

Voices of Resistance to the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) in Singapore

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Patrick, Ng Chin Leong. 2003. Voices of Resistance to the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) in Singapore. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 11(4), 265-275. Since 1992, the Speak Mandarin campaign in Singapore has aimed at encouraging more English-educated Chinese to discard dialects and speak Mandarin. In this paper, personal narratives of six Internet users were used to provide qualitative data to shed light on reasons for resisting the SMC. The data reveal that the reasons for resisting the SMC are disagreement on Mandarin as the mother tongue of the Chinese, and Mandarin as the main carrier of Chinese cultural values. This paper argues that the decision-making approach adopted by the government in implementing the SMC may not be successful among the English-educated Chinese community, as they may be less willing to shift their language habit in favour of Mandarin due to their more individualistic orientation towards language choice.

Key words: Resistance, Speak Mandarin Campaign, Singapore

1. Introduction

In 1979, the Singapore government launched the first Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) to make all young dialect-speaking Chinese Singaporeans speak Mandarin as a common language. However in 1992, the SMC began to chart a new course: to encourage the English-educated Chinese to adopt Mandarin instead of English as a preference for language use. The government perceived that the English-educated Chinese in Singapore were in danger of losing their mother tongue if they persisted in using English as a medium of communication in their daily lives. Although there were many news articles highlighting the positive response of the English-educated Chinese towards the SMC, relatively few voices of resistance to the campaign were recorded. This paper is a qualitative study to capture the dissenting voices of some

affected individuals and to uncover their reasons for resisting the SMC. It attempts to answer the question, What are some reasons for resisting the Speak Mandarin Campaign among the English-educated Chinese in Singapore?

2. Why English is problematic in Singapore

There are two reasons why the government regards English as problematic in Singapore:

Firstly, it renders Singaporeans more susceptible to cultural influences from Western sources, whose effects are discursively labelled Westernisation. This Westernisation was and continues to be seen in individual Singaporeans inclinations to such acts as drug abuse, sex, permissiveness, consumerism and political liberation. Secondly, English is emotionally problematic because it remains a superimposed Western language, thereby lacking cultural authenticity and legitimacy. (Chua, 1995, p. 113)

However, the suggestion by the government that English lacks cultural authenticity and legitimacy is highly debatable. As reported by Pakir (1994), English is beginning to supplant Hokkien, the dialect of the numerically dominant Chinese group in Singapore in its intra-ethnic lingua franca role. However, the English that is used in Singapore is different from the Standard English spoken by native speakers in the United Kingdom. It is an informal type of English known as Singapore Colloquial English (also known as Singlish). Pakir observes that Singlish is increasingly foregrounded in the consciousness of English users in Singapore. Thus not all the English-educated Chinese may agree with the government that English is problematic in Singapore.

3. Review of Literature on Language Planning and the Speak Mandarin Campaign

As the aim of this paper is to study the views of individuals on the implementation of a language policy in action, I will restrict the review

of literature to language planning and the arguments concerning the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

3.1 Theoretical concepts in language planning

In his landmark work, Fishman **et al.** (1989) ascribes language planning to the work of a government suggesting that language planning may be viewed from the societal approach, one that points in societal directions and deals with the authoritative allocation of resources to the attainment of language status and language corpus goals. However, Fishman does not discuss whether the societal approach would affect the planning outcomes undertaken by the authority nor does he view language planning from the viewpoint of solving problems in society. In contrast to Fishman, Jernudd and **Gupta** (1971) provide an alternative premise on language planning which centres on decision-making in the national context within which a speech community and its languages exist. Jernudd and Gupta explain that decision-makers choose a satisfactory course of action in order to aspire to find an effective solution to their planning tasks.

However, one major drawback of this theory is that the relationship between the planning process and actual changes in societal patterns of language use cannot be explicated because it is summarily assumed in a cause-effect sequence. **It** lacks the depth dimension of language treatment described by Neustupny (1974). Neustupny suggests that decision-making in language planning should take place not only in the context of national political community, but also in relation to an existing linguistic situation and the attitudes towards language on the part of members of a speech community. Kaplan and Baldauf (1990) believe that language planning must ultimately satisfy the interests of the community or it will not meet the conditions just enunciated for that language plan to survive. Kaplan and Baldauf (1990: 150) propose that the implementation of any language change requires more than a set of top-down decisions, as no amount of language planning can force people to change their linguistic habit. They argue that whatever the language policies in place of any country, the ultimate planners are the people themselves. Pakir (1994:165) also supports the bottom-up approach by reporting that invisible language planning occurs when individuals

interfere non-deliberately with planned changes to the systems of a language code. The individuals identified by Pakir are parents, children and teachers. Pakir suggests that it is the parents, and not the government, which are ultimately responsible for linguistic assimilation in Singapore.

