The Bilingual Policy and Mandarin as a Commercial Asset

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On the evening of 7 September 1979 the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, opened a campaign at the Singapore Conference Hall with a sentence that set out a problem of language policy in the terms of a household budget. “Chinese Singaporeans face a dilemma,” he said: the Chinese they spoke was divided among more than twelve dialects, while their children, who spoke dialect at home and learned English and Mandarin at school, could rarely cope with two languages plus a dialect. He closed with an equally plain judgement: “Logically, the decision is obvious. Emotionally, the choice is painful.”[1] The campaign that began that evening is still running. Together with the bilingual education policy that preceded it, it changed the languages spoken in Singaporean homes within two generations.

This chapter examines that policy and its economic significance. The previous chapter showed how English became the working language of government, law and business. The present chapter turns to the second element of the arrangement: the requirement that every pupil also study a “mother tongue”, the replacement of the Chinese dialects by Mandarin, the place of Malay and Tamil as official languages and the use that the financial centre has made of the resulting language skills. It treats Mandarin as a commercial asset and asks what kind of asset it is, how it was built

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and where its limits lie. The relationship with China as such, with its trade, investment and family wealth, belongs to Chapter II of Part I, to which this chapter refers.

In the Geneva volume, Part J describes the French language as an infrastructure of the financial centre: a language of law, of a market of several hundred million speakers and of a city placed between French, German and English.[2] Geneva inherited its language. Singapore chose its languages, assigned each a function and spent half a century teaching them. The comparison at the end of this chapter shows what each approach costs and what it yields for a financial centre that lives from clients who speak other languages.

Essentials

Singapore made a second language compulsory in all schools in 1966. From 1987 English was the first language of the whole school system, with Mandarin, Malay or Tamil taught as the “mother tongue”. The Speak Mandarin Campaign, launched on 7 September 1979, set out to replace a dozen Chinese dialects with Mandarin and was supported by restrictions on dialect broadcasting from 1981. Among Chinese Primary One pupils, those speaking mainly Mandarin at home rose from 26 % in 1980 to 69 % in 1989, while the share from dialect-speaking homes fell from 64 % to 7 %. By the census of 2020 English had overtaken Mandarin as the language most often spoken at home, by 48.3 % of residents against 29.9 %, although most English-speaking households still use a second language. Mandarin has served Singapore as a bridge to China since the 1990s, but the bilingual policy produced a population that is strong in English and of uneven depth in its second language, which is why the asset needs constant maintenance.

Notes

1. Lee Kuan Yew, Address at the opening ceremony of the “Promote the Use of Mandarin” campaign, Singapore Conference Hall, 7 September 1979, National Archives of Singapore, document lky19790907, p. 1: “Chinese Singaporeans

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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."; Lee Kuan Yew, Address of 7 September 1979, above, p. 4. ↩

2. Ressos, *Genève, place financière internationale*, partie J, chapitres I à III (« La langue française comme infrastructure », « La Francophonie comme marché », « Genève entre le français, l'anglais et l'allemand »). ↩

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