

Language Problems in Singapore and Hong Kong

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Abstract: The focus of this article is particularly on the development of Singaporean language policy. In Singapore, they follow a complicated language policy. As the language policy is to move towards English, and the emphasis is on bilingualism, this article will look at the mismatch between policy and what actually happens resulting from a mixture of Chinese, Malays and Indians who speak their respective languages. The context of Hong Kong will also be considered to support the central idea of the article--**languages cannot always be planned.**

Loke points out in the article policy intentions and policy outcomes which is a comparative perspective on the Singapore bilingual education system: "Singapore, which is multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual, has now become functionally monolingual in English by design, through a bilingual education system" (1994:62). There is clearly something rather interesting going on here as to why should a multilingual country become functionally monolingual in English, and how could it do so through a bilingual education system? To answer such questions, it is useful first of all to look into the factors that led to such a decision on language policy in Singapore.

A good starting point is to read Kuo's (1976, 1977, 1980a) socio-linguistic profiles of Singapore. Working largely with information from the national census and other surveys, Kuo provides large scale statistical analyses of language use in Singapore. The 1957 census identified thirty three mother tongue groups of which 20 were spoken by more than a thousand people. These include 433,718 Hokkien speakers (30% of the population), 246,478 (17%) Teochow, 217,640 (15.1%) Cantonese, 74,498 (5.2%) Hainanese, 66,597 (4.6%) Hakka and 5 other Chinese language groups; 166,931 (11.5%) Malay, plus two other Malayo-Polynesian groups; 75,617 (5.2%) Tamil, 20,063 (1.4%) Malayalam, plus four other Indian languages of Indo-European origin spoken by less than 1% of the population; and English with 26,599 (1.8%) speakers (Kuo, 1980a: 41). Using Fishman's (1971) definitions of major and minor languages, Kuo (1976) argues that Singapore had five major languages (Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, English and Hokkien) and three minor languages (Teochow, Cantonese, and Hainanese).

Of the many points of interest here, it is worth dwelling on these salient issues. First, there was clearly a great diversity within the supposed four "races" of Singapore, each being divided into a number of smaller language groups. Second,

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the four official languages--Mandarin, Tamil, Malay and English--were the mother tongues of only 18.6% of the population. Third, the two principal contenders for the position of national language, English and Mandarin (Malay is officially the national language), were spoken by only 1.9% of the population (1.8% English and 0.1% Mandarin) as a mother tongue in 1957. It is also worth observing that since Hokkien was said to be understood by 97% of the Chinese, and 77.9% of the total population (Kuo 198a), it was clearly an important lingua franca, at least in the Chinese community.

Kuo (1980a) estimates that in 1980 the percentage of native speakers of Mandarin could not be more than 2 or 3 percent. And yet, according to one survey (*The Sunday Times*, November 18, 1999), the languages most frequently spoken at home by parents of primary school children were, for Chinese, 67.9% Mandarin, 26.2% English, and only 5.6% "dialects." Kwan-Terry's (1989: 27) survey of language use among Chinese school children and their parents found that although about three-quarters of the parents in the survey used a Chinese language with their spouse at home, with only a very small proportion using English, language use to children varied greatly, with many parents using more Mandarin or English, depending on economic and educational background.

A comparison of "predominant household language" between 1980 and 1990 (Kwan-Terry 1993) shows increases in English (from 11.6% to 20.3%) and Mandarin (10.2% to 26.3%) and a decrease in "Chinese dialects" (from 59.5% to 36.7%). Such figures clearly reflect changing patterns of language use in Singapore as parents prepare their children for the school system by using Mandarin and English. Equally interesting, however, are the disparities between different surveys that point to the need to treat such figures with circumspection, since self-report data, especially on topics around language and education in Singapore, may often reflect people's understanding of government policies rather than actual language use. Such surveys, especially those that are officially published in the *Straits Times*, may construct rather than reflect the realities of language use.

Looking more specifically at the use of English in Singapore, we can find six principal domains of use: 1. As an official language (and despite its supposed equality with the other official language); 2. The language of education; 3. The working language of both private and public sectors; 4. The lingua franca for both *intra* and *inter-ethnic* communities; 5. The expression of national identity; 6. The international language. English is strongly linked to the increasingly prestigious and popular (and middle/upper class) Christianity, while other languages are associated with more "traditional" forms of religion.

Most apparent in many of the pronouncements on English has been the connection between the language and science and technology, and its role as a neutral medium of communication between the different races of Singapore.

