibly significant differences between members of the four racial types, it is also clear that it has practical advantages for the monitoring of equal opportunities among the population and provides a more powerful representative voice for each major racial group than if these groups had remained fragmented. In the area of language-learning and education, however, the rather deceptive use of the term 'mother tongue' for languages which are often not the mother tongues of ethnically Chinese and Indian students tends to cover up the size of the language-learning task facing students in bilingual education in Singapore. For the clear majority of students during the first decade of the bilingual education programme, there was a need not only to acquire the designated second language when starting school, but also to acquire the actual 'mother tongue' as another largely unfamiliar language.

A further unexpected complication in the initial development of bilingual education was the selection patterns of L1 and L2 which occurred. Although it was anticipated that students would mostly select the language closest to their native language as the dominant L1 in school, and another language as the less demanding L2, a growing number of Chinese, Indian, and Malay students were encouraged by their parents to select English as their L1, and then Chinese, Tamil, and Malay as the L2. It was widely perceived that achieving proficiency in English was important and even necessary for securing a well-paid job and because of this, enrolment in the English-medium schools climbed dramatically, reaching 91 per cent in 1979 (Bokhorst-Heng 1998). Many parents also reasoned that there was not much to lose in sending their offspring to predominantly English-medium schools, as they would still receive around 40 per cent of their education in Chinese, Malay, or Tamil. For the students themselves, though, this further increased the amount of effort which needed to be applied to actual language-learning in schools, and added to the difficult task of achieving and maintaining a high level of bilingualism. On a more positive note, however, the increasing attraction of students from Chinese, Indian, and Malay families into the same English-medium schools did result in far more mixing and integration of students of different ethnic backgrounds than in previous times when students were sent much more regularly to Chinese-/Tamil-/Malay-medium schools and did not meet and mingle with students from the other ethnic groups.

A general increase in understanding of the cultural background of the various ethnic groups and their integration in Singapore was also assisted by the introduction of newly written textbooks in Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English. Previously, school textbooks were imported from China, India, Malaya, and Britain, and described only the history and culture of their country of origin/production, hence students in Chinese-medium schools would read about Chinese history and culture but learn nothing about Malay or Indian traditions. The new textbooks produced in Singapore had a uniform content whether written in Chinese, Tamil, Malay, or English and portrayed aspects of the culture of all four racial groups in Singapore. Consequently, students began to learn increasingly more about the cultural background and traditions of classmates who came from other racial groups, whichever language this was studied in. The textbooks also significantly stressed identification with Singapore, and provided descriptions of the history, geography, and general make-up of the nation.

17.3 Further Developments in Multilingualism

From the late 1960s onwards, the economy of Singapore grew tremendously with a sustained double-digit rate of growth. This was a remarkable achievement given that Singapore had no real natural resources aside from its location and its population, and was in large measure due to the direct involvement of the government in carefully planning and developing the economy. The population began to prosper, and benefited considerably from the provision of new housing constructed by the government

to replace previously widespread substandard accommodation. Relocation of the population out of ethnically uniform ghettos and into the new housing estates also resulted in a greater racial integration of the population, with the government ensuring that the new housing estates were ethnically well mixed and balanced.

The 1970s, however, also saw certain language-related problems arising out of the bilingual education policy and the government's promotion of four different languages in Singapore. The first of these problems related to the sizeable Chinese community who were unhappy with the way that the linguistic situation was developing to the apparent, increasing disadvantage of Chinese. It was claimed that with the government-stimulated growth of English, there was an increasing neglect of Chinese, and that Chinese-educated Singaporeans could not get the same kind of employment that English-educated Singaporeans could. When the government had come to power in 1958, it had indeed deliberately downplayed the importance of Chinese in its construction of the new state due to pragmatic political pressures. The subsequent emphasis on English had (by the 1970s) the side-effect of reducing the relative value of Chinese in the eyes of parents and employers (Tan 2002), so that it was genuinely more difficult to get well-paid employment without a good knowledge of English, and higher-level qualifications in Chinese were often not considered as valuable as even mid-level ability in English. Arising from within the Chinese community, there was also a highly visible elite which had received its education in English prior to independence (due to having had the money to attend private English-medium schools) and which following independence held much political power and influence in Singapore – 'the English-educated Chinese'. The existence of such an elite, many of whom were only weakly proficient in Chinese, only served to underline the apparent difference in the valuation of English and Chinese in Singapore, and increased the discontent of many of the non-English-speaking Chinese population. Furthermore, in 1980 the first and only Chinese-speaking university in Southeast Asia, Nanyang University, was converted into an English-speaking university by the government in a merger operation which formed the new National University of Singapore. Members of the Chinese community collectively saw this as another worrying sign that Chinese language was being increasingly devalued.