3.2 Arguments for and against the Speak Mandarin Campaign

There is a need to examine the official arguments for the SMC. The success of the SMC depends on the conviction of English-educated Chinese Singaporeans whether they agree to the official arguments, especially when the SMC aims at changing their language habits in favour of Mandarin. Bokhorst-Heng (1998: 306) lists three official arguments for the SMC in Singapore:

- a. The educational argument- to reduce the learning burden of school children by eliminating dialects and using Mandarin at home.
- b. The communicative argument-to use Mandarin as a media of interdialect communication within the Chinese community.
- c. The cultural argument-to retain the Chinese cultural heritage to counterbalance the effects of Westernisation and the dominance of English.

There have been some criticisms against the arguments for the SMC. Gupta (1998) observes that Mandarin, the mother tongue ascribed by the government, corresponds neither to the individuals childhood languages, nor to the individuals ancestral language. Thus it would appear that the governments definition of the mother tongue differ from linguists, where the mother tongue is the language a child learns before learning any other language. As for the communicative argument for Mandarin, it is also questionable whether a common language was needed to facilitate communication among the Chinese in Singapore. Platt (1980) studies the typical verbal repertoire of the Chinese community in Singapore, and discovers that a typical Chinese in Singapore can speak:

- (1) The native Chinese dialect
- (2) The dominant Chinese dialect

- (3) One or more additional Chinese dialects
- (4) Bazaar Malay
- (5) English
- (6) Mandarin
- (7) Baba Malay and
- (8) Malay

Platts study suggests that it would be wrong to assume that when two Singapore Chinese meet, they would not be able to communicate if they speak different dialects. More often than not, the code selection between **the** two Chinese is usually dependent on the extent a speaker wishes to accommodate the addressee. As to the cultural argument for Mandarin, Chew (1980) argues that cultural change in Singapore takes place mainly at the institutional level, through school, family, the mass media **but** not through a language.

4. Views of Internet users towards the Speak Mandarin Campaign

Six personal narratives, relevant to this study, were extracted from three Internet articles derived from the Sintercom website community. Most extracts have been left unedited to retain the authenticity of the material. In this section, I will present the views of the SMC expressed by the six Internet users who refer to themselves as Keyboard Cowboy, Gabriel Goh, Chia Jin Ngee, Bluesky, Kim F Ong and Tan Chong Kee. I have categorized their views into those:

- a. that oppose the educational argument for the SMC
- b. that oppose the communicative argument for the SMC and those
- c. that oppose the cultural argument for the SMC.

4.1 Views that oppose the educational arguments for the SMC

In Singapore, students usually study all subjects in English, except the mother tongue which may be Malay, Chinese or Tamil. So English is called the First Language in school. An Internet user, Keyboard

Cowboy, disagrees with the educational argument for promoting Mandarin as he feels that English-educated Chinese who have studied English as a first language in school and who speak English at home should be allowed to regard English and not Mandarin as their mother tongue.

For Chinese Singaporeans who have English as their First Language, they are also required to take Mandarin as Mother Tongue. My point is why these **English-educated** people **cant** have English as their Mother Tongue? Why cant English be as a Mother Tongue for an ethnic Chinese Singaporean if he/she is English-educated and uses the language more at home and in social circles? (Chia, 1996, p7)

4.2 Views that oppose the communicative argument for the SMC

In the communicative argument for the SMC, Mandarin was promoted as a medium of interdialect communication to strengthen the bonds between the Chinese. However, Gabriel Goh feels that the SMC has divided the Chinese by promoting **Chinese** chauvinism among the Mandarin-speaking Chinese, and causes the non-Mandarin speaking Chinese to experience a certain amount of humiliation due to their handicap in Mandarin.

Chinese should know Chinese is a phrase I hear, often in an accusatory or condemning manner. The impression I get at those times is that the Chinese-educated feel a sense of superiority over me. If my impressions of the Chinese-educated can be generalized to English-educated, the situation could be: The Chinese-educated feel that the English-educated look down on them. The English-educated feel that the Chinese-educated look down on them. (Chia, 1996, p1)

Gabriel feels that the SMC has divided the Chinese instead of unifying them. The remark that, the Chinese-educated feel a sense of superiority over me, suggest that there are some feelings of a **social distance created by Mandarin** between **the** English and Chinese-educated Chinese.

Another reason for resisting the SMC was voiced by Chia Jin Ngee

who condemns the campaign for creating mutual distrust and prejudice among Chinese Singaporeans.

In this same restaurant, later in the week, 3 boys came over to eat in the restaurant. I did not converse with them in Mandarin. Anyway, they spoke Mandarin, I understood. I speak English, they understood. The horror came when it was time to leave at the door where I was ushering them off. They spat at me and call me ABC. Well the manager came to shoo them away. That was 10 years ago. It still happens now for me. Most recent was some taxi driver who told me to get out of the cab when I haltingly used Mandarin. This society is becoming more perverse. Speak Mandarin campaigns seem to be creating some kind of language superiority sub-culture. (Chia, 1996, p14)

Chia Jin Ngee resists the SMC through his remark, Speak Mandarin campaign seems to be creating some kind of language superiority subculture. When the SMC was on, he suffered some amount of humiliation by Mandarin-speaking Chinese who spat at him and called him ABC (American Born Chinese). (In Singapore, ABC is normally used as a derogatory term to refer to an Americanised Chinese person who does not understand Chinese culture). The use of the adjective, perverse, shows that he disagrees with the communicative argument for the SMC, as it has created division among the Chinese in Singapore instead of unifying them.