English, Lee Kuan Yew explained, “gives us access to the science and technology of the West” and provides a “neutral medium” for all different races (*The Mirror*, November 20, 1972). Elsewhere, he urged the learning of English as a neutral and pragmatic language: “For all of us, let us press on English. It is our common working language. It cuts across all racial and linguistic groups. It provides a neutral medium, giving no one any advantage in the competition for knowledge and jobs” (*The Mirror*, June 19, 1978). The primary consideration for education is to enable children to gain the skills necessary for them to help Singapore participate in the world economy. Thus the foremost requirements are vocational training and the knowledge of English, which is “the language of the investing industrialists, whether Americans, Japanese, Germans, Swiss, French, or British” (*The Mirror*, April 17, 1972). Children “must understand how to work the machines in the factory, how to receive and give instructions” (*ibid.*). This, then is a classic articulation of the pragmatic function of English: it is a neutral medium for the gaining of important knowledge, a neutral medium for interracial communication, and an essential language for participation in the global economy (and for giving and taking instructions).

At this point, however, a different element is added, namely the problem of “deculturalisation.” As Lee Kuan Yew explained in his National Day Rally speech: “A person who gets deculturalised--and I nearly was, so I know the danger--loses his self-confidence. He suffers from a sense of deprivation. For optimum performance, a man must know himself and the world. He must know where he stands. I may speak the English language better than the Chinese language because I learnt English early in life. But I will never be an Englishman in a thousand generations and I have not got the Western value system inside; mine is an Eastern value system. Nevertheless I use Western concepts, Western words because I understand them. But I also have a different system in my mind. (*The Mirror*, September 14, 1978).

Catherine Lim (1989) suggests that Singapore now “perceives English as largely responsible for having created tremendous obstacles to the development of a national identity. The use of English has brought into being a whole generation of Singaporeans who are more at home with western oriented lifestyles and value-systems than with the traditions of their parents and grandparents” (6). Paradoxically, the blessing of English language which has brought with it ‘undesirable’ western influences, including an “enchantment with western political ideas,” that Lee worries will undermine the very prosperity of the country in the long run.

Thus Singapore has always fought a complex battle with English. It is both the language of modernity and the language of decadence, the “first language” (i.e. the medium of education) but not the “mother tongue” (the racially assigned language), a neutral medium of communication, yet the bearer of western values,

the language of equality and yet the distributor of inequality, the language of Singaporean identity and yet the mother tongue of few. It is against this background that the paradoxical demand for English monolingualism can be understood. There is something of a paradox here: Singapore is constantly subjected to various forms of policy and planning to do with social behavior (from chewing gum to choosing marriage partners), and the matters related to the social behaviour might be shifted linguistically, from their own ethnic languages to English in a very short space of time. And yet, as this article argues, it was bilingualism, not monolingualism that was planned. How might we account for this?

Another issue is that the English that has developed in Singapore is a very distinctive variety, proudly referred to as "Singlish" by young Singaporeans. It is worth trying to hear examples of Singaporean English, or reading novels and short stories by writers such as Catherine Lim. Is it perhaps the case that however much a government plans (and the Singaporean government definitely did not plan for the development of Singaporean English), there will always be unexpected developments? So this raises a crucial question: How much can language be planned? And how much of what we discuss in language planning is in fact unplanned?

Now let us have a look at Hong Kong which presents us with another fascinating and complex context of language planning. In Hong Kong there are three languages, English (the former colonial language), Cantonese (the language of the vast majority of the people), and Potonghua or standard Chinese (the language of the new rulers of Hong Kong) competing with one another.

It is, first of all, interesting to look at Hong Kong concerning the relationship between language policy and what actually happens. In the context of Singapore, we saw a development where an apparent policy to promote bilingualism actually seemed to be leading towards monolingualism. There appeared to be a number of reasons for this, including decisions about language that did not seem to reflect what languages were actually used, possible hidden government agendas which were not overtly stated in policy documents, and the problem that to some extent language may always escape attempts to plan it.

Hong Kong presents a slightly different scenario in that language has often been fairly incoherent while the direction of language practices and use within education have followed a very definite pattern. Language policy in the 19th century tended to favour English in Hong Kong. In the early part of the 20th century, however, education in Chinese was favoured for a number of reasons: education was oriented towards, on the one hand, developing a population that would be efficient workers within colonial capitalism, and, on the other hand, maintaining social and political control over the populace. For both of these goals, education in Chinese was seen as more useful.

