

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER
MR LEE KUAN YEW AT THE OPENING CEREMONY
OF THE “PROMOTE THE USE OF MANDARIN” CAMPAIGN
ON 7 SEP 79 AT SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL

Chinese Singaporeans face a dilemma. The Chinese we speak is divided up among more than twelve dialects. Children at home speak dialect; in school they learn English and Mandarin. After 20 years of bilingual schooling, we know that very few children can cope with two languages plus one dialect, certainly not much more than the 12% that make it to junior colleges. The majority have ended up speaking English and dialect.

It is most difficult for the average, and impossible for the slow, to keep in mind, for immediate recall and use, enough words in English, Mandarin and dialects. Even those who, after twelve years of Chinese schooling, have to go to universities abroad lose their fluency in Mandarin. It is because they use English for their work and dialect for their family and friends. Because Singapore is 25% non-Chinese, English will be the common language between different ethnic Singaporeans. And if we continue to use dialects, then English will tend to become the common language between Chinese of different dialect groups.

A knowledge of dialect helps the learning of Mandarin. But the continued use of dialect, after Mandarin has already been learnt, makes a person lose his fluency in Mandarin. It is daily use which gives fluency, the facility to think and speak a language. All Chinese parents face this choice for their children - English-Mandarin, or English-dialect. If they allow, or worse want, their children to speak dialects, then their children will find their work in school very burdensome. Therefore, actively encourage your children to speak Mandarin in place of dialect. If you can speak dialect, it is not difficult to learn to understand Mandarin, and, if you make some effort, then learn to speak it. It is much easier to understand a language than to speak it.

Once it is clear to the government that parents want their children to learn and to use Mandarin, not dialects, the government will take administrative action to support their decision. All government officers, including those in hospitals and clinics, and especially those in manning counters, will be instructed to speak Mandarin except to the old, those over sixty. All Chinese taxi-drivers, bus conductors, and hawkers, can and will be required to pass an oral Mandarin test, or to attend Mandarin classes to make them adequate and competent to understand and speak Mandarin to their customers.

I had surveys carried out a few months ago of the languages spoken on the buses and in the hawkers' centres. They disclose how widespread and dominant dialects are. Nevertheless, within five years, once parents have decided that their children's learning load must be lessened by dropping dialect and concentrating on English-Mandarin, we can dramatically alter the language environment. Students will hear and speak Mandarin in the streets, on the buses, in the shops, in the hawkers' centres. If, however, the majority of parents secretly believe they can have English-Mandarin plus dialect for their children, then administrative action will not be wholly successful, because administrative action cannot reach the home where dialects, already entrenched, will prevail.

It is frequent repetition, through constant use, that makes for easy immediate recall and fluency. It is the chicken and the egg. If our ancestors had come from northern China, most parents will be Mandarin-speaking. Then the few who do not will soon pick it up, just like everybody picks up Cantonese when they go to Hong Kong. All the same, we can create this Mandarin-speaking environment, if the majority of parents decide to lighten their children's learning load.

For online reference
viewing only

Let us face the problem and make our decision to use Mandarin, not dialect. Two generations of Chinese-educated students have gone through

twelve years of Chinese school education since the war. They still do not speak Mandarin fluently because they have reverted to dialect in their daily lives. We can go on for another two generations teaching Mandarin and we shall make as little progress if we revert to dialect outside school. And because it is Mandarin, not dialect, we teach in schools, the dialect spoken will be a limited, pidgin-type patois. This is the stark choice - English Mandarin, or English-dialect. Logically, the decision is obvious. Emotionally, the choice is painful.

Now I have pleasure in declaring the Campaign open.

LANGUAGES/DIALECTS USED BY CHINESE BUS PASSENGERS

For online reference

Language/ Dialect	Chinese Passengers speaking to			Distribution of Dialect Groups in Singapore
	Chinese Conductors	Malay Conductors	Indian Conductors	
Hokkien	75.0%	30.6%	26.8%	42.2%
Teochew	7.0%	1.7%	0.8%	22.3%

Cantonese	5.2%	1.0%	0.8%	17.0%
Other Dialects	1.0%	0.5%	-	18.5%
Sub-total:				
Dialects	88.2%	33.8%	28.4%	100.0%
Mandarin	3.7%	1.0%	0.8%	NA
English	7.0%	34.2%	36.2%	NA
Malay	1.2%	31.1%	34.6%	NA
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

NA : Not Applicable

Notes: 1. Data on language/dialect use were from a Singapore Bus Service Survey in March 79 on 116 bus trips.

2. Of 8914 passengers observed, 5,637 or 63.2% did not speak to the conductors during the survey because they were pass holders, had exact fares or used hand signals.

LANGUAGES/DIALECTS USED BY MALAY
AND INDIAN BUS PASSENGERS

Language/Dialect	MALAY Passengers speaking to		
	Chinese Conductors	Malay Conductors	Indian Conductors
Malay	84.3%	90.5%	86.4%
English	10.8%	9.5%	12.1%
Hokkien	4.8%	-	1.5%

Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
-------	--------	--------	--------

Language/Dialect	INDIAN Passengers speaking to		
	Chinese Conductors	Malay Conductors	Indian Conductors
Malay	69.8%	75.5%	31.4%
English	25.0%	24.5%	11.8%
Hokkien	5.2%	-	-
Tamil	-	-	56.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

- Notes: 1. Data on language/dialect use were from a Singapore Bus Service Survey in March 79 on 116 bus trips.
2. Of 8914 passengers observed, 5,637 or 63.2% did not speak to the conductors during the survey because they were pass holders, had exact fares or used hand signals.

**For online reference
viewing only**

LANGUAGES/DIALECTS USED AT CHINESE
HAWKERS STALLS IN HAWKER CENTRES

Language/Dialect	Distribution of Hawkers Surveyed	Hawkers speaking to Customers	Customers speaking to Hawkers	Distribution of Dialect Groups in Singapore
Hokkien	37.6%	53.2%	55.5%	42.2%
Teochew	39.0%	20.9%	17.3%	22.3%
Cantonese	10.5%	14.3%	15.2%	17.0%
Other Dialects	12.9%	1.0%	1.1%	18.5%
Sub-total: Dialects	100.0%	89.4%	89.1%	100.0%
Mandarin	NA	1.2%	1.2%	NA
English	NA	2.7%	3.0%	NA
Malay	NA	6.7%	6.7%	NA
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

NA : Not Applicable

- Notes:
1. Data on language/dialect use were from a Ministry of the Environment survey in April 1979 covering 295 hawkers in 9 markets/food centres.
 2. 13,746 customers spoke to the hawkers surveyed; the hawkers replied in 13,517 instances.
 3. In 86.3% of the conversations, hawkers responded in the language/dialect spoken by the customers.
 4. Customers who spoke English were mostly tourists and non-Chinese. Customers who spoke Mandarin were mostly young persons.