The Introduction and Significance of Official Languages in Singapore

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Abstract: The selection of official languages are always the most terrible event in a country with multi-lingual culture, However, the strategies for the language planning has achieved a great success in Singapore, bringing about benefits for the country and setting a great model for other countries. This article will introduce four major official languages of English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil, and discuss their significance for the development of this country.

Keywords: Singapore, official languages, significance

1. Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that Singapore is a country where people of different races live together. However, such integration of different ethnics would directly lead to a relatively serious problem on the choice of official languages. If no optimal choice has been made to balance Singaporeans, effective and efficient interactions wouldn't go very smoothly and society chaos would be incited more easily. Hence, Singaporean government must implement relevant policies and has eventually selected English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil as four major official languages. This essay will primarily discuss the formation of major official languages and their values influencing the whole society.

2. Literature review

An official language is a language that is given a special legal status in a particular country, state, or other jurisdiction. It is often used within the government, courts, parliament, administration and business etc. The successful setting and planning of official languages in a country would play a very critical role in many aspects: Politically, it indicates the countries' independent status in the world through setting their own mother tongues as their official languages. For example, the setting of Swahili language in Tanzania would finally lead their country to have their unique position in east Africa [11]. Historically, it could be seen as the symbols of national solidarity and confidence. In Pakistan, the shift of their official languages from English to Urdu indicates the independence of this country from their previous colonial history and sets a new image of pride for the outside world [9]. Culturally, it is an inheritance of their own unique culture through using their own languages. In China, some autonomous regions are making efforts to imposing laws for the protection of their language heritages[2].

Singapore is a country containing various kind of cultures, whose special situation request the country to have a successful implementation of official languages. Previous studies have delved into the setting of official languages from different aspects. Some studies have primarily probed into Singaporean official languages from historical background: Liu and Lu (2004) tried to collect the historical events and order the historical developments, and made detailed analysis of the formation of four official languages [4]. Tang and Wu (2006) selected relevant statistics to provided us with both direct and clear pictures of using official languages, reflecting different positions of official languages[8]. Then, some researches began to figure out the influence of official languages: Huang (2007) focused on the influences of languages planning on the development on Chinese and English and concluded that the importance of English and Chinese will cause more interactions in Chinese and English in the whole country [1]. Zou (2014) found that the implementation of English official languages will encourage students into speaking better English so that it will grant valuable experiences for the English education in our countries [13]. Recently, some studies try to analyze the influences of official languages from various angles: Li and Huang (2012) deemed that official languages can create much

economic bonus for Singaporeans [3]. Qian (2015) applied comparative analysis between Singapore and Philippines for discussing the different effects politically and economically on their separate societies [6].

From above, previous studies have a elaborate discussion on the influence of official languages. In the arena of Singaporean researches, studies have mentioned the historical development and benefits of official languages. However, studies didn't provide a relatively detailed picture of its history and the influences are not comprehensively analyzed. Hence, this research will introduce four official languages in details and discuss their influences.

3. Official languages in Singapore

Singaporean has four official languages: English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil.

It took a long period of time for English to become the most dominant position in Singaporean society. In 1819, the Eastern Indian company build factories there and tried to develop trade deals between Britain and other Asian countries, through which English must be used as a tool for understanding each other. Then, in 1823, this country was unfortunate to become one of British colony, during which English became a compulsory course for students to learn. After World War II, Singaporeans gained their autonomous rights and English was still widely used in many aspects of politics, economy, and science and technology etc. However, they have formulated English of their own style called *Singlish,* which is the mixture of English and other languages and spoken for a long period of time. This way of speaking is much more convenient for people to communicate with each others, but it didn't follow the rules of standard English and would possibly lead to native speakers' difficulties to understand each other. In order to make improvement, the government initiated a campaign called Speaking Good English Movement in 2000, whose slogan is *Speak well, Be understood.* Meanwhile, the government also set many associations such as ENTHUSE to improve English teaching qualities in Singapore. These actions can not only enable people to realize the deficiencies of speaking Singlish but also enhance them to read, write and speak standard English. Nowadays, many people could speak standard English and it has gained popularity [8].

Malay has been admitted as the second largest official language in Singapore, which has experienced a complicated history. Since Singapore was trying to become one of the federal members in Malaya in the 1950s, the government should underline the importance of Malay to satisfy its domestic necessity and political purpose, and learning Malay began to develop. In 1959, People's Action Party tried to enable Malay language as Lingua Franca in Singapore and hoped to integrate Malay into their educational system. In 1963, Singapore successfully joined Malaysia and learning Malay became a fashion. However, in 1965, Singapore decided to separate itself from Malaysia and became an independent country again, bringing about a complicated problem of whether they should still keep the position of Malay or not. After several discussions and debates, the government still took it as their second language eventually, which could be reduced to two major points: One, Malays in Singapore account for 14 percent of the whole population, but they are still one of the most important constituents in the society. The relegation of their language positions would directly lead to their dissatisfaction and the whole country would be in a great chaos easily. Two, this would also incite dissatisfaction in Malays in adjacent countries and do greatest threat to the regional stability. For these two reasons interweaving, Malay's dominant position should be maintained and until now it is still one of the four official languages in this country.

