CHAPTER 8

LANGUAGE PLANNING IN SINGAPORE

English Knowing Bilingualism

1. INTRODUCTION

Singapore is a small 633 sq. km (244 sq. mile) island state located at the tip of the Malay peninsula—in the heart of the Malay speaking world. With a population of 3,531,600 it is a densely packed city-state, dependent on trade and the resources of its mainly Chinese background population (76.5%). Malays (15%) and Indians (6.5%) make up most of the rest of the population—although there are quite a number of others (2%) including Eurasians and guest workers from the region as well as from English speaking countries. Singapore is tolerant of religious diversity and these religious practices—Buddhism and Taoism (56%), Christianity (19%), Islam (15%), Hinduism (5%) and other (5%)—reinforce Singapore's multilingual and multicultural society. (See Appendix A, Figure 12.)

2. THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN SINGAPORE

The strategic location of Singapore as a trading port—a swampy bit of jungle with a village of 100 residents including perhaps 40 Chinese—was realised by the English colonial administrator Sir Stamford Raffles who leased it from the Sultan of Johore in 1819. It passed to the crown in 1858 and was part of the Straits Settlements from 1867-1942. Without customs tariffs or other restrictions it was a mecca for Chinese traders and with the opening of the Suez canal became a major trans-shipment point for tin and rubber from Malaya. Occupied by the Japanese from 1942 to 1945, it reverted to being a crown colony after the war, with self-government coming in 1959. It briefly joined Malaysia on independence in 1963, balanced ethnically by North Borneo (Sabah) and Sarawak but, within two years, differences between the Chinese leadership in Singapore and the Malay leadership in Kuala Lumpur lead to a separation. Since self-government the Peoples Action Party (PAP) have run the parliamentary democracy in Singapore as a tight and well-ordered society with little or no opposition being tolerated. It has become a commercial entrepot for commerce and finance, and has one of the highest standards of living in Asia after Japan and Brunei.

Singapore from its founding has been a multilingual and multiethnic polity with a range of Chinese varieties, South Asian and South-east Asian languages and several local pidgins being spoken. According to Singapore's constitution, Malay is

the national language and English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil are official languages. Each of the latter three languages represents one of the three 'communities' that live in Singapore, and for official purposes these languages are deemed to be the 'mother-tongues' of these communities. Pennycook (1994: 233) estimates that the four official languages were the first languages of only 18.6 per cent of the population in 1957. The Chinese community, which uses a common written system of characters, includes speakers of mutually unintelligible varieties that include Cantonese, Foochow, Hainanese, Hakka, Hokkien and Teochow. The Malay community includes a number of divergent dialects of Malay as well as speakers of languages like Javanese, Boyanese and Bugis. The Indian community, while consisting mainly of people of Tamil speaking origin, also includes speakers of languages such as Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Malayalam, Punjabi, Singhala and Urdu. The final group of speakers includes speakers of English and languages like Arabic, Japanese, and Filipino. In addition an increasing number of young people speak Singlish—Singaporean colloquial English—at home and in their communities (see Lee-Wong 2001 for examples). Since 2000, the government has sponsored a 'speak good English movement' to try to reduce the increasing use of Singlish. While some argue Singlish serves to increase the "bonds of cultural identity and social cohesion", the government is concerned it might eventually undermine the position of standard English (Rubdy 2001:341). The instance of Bazaar Malay, the pidgin lingua franca of the region, is on the decline. There are also small numbers of speakers of Baba Malay.

As these communities were far from homogeneous, lingua franca have been needed to bridge the communication gap both within and across the communities. Up until the 1980s the lingua franca were English for the small educated elite and Hokkien Chinese within the Chinese Community—Kuo (1980) estimates 97 per cent of Chinese understood Hokkien prior to the 'speak Mandarin campaign'—while Bazaar Malay was the principal language used for everyday commerce and communication within the polity and Malay with its immediate neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia. However, since 1979 government policy has promoted Mandarin as the language of the Chinese community through the 'Speak Mandarin campaign' and English as the principal lingua franca, creating what has been called 'English-knowing bilingualism'. This aligning of language and ethnic background (PuruShotam 1998) and the resultant language shift phenomena have been central features of status planning and policy for language in Singapore.

Singapore is a small polity, and the official languages come from different language families (Malay from the Austronesian, Tamil from the Dravidian, English from the Indo-European and Mandarin from the Sino-Tibetan). Therefore, the standards (i.e., the corpus planning) adopted for the various languages have been exoglssic, with British English being the de facto standard for English, Mandarin Chinese (huayu—the [Chinese] peoples' spoken language) following standards set in the Peoples Republic of China (see Chapter 4), Tamil following standards from South India and Malay (Bahasa Kebangsaan—the national language) following developments in Malaysia and Indonesia (see Chapters 6 and 7). This has allowed Singapore in its language development to focus on status planning and language-in-education planning (see Chapter 12 for a general discussion of these terms).