The choice of English after independence

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Four official languages and one national language

The legal framework of language in Singapore took shape in three steps. In 1955 the Legislative Assembly gave official status to English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. After internal self-government in 1959 Malay was accepted as the national language, which was consistent with the plan of a merger with Malaya. After separation in 1965 the four languages were confirmed as official.[1] Chapter C.II describes the political events of those years.

The Constitution states the result in Article 153A. Under its first paragraph, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English "shall be the 4 official languages in Singapore". Under the second, the national language "shall be the Malay language and shall be in the Roman script". A proviso adds that no person may be prohibited or prevented from using, teaching or learning any other language. It also preserves the right of the Government to sustain the use and study of the languages of other communities.[2] Article 152(2) further obliges the Government to protect and promote the interests of the Malays, the indigenous people of Singapore, including their language.[3]

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The Constitution thus gives English no special rank among the four official languages. The position of English as the working language rests on practice, on the education system and on a small number of rules that apply to specific institutions. In this respect Singapore differs from Hong Kong, whose Basic Law expressly provides that English may be used as an official language alongside Chinese, a comparison taken up at the end of this chapter.

Common misconception

It is often assumed that English is the national language of Singapore. The national language is Malay, under Article 153A(2) of the Constitution, and it retains its symbolic functions: the national anthem *Majulah Singapura* is sung in Malay and military commands are given in it.[4] English is one of four official languages of equal constitutional rank. Its dominance as the language of government, law and business is the result of policy and practice since the 1960s, without any constitutional priority.

Why English

The leaders of the People's Action Party who governed Singapore from 1959 were themselves largely English-educated. Lee Kuan Yew grew up in a family that spoke English as its first language. He began to learn Mandarin only in 1955, at the age of 32, when an opponent in the election campaign of that year exploited his inability to converse in Chinese.[5] Their choice of English was nonetheless a political decision with several reasons, which the government stated many times over the following decades.

The first reason was neutrality. A language belonging to one community would have advantaged that community in schooling, employment and public life. Mandarin would have favoured the Chinese majority and alarmed the Malay and Indian minorities as well as the neighbouring states. Malay, the national language, was the language of a minority within Singapore. English belonged to none of the three main communities and therefore placed them, at least in principle, on equal terms. The second reason was economic. English was the language of the British, American

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and European firms whose investment the Economic Development Board set out to attract, as Chapter C.III shows. It was also the language of science, technology and international trade. The third reason was access to the world. A small state without a hinterland needed a language that would connect it with markets, institutions and knowledge beyond its region.[6]

Each of these reasons applies to the financial centre. Foreign banks could hire local staff who wrote and spoke the language of their head offices. The Asian Dollar Market created in 1968, examined in Chapter C.IV, could operate in English with the same documents as the euro-dollar market in London. The Monetary Authority of Singapore, founded in 1971 and examined in Chapter C.V, could recruit officials who read the reports of the Bank for International Settlements and of the International Monetary Fund without translation.

From four streams to one national system

The choice of English was implemented through the schools over a period of more than twenty years. In 1966 the government made bilingualism a principle of education: every pupil learned English and a second language, which for most pupils was the official language of their community.[7] Parents remained free to choose the language stream of their children's school. They chose English in growing numbers, because they saw where the jobs were. Between the early 1960s and the late 1970s the share of pupils enrolled in English-medium schools rose from about 50 to about 90 per cent, while Chinese, Malay and Tamil schools lost pupils and several closed.[8]

The policy had costs that the government itself documented. A review led by Goh Keng Swee in 1978 found that the bilingual policy was "not universally effective". Fewer than 40 per cent of pupils reached minimum competency in two languages, while only 11 per cent of armed forces recruits were adequately competent in English.[9] Many children came from homes where neither English nor Mandarin was spoken. They were being taught in two languages that were foreign to them both. The Goh Report led to streaming by ability and to a more systematic teaching of languages. The Speak Mandarin Campaign launched by Lee Kuan Yew on 7 September 1979, examined in Chapter J.II, addressed the other half of the problem.[10]

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The fate of Nanyang University marked the end of Chinese-medium higher education. In the 1970s Lee Kuan Yew pressed the university to adopt English as its medium of instruction within five years. After its merger with the University of Singapore was confirmed in April 1980, the new National University of Singapore came into being in August 1980.[11] For many Chinese-educated Singaporeans the closure of Nantah, as the university was known, remains a painful memory. It showed that the choice of English carried a cultural price.

The process was completed in 1987, when English was officially designated the first language of the education system. The remaining vernacular schools were absorbed into a single National System of Education, in which English is the medium of instruction for all subjects except the mother tongue languages.[12] Since then every child who passes through Singapore's schools has been educated in English from primary school to university. The generation that entered primary school in the 1980s now occupies many of the senior positions in the banks, law firms and regulators of the financial centre.

English in Parliament and in the courts

Two institutions show how the constitutional equality of the four official languages coexists with the practical primacy of English. The first is Parliament. Article 53 of the Constitution provides that "until the Legislature otherwise provides, all debates and discussions in Parliament shall be conducted in Malay, English, Mandarin or Tamil".[13] The Standing Orders repeat the rule. A Member may speak in any of the four languages and may combine them in a single speech.[14] Members can therefore address the House in their mother tongue. Debates on the bilingual policy or on Malay affairs often include speeches in Mandarin, Malay or Tamil.

