Language Policy and Social Transformation in Contemporary Singapore

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This essay will attempt to describe some salient interrelationships between ideology, language policy, and social transformation in present-day Singapore. It will focus on the role that language policy plays in transforming the communicative structure of society in ways which are consistent with and simultaneously instrumental in creating the conditions under which the dominant ideology, and the political goals and economic interests which underlie it, can be disseminated and legitimated within the social system.

To provide a basis for understanding the nature and content of ideology and language policy in Singapore today, some of the implications of the People's Action Party's (PAP) economic policies for social organization and transformation will be identified. Second, some of the social and communicative problems inherent in these economic policies will be examined in so far as they relate to the formulation of concrete language policies. Third, some comments will be made concerning the nature and functions of ideology in Singapore, particularly those aspects which relate to the transformation of the communicative structure and the social relations the latter embodies. Fourth, selected aspects of language policy will be analysed in terms of their implications for social change and the political and economic interests they represent.

The Social Implications of Economic Development

Arguably, one of the main goals of the present political leadership in Singapore is to increase the degree of centralized, vertical social integration as a necessary precondition for realizing certain national economic and political goals. Obviously, it is not possible to alter the economic relations in a society without also creating some fundamental changes in the way people live, relate to each other, what they see, feel and think, and who they communicate with, about what, and in what language — in other words, every industrial revolution necessitates social transformations.

In contemporary Singapore, such social transformations arise from the following economic and political goals and processes:

1. the formation of a modern industrial labour force which is free from restraints to economic participation, stable yet versatile, and loyal to the
goals of increased productivity, product quality, harmonious labour relations, and self-discipline;

(2) increased demands on the education and retraining of labour in response to the changing requirements of the productive process, for example, emphasis on mental rather than manual skills and the increasing responsibility of workers for production through quality control circles;

(3) the growth in importance of managerial, technical, and professional expertise in the private sector as well as in government bodies as a result of the increasing complexity of problems of co-ordination, planning, and control, and the growing mutuality of interests between the State and private business; and

(4) the need for increased integration at the national level of ethnic, educational, labour, and other organizations in the interest of social and economic planning and the regulation and control of possible threats to the processes mentioned above.

All these imply a greater degree of co-ordination between government, labour, management, and other organizations at all levels of society. They place demands on the state to perform functions at the national level which are beyond the scope of individual companies, organizations, or “special interest” groups, and which serve to optimize the conditions under which economic growth and the consolidation of state power can take place. In the words of Wallerstein (1972, p. 280):

In such a circumstance, the essential problem of economic development can be posed as follows: How is it possible to install and maintain in power a regime with the will and the possibility to transform the social structure in a way that would make possible a dramatic rise in productivity and investment... [and]... how to maintain it in power over a long period of time, perhaps thirty to fifty years, during which time... a national economy could be erected and national (as opposed to sub-national) strata or classes could be sufficiently organized so that the state machinery is structurally resistant to outside intervention [or] internal secession.

In order to accomplish these ends in a structurally differentiated society with significant non- and semi-modern sectors, a basic transformation of the existing social order is necessary in the direction of centralized, vertical integration based on public acceptance of the legitimacy of national political institutions and goals, the necessity of economic growth by means of central planning and private initiative, and the subordination of individual or special interests to those of society or the nation. This transformation involves the establishment and expansion of new institutions, channels and media of communication which serve

(1) to link closer the political leadership and bureaucratic decision-makers and planners with the groups to be activated to facilitate the transfer of human resources from the non- and semi-modern sectors to the modern sectors; and

(2) to create conditions which are conducive to the formation and perpetuation of a national commercial, administrative, and professional élite who control substantial benefits of economic development.

The pursuit of these national goals necessarily gives rise to a number of attending social problems, especially in a society like Singapore which is still to a consider-