4.3 Views that oppose the cultural argument for the SMC

As mentioned in the cultural argument for Mandarin, Singaporeans need to speak Mandarin to retain their Chinese heritage. Three Internet users, Bluesky, Kim F Ong and Tan Chong Kee do not support the cultural argument for the SMC. For instance, Bluesky argues that Mandarin is not the mother tongue of the Chinese as it is an imported language from Beijing. He feels that the cultural impetus for Chinese culture should come from speaking dialect, which is the ancestral language of the Chinese in Singapore.

The reality is that Mandarin is a Beijing dialect. It was selected over Cantonese to be the common language of the Chinese people in China.

On the other hand, most Singaporean Chinese are descended from immigrants from South China. Our ancestral dialects are not Mandarin but Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, Hakka and others. These dialects are our mother tongue. (Bluesky, 1996, p1)

Another Internet user, Kim F Ong, also voices his unhappiness over Mandarin being ascribed as the mother tongue of the Chinese. **In fact**, he blames the SMC for destroying the Chinese culture of the Chinese in Singapore.

Mandarin as they are taught in Singapore has nothing to do with the culture of the majority of the Singaporean. Mandarin Chinese in Singapore belongs to the Beijing variety. Almost all Chinese in Singapore were originally from the Southern provinces of China. Hence the major dialect groups of Chinese Singaporeans: Teochew, Hakka, Cantonese and Hainanese. As a sideline, the Speak Mandarin Campaign has done more to eradicate the indigenous culture of Chinese Singaporeans than anything else. How many young Singaporeans can fluently speak their own mother tongue? (Chia, 1996, p3)

The other Internet user, Tan Chong Kee disagrees with the cultural argument that Chinese culture is promoted through speaking Mandarin,

Coming back to the roots argument wont it be more cost-effective to channel the money spent on the Speak Mandarin Advertisements to investment in Chinese tertiary education? Resurrecting Nantah (the former Nanyang University, a Chinese university) might still be politically unfeasible, but we can create a school of Chinese culture in Nanyang Technological University, for example, where there are good teachings and research on Chinese literature, music, art, philosophy, **history, etc.** There is no reason why we shouldnt try to have a more lasting impact on the use of Mandarin than advertisements ever will. (Tan, 1996, p3)

5. Discussion on the reasons for resisting the SMC

This section will attempt to explain the reasons for resisting the SMC

expressed by the six English-educated Chinese. It is evident the main reason for resisting the SMC revolves around the mother tongue issue. In the Speak Mandarin Campaign, the ethnic mother tongue for Chinese Singaporeans has been defined primarily in terms of ascription and external identification by the government but does not reflect the linguistic reality of the Chinese in terms of origin (Gupta 1998). Keyboard Cowboy rejects Mandarin as his mother tongue because it is not a language that corresponds to his home and educational experiences. The protest by Bluesky and Kim F Ong is directed towards the effort to **eradicate the dialects of their** mother tongue. They particularly dislike the SMC as the phasing out of dialects is threatening their individual mother tongue. Bluesky argues that it is the various dialects such as Hakka, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese and Cantonese that the Chinese in Singapore associate with their Chinese cultural heritage. Similarly, Kim F Ong also argues that Mandarin in China belongs to the Beijing variety and has no relevance to local Chinese culture. He feels that a great part of Chinese cultural traditions and values are transmitted through dialects and not Mandarin (Kuo, 1985).

Finally, both Gabriel and Chia Jin Ngee resist the SMC because it ascribes Mandarin as the mother tongue of **the English**-speaking Chinese. They particularly reject the Mandarin is Chinese slogan because in the light of their own inability to speak Mandarin satisfactorily, they are vulnerable to acts of derogation, which **questions** their right to call themselves Chinese.

6. Implications for language planning

As suggested by Jernudd and Gupta (1971), language-planning decisions at the national level are made against a socio-political background. However, the actual outcomes of the implementation of the language planning decisions are necessarily equivalent to the planned or predicted outcome. It is evident that the decision-making efforts by the language planners for the SMC fail to take into account the sociolinguistic situation of the English-educated Chinese. Given that language planning efforts seek to effect changes in patterns of habitual language use, the decision-making approach by Jernudd and **Gupta** may

fail to effect changes in language use in the English-educated Chinese community. Language planning in the direction in the direction of changing habitual patterns of language use should perhaps be carried out in the context of language maintenance or language shift outlined by Fishman (1964). Perhaps language planning in Singapore should **also** take into account the attitudes of the English-educated Chinese towards Mandarin and English, and the domains where both English and Mandarin are used.

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