The machinery of Parliament nevertheless runs on English. Where the facilities for simultaneous interpretation are inadequate, the Speaker may require a Member who wishes to speak in Malay, Mandarin or Tamil to provide an English translation of a prepared speech to the interpreter.[15] A petition to Parliament must be written in English.[16] Bills are drafted, debated and enacted in English, with the result that the

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statutes published on Singapore Statutes Online exist in English only.[17] An investor who wants to know the law therefore has a single authoritative text to read, without the comparison of language versions that the Swiss federal statutes require.

The second institution is the judiciary. The courts state the position plainly: "All court proceedings in Singapore are conducted in English." Parties who are not comfortable in English can use the courts' in-house interpreters. The Supreme Court offers interpretation into Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Malay, Javanese, Boyanese and Tamil, while the State Courts add Malayalam and Urdu.[18] Documents in other languages are placed before the court in English translation. Judgments are written and published in English, which makes Singapore case law directly accessible to lawyers throughout the common law world.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Language policy in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): official status for English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil with the Legislative Assembly in 1955 (citing Newman, 1986); Malay accepted as the national language after self-government in 1959; the four languages declared official with the Singapore Independence Act in 1965 (citing Ng, 2017). ↩
2. Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Art. 153A(1) and (2), text as published on constituteproject.org (Singapore 1963, rev. 2016), accessed November 2026. ↩
3. Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Art. 152(2), text as published on constituteproject.org (accessed November 2026). ↩
4. On the use of Malay for the national anthem *Majulah Singapura* and for foot-drill commands in the Singapore Armed Forces, see National Library Board Singapore, *Singapore Infopedia*, "National anthem". ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Lee Kuan Yew" (accessed November 2026): "the family spoke English as its first language"; "Lee first started learning Mandarin in 1955, at the age of 32" (citing his speech at the Speak Mandarin Campaign's 30th anniversary launch, 17 March 2009); the Democratic Party challenger Lam

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Thian "capitalised on Lee's inability to converse in Chinese" in the 1955 campaign. ↩

6. On the reasons given for the choice of English, see Lee Kuan Yew, *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingual Journey*, Singapore, Straits Times Press, 2012, and Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965–2000*, Singapore, Times Editions, 2000, chapter on language. ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): "The bilingual policy was first adopted in 1966." The article also gives 1960 as the date of an earlier introduction of bilingualism in schools, a discrepancy that reflects the gradual introduction of the policy. ↩
8. Wikipedia, "Languages of Singapore" (accessed November 2026): between the early 1960s and the late 1970s the share of students in primarily English-medium schools rose from 50 per cent to 90 per cent; attendance at Mandarin, Malay and Tamil-medium schools fell and some schools closed. ↩
9. Wikipedia, "Language policy in Singapore" (accessed November 2026), citing Goh Keng Swee et al., *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978*, Singapore, 1979: the bilingual policy was "not universally effective"; fewer than 40 per cent of school-going students had minimum competency in two languages; only 11 per cent of armed forces recruits were adequately competent in English. ↩
10. Wikipedia, "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026): the campaign was "launched on 7 September 1979 by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew". ↩
11. Wikipedia, "Nanyang University" (accessed November 2026): Lee Kuan Yew "prompted the university to adopt the English language within five years"; "in April 1980, the merger was confirmed"; the National University of Singapore Act took effect in August 1980. Wikipedia, "National University of Singapore" (accessed November 2026), gives 6 August 1980 in the text and 8 August 1980 in the infobox. ↩
12. Wikipedia, "Education in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): English was "officially designated the first language within the local education system in

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1987"; Wikipedia, "Language policy in Singapore" (accessed November 2026): "When vernacular schools were closed in 1987, the Ministry of Education implemented the National System of Education" (citing Mohamed, 2005). ↩

13. Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Art. 53, quoted in note 12 to the Standing Orders of the Parliament of Singapore (reprint incorporating amendments up to 8 May 2017), parliament.gov.sg, accessed November 2026. ↩

14. Standing Orders of the Parliament of Singapore, SO 47 ("A Member may speak in English, Malay, Mandarin or Tamil as permitted by law") and SO 48(7) ("A Member may use any or any combination of the four official languages in his speech"). ↩

15. Standing Orders of the Parliament of Singapore, SO 49(1)(a) and (b). ↩

16. Standing Orders of the Parliament of Singapore, SO 18(5)(g): "Every Petition shall be written in the English language." ↩

17. On the drafting and publication of Singapore legislation in English, see the Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore Statutes Online (sso.agc.gov.sg), where all Acts and subsidiary legislation are published in English; no statutory provision prescribing English as the language of legislation has been identified. ↩

18. Singapore Courts, "Interpretation services", judiciary.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): "All court proceedings in Singapore are conducted in English"; in-house interpretation in Chinese (Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese), Malay, Javanese and Boyanese, and Tamil at the Supreme Court and the Family Justice Courts, with Malayalam and Urdu in addition at the State Courts. ↩

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