The second general language-related problem to surface in the late 1970s was a common perception that the linguistic ability of the young had actually fallen rather than increased following the introduction of compulsory bilingual education. This was formally investigated by the Ministry of Education in 1978 and resulted in the Goh Report, which candidly admitted that language standards had indeed fallen and that the policy of bilingual education had not been successful in the ways originally hoped for, by quite a significant margin. The report revealed that less than 40 per cent of students had reached the minimum competency level in two languages targeted by the government, and that the ability in language which students attained at school was also frequently being lost when the latter left school and became part of the workforce. The report added that too much was being expected of students in

terms of language learning, and that action was therefore needed to improve and facilitate bilingualism both at school and elsewhere in daily life in Singapore. One of the key factors which the government investigation identified as hindering the achievement of successful bilingualism amongst students was the use of a home language which was not one of the two languages being learned in school. Such a problem was noted as being particularly chronic amongst the Chinese population, where dialects other than Mandarin were commonly used at home. Because of this, as many as 85 per cent of students from Chinese families were effectively having to learn two new languages at school, and this heavy learning burden was argued to be significantly hindering the intended progress of students in bilingualism.

Attempting to address the problems highlighted by the Goh Report and the discontent of many of the Chinese community, the government announced an important new initiative and two changes to the organization of bilingual education. The first of these was the Speak Mandarin Campaign, a programme which encouraged (and in some domains required) members of the Chinese population to switch from using dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew to using only Mandarin Chinese. The reasons given for this strong promotion of Mandarin were various in number. First of all, the Prime Minister suggested that continued extensive use of the various dialects in Singapore was keeping the Chinese community fragmented and that use of a single form of Chinese would pull the community together and strengthen it, adding the warning that if Mandarin was not taken up and adopted English might ironically come to be the inter-group language of the Chinese. Secondly, concerning education, it was argued that the continued use of dialects in the home was holding children back in their studies and that there were even surveys to show that children who spoke Mandarin at home did better in their studies than children who spoke dialects with their family. Finally, it was suggested that Mandarin Chinese increased an individual's access to Chinese literature and culture, and would also have growing value for business as mainland China became more open to trade with countries in the outside world.

Concerning the actual implementation of the Speak Mandarin Campaign, because Mandarin was an important variety of Chinese in both mainland China and Taiwan, it was in fact already quite widely *understood* in Singapore. In order to help Chinese Singaporeans improve (or initiate) their ability in Mandarin and come to speak it more in everyday life, the government provided free of charge a variety of classes (including phone-in and radio sessions), books, tapes, and various other materials, and also decreed that those in certain public-area professions such as taxi-drivers, bus conductors, and hawkers would have to pass exams in Mandarin Chinese. Civil servants and those employed by the government (e.g. in hospitals) were furthermore instructed to use Mandarin with all (Chinese) members of the public, except those over the age of 60 (Gopinathan 1980). Each year during the campaign the government set out to target new domains for the spread of Mandarin and replacement of the dialects, starting with pressure on parents to use only Mandarin with their children in the

home, and then later pushing for increased use of Mandarin in the workplace, in cafes, restaurants, and markets. Over time, television and radio programmes in Chinese dialects were also reduced and finally fully replaced by programming in Mandarin. Most recently, the government has set its sights on the English-educated section of the Chinese community, attempting to increase the amount of Mandarin spoken by this particular group.

In addition to simply consolidating the Mandarin linguistic ability of the Chinese in Singapore, the Speak Mandarin Campaign also importantly reassured the Chinese that the government was concerned with maintaining and strengthening their collective cultural identity and wanted to promote Chinese language and Chinese heritage rather than simply abandon it to the continual advance of English. The campaign (which still continues) therefore partly allayed the worries of the Chinese which had been growing in the 1970s.

