Malay and Tamil as official languages

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The constitutional settlement

Article 153A of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore names four official languages: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English. It also provides that "the national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in the Roman script". Singapore was the first state outside China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau to give Mandarin constitutional status as an official language.[1]

The settlement reflects the history examined in Chapter II of Part C. In the 1950s the government of the self-governing state made Malay the national language in preparation for merger with the Federation of Malaya. Lee Kuan Yew stated the principle at the time: all should learn the national language, while other races should remain free to study and use their own languages.[2] Separation in 1965 left Singapore with a national language spoken at home by a minority. The government kept it as a symbol of the state's place in a Malay world, while English took over the practical functions.

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Article 152 of the Constitution also requires the government to exercise its functions so as "to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore". It must accordingly protect and promote their interests and the Malay language. Malay is the language of the national anthem, *Majulah Singapura*, composed by Zubir Said, adopted by the Legislative Assembly on 11 November 1959 and confirmed as the national anthem on independence on 9 August 1965. By law it must be sung in Malay.[3]

Malay: national language and regional bridge

Malays numbered 545,498 in 2020, or 13.5 % of the resident population. Malay remains the home language of a large majority of them, although the share fell from 92 % to 83 % between 2000 and 2010 as English advanced in Malay homes too. The Malay Language Council, first established in April 1981, sets standards for the language in Singapore and promotes it through the annual Malay Language Month, held for the first time in 1962.[4]

For most of Singapore's history Malay was also the language between communities. In its Bazaar Malay form it served as the interethnic lingua franca of the colonial port.[5] The bus survey of 1979 confirms that role. Malay passengers addressed Chinese conductors in Malay in 84.3 % of cases, Indian passengers in 69.8 %.[6] English has since taken over this function for younger Singaporeans, but older Chinese and Indian Singaporeans still often understand colloquial Malay.

The commercial value of Malay lies across the Strait. Malaysia and Indonesia use standard forms of Malay as their national languages. Chapter IV of Part I describes Singapore's economic relations with these two neighbours. Since 2008 Indonesian has been available in Singapore schools as a third language.[7] Few non-Malay professionals in Singapore speak Malay well enough to negotiate in it. For a bank or law firm that serves Indonesian families or Malaysian companies, Malay Singaporeans and staff with a good command of Bahasa Indonesia are therefore a resource that the bilingual policy produced almost incidentally and that the financial centre can use.

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Tamil and the languages of South Asia

Indians formed 9.0 % of the resident population in 2020. Tamil was chosen as their official language because it was spoken by the largest Indian group and had the longest history of education in Malaya and Singapore.[8] Tamils accounted for 54.2 % of Indian residents at the census of 2010. The share of Indians using Tamil as the main home language fell from 42.9 % in 2000 to 36.7 % in 2010.[9] The decline is usually attributed to the attraction of English and to the growing diversity of Indian immigration.

The school system recognised that diversity from the early 1990s. Pupils of Indian descent may take Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu as their mother tongue, taught outside school hours by seven community organisations.[10] The Tamil Language Council promotes the use of Tamil, particularly among the young. Its Tamil Language Festival of 2026, held from 28 March to 26 April, comprised 46 programmes organised with 47 partners.[11]

The economic relevance of Tamil is more limited than that of Mandarin. Tamil is the language of Tamil Nadu and of Sri Lanka's Tamil community. It is not the language of Indian business at large, which works in English and Hindi. Chapter III of Part I shows that Singapore's financial relationship with India runs largely through English, through the common law heritage that both share and through institutions such as GIFT City. The value of Tamil lies above all in social cohesion and in the trust of an Indian community that has played a large part in Singapore's legal and financial professions.

Multilingualism as a principle of the state

The four official languages embody a principle that goes beyond language: the equal standing of the communities in a state that refuses to define itself by one of them. Malay, Mandarin and Tamil each have a language council, each is taught as a mother tongue in the schools and all four official languages appear on many public notices.

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The principle has economic consequences because it protects the neutrality of English. No community can claim English as its own, which is why it can serve all of them as the common working language.

The same principle explains the weight that public policy attaches to fairness in employment. If Mandarin became the language of advancement in finance, the Malay and Indian communities would be at a disadvantage in the sector that pays the highest salaries. The tension between the commercial value of Mandarin and the equal standing of the communities runs through employment practice in the financial centre.

Notes

1. Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Art. 153A(1): "Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English shall be the 4 official languages in Singapore"; Art. 153A(2): "The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in the Roman script", with provisos protecting the use, teaching and learning of other languages; text as reproduced by Université Laval, CEFAN, "Singapour : Constitution", axl.cefan.ulaval.ca (accessed November 2026); Wikipedia, "Majulah Singapura" (accessed November 2026), citing Art. 153A; Culturepaedia, "Mandarin in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Singapore was the first country outside China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau to give Mandarin constitutional status as an official language. ↩
2. Culturepaedia, "Mandarin in Singapore", above: in the 1950s the government adopted a multilingual policy making Malay the national language, partly to support a planned merger with the Federation of Malaya; Lee Kuan Yew said that "while all should learn the national language, other races should have the freedom to study and use their own languages". ↩
3. Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Art. 152(2), as reproduced by Université Laval, CEFAN, above: "The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore", with the duty to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their interests "and the Malay

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language"; Wikipedia, "Malays in Singapore" (accessed November 2026), quoting the same provision; Wikipedia, "Majulah Singapura" (accessed November 2026): composed by Zubir Said; adopted by the Legislative Assembly on 11 November 1959; formally adopted as national anthem on 9 August 1965; "By law, the anthem must be sung with Malay lyrics"; regulated by the Singapore Arms and Flag and National Anthem Act. ↩

4. Wikipedia, "Malays in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): 545,498 Malays, 13.5 % of the Singapore resident population (2020); Wikipedia, "Languages of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Malay home use fell "from 92% to 83%" between 2000 and 2010; Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore": 82.7 % of Malay Singaporeans used Malay as their home language in 2010; Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Malay Language Month first introduced in 1962; the Malay Language Council "first established in April 1981". ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Languages of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Bazaar Malay, a Malay-lexified pidgin, was once an "interethnic lingua franca" under British rule. ↩
6. Lee Kuan Yew, Address of 7 September 1979, above, annex tables: Malay passengers speaking to Chinese conductors used Malay in 84.3 % of cases; Indian passengers speaking to Chinese conductors used Malay in 69.8 %. ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): in 2008 Indonesian and Arabic became third-language options. ↩
8. Wikipedia, "Indian Singaporeans" (accessed November 2026): Indians form 9.0 % of the resident population in the 2020 census, the third largest ethnic group; Wikipedia, "Languages of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Tamil was chosen because it was spoken by the largest Indian ethnic group and has "the longest history of education in Malaysia and Singapore". ↩
9. Wikipedia, "Indian Singaporeans" (accessed November 2026), 2010 census table: Tamil 54.18 % (188,591 people); Wikipedia, "Languages of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): about 36.7 % of Indians spoke Tamil most often at home in 2010, down from 42.9 % in 2000. ↩

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10. Wikipedia, "Language education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu have been offered as mother tongues since the early 1990s, with lessons run by seven Indian community groups outside school hours. ↩
11. Tamil Language Council, tamil.languagecouncils.sg (accessed November 2026): the Council aims to promote awareness and greater use of the Tamil language; Tamil Language Festival 2026 from 28 March to 26 April with 46 programmes by 47 partners. ↩

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