But with English remaining the powerful language of colonial government, business and education, there was a great deal of pressure to increase access to English education. Thus, there was a gradual move, generated largely by parental pressure, towards secondary education in English. By the 1990s this had led to 90% of Hong Kong secondary schools claiming to be English-medium (EM) schools. This move to greater English has, unfortunately, had serious effects on education. English medium education in Hong Kong adversely affects many students' educational attainment. Similarly, So (1987) comments that "there is much evidence indicating that EM instruction has created learning problems for many students" (265). Quite simply, for large numbers of students in Hong Kong schools, an education through the medium of English is detrimental to education has become the principal determinant of upward and outward mobility for the people of Hong Kong" (p.78). Thus, with success in schooling closely linked to social class, and since, "Hong-Kong students from lower social-class are not receptive and prepared for English as a second language (ESL) as are students of a higher social background" (Yee, 1992: 302), parents are caught in an impossible situation: to provide their children with the possibility of a good education, they must opt for the better Anglo-Chinese schools, and yet in doing so, they often condemn their children to an educational dead end.

And yet, although it is parents who have constantly chosen English-medium schools for their children, they cannot be held responsible for the limited choice with which they are presented. That is a result of the micro politics of colonial rule, such as "the colonial support for elite schools and the preservation of the University of Hong Kong as a wholly English-medium institution" (Postiglione 1992: 21). In fact, it is not only the maintenance of English as the medium of education at Hong Kong University that supports English medium education in Hong Kong but also the narrow elitism of the system. Bray (1992) cites figures of 34,000 Hong Kong students in tertiary education overseas (compared to 19000 in Hong Kong), of which 12,000 were studying in the United States, 10,000 in Canada, and 4,000 in the U.K. He goes on to suggest that "[t]he chief reason why English-speaking countries receive so many more students than Chinese-speaking ones is that the Hong Kong government refuses to recognize degrees from the latter"(90). Thus, an apparently small government policy has had major implications within Hong Kong for supporting the role of English in both secondary education and employment.

Another way in which English is constantly favored not as overt government policy but rather in terms of lower-level decision-making has been in the constant favouring of expatriates for both work and advice (a process gradually being opposed through localization schemes). The dependency on foreign curricula in Hong Kong schools (most mainstream academic subjects closely resemble British 'O' and 'A' level curricula) was reinforced by the domination of expatriates at senior levels of the Education Department (ED) and the tertiary

institutions; the use of overseas study visits by ED officials, specially to England to identify curricular trends and innovations for adoption in Hong Kong; and a reliance on visiting curriculum 'experts' from the United Kingdom" (120). The education system has been heavily influenced by Western external advisers. Hong Kong University's policy of hiring the best "international" candidate in practice means a high proportion (22 percent) from the United Kingdom with most of the remainder from other Western countries (5 percent from the United States, 3.6 percent from Canada, 5.4 percent from Australia) (88).

According to Chen (1992), "education in Hong Kong under British rule has been characterised by inequalities, privileges, patronage, discrimination as well as archaic hierarchies, inadequate planning and emphasis on quantity over quality" (11). Chen goes on to explain the operation of this colonial education system in terms of five key elements:

1. Policy making in the hands of an unrepresentative elite operating an undemocratic structure of territory-wide educational governance;
2. Over-bureaucratized and illiberal administration of educational institutions, from primary schools to universities;
3. Systematic official discrimination against mother tongue teaching and learning;
4. Curriculum design that not only prevented the promotion of nationalistic sentiments but also independent thought and critical analytical ability. This ensured schools would not become a healthy force in democratizing Hong Kong, but rather a hindrance to this long overdue process; and
5. Legal and administrative patronage favoring "British" (as against "non-British") degrees and qualifications in academic recognition, professional accreditation, employment criteria, and scholarship awards regardless of merits. (Chen 1992: 12).

Daniel So gives a useful overview of the sociolinguistic context of Hong Kong.

- So mentions a particular problem in Hong Kong- "the small number of Hong Kong Chinese who speak their language well" (153).
- In spite of a degree of multilingualism in the early part of the 20th century, Cantonese gradually became the dominant language of Hong Kong.
- So questions the idea that Cantonese is the language of solidarity and English the language of power.
- So is critical of the proposal for only 30% of schools to be English medium (169-170).

An interesting perspective on such questions is provided by Benson's discussion of language rights in Hong Kong. Benson argues that "language rights are not

fundamental. They are only fundamental in so far as they mediate rights to freedom of expression, non-discrimination, or cultural continuity” (7). That is to say, according to Benson, the notion of language rights should not be tied to an automatic right to one language and another, but rather to questions of how rights to a certain language may impact on other rights and preferred futures.

Hong Kong, therefore, presents us with a rather different case from Singapore, though both have ended up with a strong emphasis on English. This emphasis can not be explained simply in terms of the colonial support for English or the current global role of English. But nor can it be explained easily in terms of overt policy to support English, since neither had policies that overtly favored English. We are left, therefore, with a number of questions to do with the relationship between language policy and other social, cultural, economic and political forces.

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