The second important step taken by the government in direct response to the Goh Report was the introduction of *streaming* in schools. Confronted with the failure of many students to reach the original targeted levels of competence in two languages, the government conceded that it was perhaps unrealistic to expect that all students would be able to become fully bilingual in the intended way. It was therefore decided to adjust and set the goals of language attainment for students according to the way they performed in early language classes and exams. Those showing a good ability to cope with instruction in two languages would continue to learn via two mediums of instruction, whereas those experiencing difficulties with their chosen languages would be taught with either a reduced amount of the L2 or alternatively only via a single language (English). The streaming of students into different schools and modes of learning therefore regulated the amount of language they studied and attempted to make them 'as bilingual as they could be' (Bokhorst-Heng 1998), and students were no longer expected to reach the same challengingly high levels of bilingualism.

The third technical measure which the government took in the years following the Goh Report was the conversion of all schools in Singapore to English-medium education. Although this might have seemed like an unfair promotion of English over Chinese, Tamil, and Malay, it was in fact simply a measure which formally recognized the reality of the situation which had evolved in Singapore. In 1983 it was noticed that less than 1 per cent of children had enrolled in a Chinese-medium primary school and that no children had enrolled for Tamil- and Malay-medium schooling. Parents of all racial groups had consequently been sending their children to English-medium schools (both at primary and secondary level) in such large numbers that it was no longer realistic to operate the non-English-medium schools, and these were therefore simply converted into new English-medium schools. Symbolically, though, this seemed to many members of the Chinese community to signal the end of Chinese education in Singapore (taken along with the closure of Nanyang University), despite the fact that Chinese was widely available as the L2 in the English-medium schools, and there were significant protests to the government by many who

were convinced it would result in a seriously reduced knowledge of Chinese language and culture. Partly in response to this, the government reacted by promising to establish a new series of elite schools (Special Assistance Programs) which would allow for gifted students to reach very high levels of bilingualism in both English and Chinese, and this reduced the level of protest emanating from the Chinese community.

Considering the effects of the government's language initiatives on each of the major language groups in Singapore, surveys indicate that the Speak Mandarin Campaign has been a success, and that Mandarin has now displaced the use of other varieties of Chinese as the dominant language of the home. In 1980, 80 per cent of households reported using dialects as the main language of the home, but this subsequently dropped to 31 per cent in 2000, and there has been an accompanying rise in the use of Mandarin from 10 per cent in 1980 to 45 per cent in 2000. Use of English as the dominant language of the home amongst ethnically Chinese families also rose during the same period to 25 per cent, further displacing the presence of non-Mandarin dialects in domestic environments. The use of Mandarin is therefore clearly rising year by year, both in the home and also in the workplace, and the next target of the Speak Mandarin Campaign is to try to increase the amount of Mandarin used socially outside the home. This impressive and perhaps surprising success of the Speak Mandarin Campaign is commonly attributed to the trust that the population of Singapore generally has in its government and its advice, believing that if the government firmly recommends a path of action, it is likely to be for good, well-thought-out reasons. Interestingly, Mandarin is now also highly rated as a language of solidarity and cross-dialect communication amongst the Chinese, as well as being considered valuable for acquiring Chinese culture and for expressing a Chinese Singaporean identity (Xu et al. 1998). The increase in use of Mandarin has consequently been accompanied by strong, positive attitudes to the language.

It is also clear from statistics on the current use of Chinese that the dialects have not disappeared from Singapore, and although in clear decline, they continue to have a significant presence in Singapore. Kong (2002) reports that use of the dialects remains common amongst those who have lower incomes and poorer accommodation, as well as among the elderly, and that retention of the dialects is therefore now *partly* associated with lack of economic advancement. It is this lower-income group which is furthermore most likely to be at the core of protests against the promotion of English and make demands for increased protection for Chinese language and culture, having benefited the least from the government's policies on language.

Turning to the present status of English, as compared with 1958, due to sustained governmental support for English since independence and its promotion for largely utilitarian reasons, English has now become the dominant lingua franca of Singapore and has made substantial gains in use in a wide range of domains of life in Singapore, from increased use in the home in parts of the Chinese and Indian communities to dominant public use in business, industry, law, politics, and education. English has

therefore changed from being the erstwhile language of a privileged, wealthy group to become a broadly shared language spoken with enthusiasm by much of the younger generation, and is seen to be so essential to employment opportunities and other aspects of daily life that its across-the-board usefulness may well pose a future threat to the maintenance of other languages in Singapore.

