Singapore’s *Speak Mandarin Campaign:*
The Educational Argument

John Newman
School of Arts, Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education, Australia

Introduction*

During the late 1970’s, the Singapore government embarked upon a campaign to persuade its ethnic Chinese citizens (who comprise approximately 77 per cent of the country’s population) to use Mandarin in place of Chinese dialects. This campaign has been maintained since then, with one month being set aside every year for intensive campaigning through government statements, government sponsored programmes, posters, television and radio advertising, etc. Although the rhetoric of the slogans has varied somewhat over the years, it is convenient to refer to the campaign as the *Speak Mandarin Campaign.* This is also the most common way in which the campaign is referred to in official speeches and the Singapore press.

Obviously there are many possible ways to approach the campaign, including the political background, the administrative organization responsible for the campaign, implementational tactics, the role of the media, etc. These aspects have been covered in works such as Ng (1980), Altehenger-Smith (ms.), and Kuo (1984). My purpose here is not to repeat what has been said by these authors, but to concentrate instead on an aspect which has not yet been given the attention due to it, namely the argumentation publicly presented in support of the campaign. More than any other campaign conducted by the Singapore government, the Speak Mandarin Campaign has been accompanied by extensive argumentation and, in the early years of the campaign, debate. Obviously with a campaign such as this, the target audience needs to be convinced of the need to change patterns of language use in order for the campaign to be truly effective. It is appropriate, therefore, to examine the argumentation in some detail.

One difficulty in discussing the argumentation for the campaign is the fact that a number of interconnecting arguments have been proposed in support of it. These arguments need to be kept apart when one comes to do a serious evaluation of them. Noss (1984: 25) distinguishes three official arguments: educational (if there were no dialects, the bilingual policy would be more successful), cultural (Mandarin can be a symbol of the Chinese cultural heritage), practical (Mandarin can function as a lingua franca amongst the Chinese). Occasionally, other arguments may be put forward, but the three mentioned by Noss are certainly the major ones. Here I will be

*I am grateful to Richard Noss, Peter Wicks and Robert Le Page for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
concerned with the first of these, the educational argument, and I will base my analysis of this argument on a single, but major, speech by the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Although this approach may appear rather narrow and one-dimensional, I believe that this kind of microscopic analysis is an important part of the basic research on such a campaign. The approach taken here may be seen to complement the existing literature on the campaign which has tended to take a much broader view of the campaign without undertaking any detailed analysis of the campaign rhetoric.

Since the argument being considered here makes extensive reference to the bilingual policy, it is necessary to provide some background on the education system in so far as it involves language. For this reason, I will discuss the historical background to the present language policy before turning to the educational argument itself.

Historical Background

The Colonial Era

For the most part, Singapore's Colonial period 1819-1959 was characterized by blatantly preferential treatment of English both in the government supported schools (the Christian missionary schools and the "Free Schools") and in the society at large. To some extent, the Malay language also enjoyed some official support as the "natural vernacular" of all the Straits Settlements. Chinese, however, was not given official recognition in society at large; nor were the Chinese schools (run by the Chinese using Chinese as the medium of instruction) given any kind of assistance until the 1920's. Partly the reason may be found in the continuing image of Singapore as part of a larger Malay world in which Malay was the main lingua franca, rather than an image of Singapore as a sovereign state in which the Chinese predominated (an image of Singapore shared by most of the political leaders of modern Singapore up to 1965); partly a lack of materials and properly trained personnel to teach Chinese (especially before the development of Mandarin as the national language in China); the multitude of Chinese dialects represented in Singapore; and possibly a certain distrust on the part of the Chinese themselves towards local (as opposed to mainland China) education.

By the 1920's, the neglect of the Chinese schools had become more serious. For a start, the proportion of ethnic Chinese to the total population of Singapore had increased in the course of the nineteenth century. By the turn of the century it had stabilized to about 70-75 per cent (in 1921, 74.5 per cent). Not only were the Chinese in the majority, they could no longer be seen as transient guest-workers. Secondly, the government in Peking was beginning to involve itself in serious language-planning efforts, following the establishment of the Republic of China. In addition to developments within China (such as the gradual emergence of a high-status Peking-based variety as the national standard and the establishment of a standard pronunciation), there were also developments initiated by Peking which affected the Overseas Chinese. As reported in Wilson (1978: 56), the Chinese Ministry of Education sent two representatives to Singapore and Malaya in 1917 to inspect Chinese schools, following which three new Chinese schools were set up. In other words, the Chinese schools in Singapore were regarded by the Republic of China as being under the control of its Board of Education through the Chinese Consul-General. In 1920, then, a bill