Considering the fate of Malay over the past forty years, it is interesting to note that there has been little change or decline in the use of Malay since independence and the Malay community continues to maintain its language very well, with 95 per cent of households reporting that Malay was used as the dominant language of the home in 1990. Although English has been acquired by the rising generations, this does not seem to have significantly affected the continued regular use of Malay, and the language is commonly perceived both as an important symbol of Malay identity and as critical for the transmission of traditional Malay culture (Kamsiah and Ayyub 1998).

By way of contrast, the Indian community has been struggling with a number of difficulties in the maintenance of Tamil as its representative, unifying racial language, and although Tamil continues to be accorded equal rights in education, the media, and government administration, the amount of Tamil spoken in Singapore is seriously decreasing. It can be observed that there are two fundamental problems associated with the support of Tamil as a major racial language in Singapore. The first of these is that there are actually two distinct forms of Tamil, a high literary form which is taught in schools and used in all media broadcasting in Singapore, and a low colloquial form which is the language form people actually use at home and in normal conversation. The colloquial form is however perceived in a very negative way and associated with low-paid manual labourers (Saravanan 1998). Consequently, people may actively avoid the use of this form of Tamil in public, so as not to be perceived as from the lower classes, and if they have not mastered the difficult, high literary form of Tamil, this results in a common switch to the use of English (or sometimes to Malay). Generally, then, Tamil children are being taught a complex form of Tamil (the literary form) which they are unable to master because it is not being reinforced in the home in practical everyday-life situations, and the colloquial form which is used in these situations is so negatively valued that it is not accepted as being appropriate for wider use and is largely absent from television and radio broadcasts in Tamil. In addition to this, it is widely perceived that Tamil has no practical use for obtaining employment and so there is not much pragmatic motivation to learn the language.

The second basic problem affecting Tamil as the representative language of the Indian community is that only 60 per cent of the Indian community are actually ethnically Tamil and the remaining 40 per cent come from a range of different ethno-linguistic groups which may speak north Indian Indo-Aryan languages such as Punjabi, Hindi, and Bengali. These are quite unrelated to Tamil, which is a south Indian Dravidian language, and much more different from Tamil than the Chinese 'dialects' are from Mandarin. Consequently Tamil is both difficult to learn for much of

the Indian community, and not really felt to bind the community together in a genuinely representative way. In the 1990s, protests from non-Tamil Indian groups have led to the government actually allowing for Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Bengali to be studied as mother tongues and to satisfy the mother tongue language requirements necessary in education. The Indian community in Singapore is therefore not really bound by the use of a common language, there is increasing language shift into both English and Malay (as the result of intermarriage), and there are those among the community who see the government's division of the population into four distinct racial categories as actually being disadvantageous for the Indian community, and not having the benefits which it creates for the other major ethnic groups.

In addition to the non-trivial impact that the growth of English has had on the learning and use of other languages in Singapore, there are two further issues relating to English and national identity which require mention here. The first of these is essentially very simple, but also highly important for the future development of Singapore and its targeted identity. The government has in recent years repeatedly emphasized that as Singaporeans' knowledge of English increases, so does their exposure to liberal Western ideas, and this potentially brings in to Singapore Western values and attitudes which may not be beneficial for the kind of society that the government thinks should be developed in Singapore, (in the government's eyes) incorporating excessive individualism and unwillingness to make personal sacrifice for the good of the community, as well as potential decadence. The government has therefore strongly urged the population to guard its traditional, common Asian values, which are described in the national ideology as including the idea of nation before community, society above self, and family as the basic unit of society. The learning of English is presented as a pragmatic necessity for the technological and economic development of Singapore, but the upkeep of the mother tongues is also argued to be of supreme importance for the way the latter provide access to and assist the maintenance of traditional Asian culture and values, which in turn serve as critical foundations against the destabilizing effects of rapid modernization (Gopinathan 1998). The government is therefore strongly committed to the preservation of the three different, official Asian languages for the sake of ongoing and future social stability. Such a commitment, however, highlights the fundamental dilemma facing the development of national identity in Singapore. On the one hand the upkeep of the different Malay, Chinese, and Indian languages and cultures is deemed necessary to ward off the encroachment of undesired Western values (and maintain official equality among the different racial groups), yet on the other hand the establishment of an all-encompassing national identity is hampered by the diversity expressed by the mother tongues and their associated different cultures. The development of national identity in Singapore therefore has to contend with the two opposing forces of apparently necessary diversity paired against the desire for overarching unity, this requiring a highly delicate, continually adjusted balancing act on behalf of the government, and a slow, step-by-step easing towards a possible unifying identity

rather than the instantaneous, dramatic construction of a national image designed to incorporate and subsume all of the country's population.

A second issue relating to English which has come to the fore in recent years is a worry by the government that despite its attempts to stimulate the learning of English for its practical use in accessing technology and establishing Singapore as an international centre of commerce, the English which is being spoken by Singaporeans may frequently be of non-standard quality and not comprehensible to non-Singaporeans. Currently there are in fact two general forms of English regularly used in Singapore. The first is a form of standard (British) English which is learned in school and pronounced with a local, distinctive Singaporean accent, known as Standard Singaporean English (SSE). The second is a vernacular learned at home and generally restricted to informal situations. This predominantly spoken form is referred to as Colloquial Singaporean English (CSE) or as 'Singlish', and has incorporated many non-standard English grammatical features from Bazaar Malay and locally spoken Chinese dialects such as Hokkien. Below is an example of the colloquial form paired with its equivalent in standard English (from Alsagoff and Ho 1998: 129):

Singlish/Colloquial Singapore English

Eh, better do properly, lah. Anyhow do, wait kena scolding. And then, you always ask her for favour, and still don't want to do properly. Must lah. Like that do cannot.

Standard English

You had better do this properly. If you don't, you may get told off. And since you are always asking her for favours, you should at least do this properly for her. You should! You cannot do it like this.

CSE has now been spoken in Singapore for approximately thirty years, and much of the population has developed an ability to switch between CSE and SSE depending on the speech situation. The use of CSE/Singlish did not attract the criticism of the government until the 1990s, however, when it came to be used in several very popular television shows. This turned Singlish into an issue of much public debate, with different opinions being aired over whether use of CSE should be encouraged by its presentation in the media. Ultimately it was the government which officially decided the issue, banning Singlish from television and radio and categorizing it as 'ungrammatical English spoken by those with a poor command of the language'.

What is ironic in the official discouragement of Singlish is that CSE was gradually but surely becoming a useful informal symbol of a race-neutral, general Singaporean identity, hence just the kind of distinctive, universal language form that the government has been in need of to unite the four racial groups in Singapore in an unbiased way. Singlish also has a significant number of grammatical features common to Malay and Chinese, such as tense omission, ellipsis of subjects and objects, and sentential mood particles, which make it feel considerably more like a Southeast Asian language and so potentially easier to accept as a symbol of local identity than, for example, Standard English. Specifically because of the presence of these local grammatical

features, however, CSE is unacceptable to the government and cannot be promoted as a national language, and in the year 2000 the government initiated the Speak Good English Movement with the deliberate goal of decreasing the use of CSE and ensuring that the English spoken in Singapore would be intelligible to people from other countries.

Concerning SSE, to a lesser extent this also functions as an expression of Singaporean identity. It is not associated with a particular race in Singapore (and is also no longer mentally associated directly with the former colonial power, Britain), it is widely spoken and understood, and its pronunciation is clearly identifiable and distinct from other world forms of English such as Hong Kong English, Indian English, Australian English, etc. Whether SSE may some time come to serve as a really successful symbol of national identity and be spread throughout the economically poorer levels of society where CSE is more common is however an interesting question for the future, and a linguistic issue which, like many other questions of language in Singapore, is likely to be at least partly decided by government policy and support.

17.4 Multilingualism and the Emergence of National Identity

Having seen how Singapore's policy of official multilingualism and individual bilingualism has unfolded since its initiation at the time of independence, we can now step back and highlight what the policy achieves and how it supports the creation of national identity in Singapore.

The declaration that Singapore would have four co-official languages and pursue a policy of broad multilingualism in education and public life was made as part of a wider attempt to maintain social stability among Singapore's ethnically mixed population and create the sense of being equal partners in a single nation. As a means to achieve and maintain harmony in a densely populated, racially mixed fledgling state, Singapore's multilingualism has been considerably effective, paired up with guarantees of equal rights for the four ethno-linguistic groups in other areas of daily life. If one examines the policy and its implementation in a critical way, however, it becomes apparent that one of the official languages, English, is privileged by the government in ways that the other three languages are not, with this being clearest in the area of education where English now has to be studied by all students in Singapore, and is the sole medium of instruction at university level. Because students are constrained to pick English as one of the two languages involved in their bilingual education, this furthermore means that they are generally not learning the languages of the other racial groups in Singapore, as the second language selected is almost always the (language closest to the) mother tongue of students. The potential for the policy of multilingualism to increase understanding of the different cultures of the three major racial groups in Singapore by having students from one group learn the language of

a different racial group is therefore not being taken advantage of, and students are instead learning the neutral, 'international' language, English. However, by other means, Singaporeans are coming to learn about the culture and traditions of the different ethnic groups which make up the population, in schools via the use of new general textbooks which describe Chinese, Malay, and Indian culture, and in daily life via the media and promotion of the three major cultures during public festivities.

What can therefore be concluded about the Singaporean policy of multilingualism is that although it does not *directly* bring about integration and the growth of a single national identity, it nevertheless is responsible, in significant part, for creating the stability which does allow for a collective identity to evolve which is actually not centred on a single traditional language or culture. The signs of such an emergent national identity in Singapore are in fact quite positive, and recent surveys of public opinion indicate that there is a high degree of identification with Singapore as a nation and a homeland which people both have an allegiance to and a strong desire to continue to live in. There appears to be a strong sense of the need to work together for the good of the country and continued prosperity, and a common pride in the way that Singapore has both survived in the face of initial adversity and become a highly successful modernized nation.

As part of the government's general policies of equal treatment for the three major racial groups in Singapore, the support of multilingualism is, however, also recognized as potentially *impeding* the development of a single national identity, as any attention drawn to the diversity of the population in the country can distract from the goal of forging unity. As multilingualism is seen to be absolutely necessary for the maintenance of harmony in Singapore, what is therefore required from the government is constant, careful attention to the balancing of multilingualism, progress in the economy, and the needs and fears of different sections of the population. One further example of how delicate this balancing act often is concerns the government's deep desire for students to obtain a high level of bilingual proficiency. In the 1980s the initial hope that all students would become bilingual had to be scaled down in the light of the Goh Report and streaming resulted in certain less able students attaining a significantly reduced level of bilingualism. At the higher end of education, elevated standards of bilingualism were still demanded, however, and entrance into university in Singapore required students to pass advanced-level exams in their mother tongue as well as English. Such a requirement has proved to be unpopular with many in the population whose children experience difficulties in learning language but are otherwise academically suited for university study, and significant numbers of gifted students have chosen to study in overseas universities in order to avoid the mother tongue language entry requirement. As this situation has become more chronic, and competition to attract good students has grown, the government has (in 2004) made moves to relax the L2 university entry requirements and indicated that certain grades lower than pass-level would also be acceptable, believing such a change to be in the interests of the general population. This however immediately provoked a strong

reaction from sections of the Chinese community who expressed alarm that it might allow for standards of Chinese to fall to very low levels. The government had to quickly assure the Chinese that this would not be the case and it would seek to compensate by adding new courses on Chinese history, economy, and society into the school curriculum to increase coverage of things Chinese and would make new efforts to protect the learning of Chinese and the other mother tongues. It can therefore be seen that each step taken in language policy in Singapore has potentially important associated consequences and the issue of language in Singapore is continually highly charged with emotion and concern.

As for what the future may hold for Singapore, this is clearly difficult to predict; however, three issues in particular can be signalled as having a likely significance for the development of Singapore in the twenty-first century. The first of these is the economy. In the absence of obvious historical or cultural symbols of unity at independence, the government has used economic survival and progress as goals to unite and bind the nation, and the spectacular achievements made in the economy over the last few decades have come to function as an important part of Singaporean national identity. Consequently, continued stability and coherence as a nation may depend on the ability of the government to sustain high economic growth as a symbol binding the nation together. A second important question for the future is the degree to which rising generations will continue to accept the paternalistic, heavy involvement of the government in everyday life, which has been so characteristic of the last forty years. Until now, this has been relatively well tolerated by the population as many feel it has assisted Singapore in its ongoing development. However, those who have no memory of the hardships of life before independence and the struggle for modernization may be less willing than previous generations to accept the continuation of restrictions on the press and personal and public freedom imposed by the government, and this could lead to new divisive confrontation between state and population. Finally, the economic rise of China predicted for the next fifty years is bound to have increasing effects on Singapore and cause new interactions between English and Chinese as potentially dominant regional languages, possibly reducing the importance of English and making Chinese a more marketable commodity, with clear consequences for policies on bilingualism and education. How all these and other tensions in multiracial, multilingual modern Singapore play out in the century to come will certainly be interesting to follow.