Although 77 percent of Singaporean are Chinese, people speak 23 different Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese dialect in their own communities. Such differentiation of dialects results in that Singaporean Chinese can't understand each other very well. Therefore, one branch of Chinese dialect must be stood out for the consolidation of Singaporean Chinese and mandarin became the third official language in Singapore. Its development in Singapore can be analyze through the simplification of Chinese characters, the edition of mandarin and government campaign in Singapore. On simplifying character, the government decided to follow language planning in mainland China in the 1960s and requested schools to transfer from teaching traditional characters to simplified Chinese characters. In 1969, List of Simplified Chinese Characters stipulated 498 standard simplified characters, gaining popularity among Singaporeans. Until 1974, it has developed into a comprehensive system containing 2287 simplified characters in alignment with the use in Mainland. On editing mandarin, the ways of writing has been reformed since 1974, which was from the way of right-to-left row writing primarily into left-to-right line writing. Since then, it has been widely used in the local newspapers and textbooks

etc., symbolizing the modernization of the whole society and indicating the consistency of mainland culture. On the government campaign, President Lee Kwan Yew lead Mandarin Campaign in 1979, marking the turning point of mandarin position in Singapore. The publicity of speaking mandarin in public has achieved a great success so that all of Singaporean Chinese can communicate with each other without barriers and only 4.3 percent of Chinese Singaporeans speak their own dialects at home [4].

Tamil is the fourth official language in Singapore, which is spoken by Tamils living in the south of India. In the 19th century, nearly 13000 people have left their hometown and stampeded into this country in which they worked as oak force, or junior management workers etc for making fortunes. Such a great influx of Tamils contributed to 8 percents of the total population in Singapore. Because of this increase, the Tamil education has been scheduled by the government but it is a relative complex process. Primarily, many Tamil schools was founded but they were soon closed because of Tamils' preference for English education. In 1978, Tamils Representative Council (TRC) tried to launch campaigns such as mailing letters or approaching the press for reviving Tamil education and eventually achieved a great success. Until now, 93 secondary schools have been set to teach Tamil language in Singapore [7].

4. The significance of implementing official languages

The significance of implementing official languages can be seen politically, economically, and culturally. To be specifically, it can maintain the stability of the country, boost the economic prosperity, strengthen the relations with traditional culture and enhance the global contacts.

4.1. Promote the long-term stability of the society

Now that Singapore is like a melting pot containing different kinds of ethnic groups in the world, it would be of great necessity for the government to handle the planning of official languages successfully in this society. The wrong decisions will possibly lead to the dissatisfaction among Singaporeans and the political conflicts might easily occur in this country. Fortunately, Singaporean government have dealt with it very successfully in the selection of dominant official language and set a good model for other multi-lingual countries. Since choosing any one of the mother tongues as their mere national language would easily bring about the unfairness and instability of the Singaporean society, the government eventually decided to select the third-party language English as their dominant official language and it should be applied in politics, economy, education, and media. These actions can enhance not only the stability of the whole society but also the fairness in the selection of elites [5].

Besides, its success also lies in other mother tongues. For example, Although the population of Malays account for a relatively small percentage in contrast with adjacent Malaysia, the imbalance in the relation of Malays with other ethnic groups would possibly ignite the anger of Malays in the adjacent countries and would cause great conflicts. In order to seek for a stable society and build politically peaceful relationship with other countries in the southeastern Asia, the government has admitted the position of Malay which is equal to Chinese and Tamils on language planning, indicating Malays' equal status in Singapore and strengthening the relations with adjacent countries.

4.2. Boost the economic prosperity

Economically, the implementation of official languages can boost the prosperity of the whole country. Thanks to the attached importance to speak English, this country could successfully make a great many trade deals with other countries. According to economic data from the Ministry of Trade and Industry of Singapore, the total amount of trade deals in importing and exporting could reach nearly $1.02 trillion. Besides, the publicity of speaking good mandarin also boost the development of business between Singapore and Mainland China. Presently, with the imposition of the policy of *One belt, One road*, trade deals between Singapore and China has rocketed and it can reach $4.4 trillion in 2019, ranking the 25th largest country among partners. Due to the successful language planning, smooth interactions can be well achieved among people, so that much agreement can be found in trade deals and the national economy will be greatly boosted [10].

4.3. Strengthen the connections of traditional cultures

Since people in many different ethnic groups gathered in a country to live for a long period of time, there must be an irresistible tendency that people should re-adapt themselves for the integration of the new world so that some of their traditional customs would be hidden, or even abandoned. The abandonment of their own values would directly result in the isolation of their own cultures. However, the implementation of four official languages based on its ecology can successfully provide people with opportunities for the contact and inheritance of traditional cultures: Tamils can use their own language without any difficulties to communicate with each other because of the implementation of their official language, and Singaporean Chinese can have access to receive standard mandarin education in campus, read and write with simplified Chinese characters through mandarin campaign. This planning of official languages in Singapore will eventually enhance their identities and strengthen their relations with ancestral culture. Meanwhile, their responsibilities for the cultural transmission will be fulfilled [3].

4.4. Enhance the interactions with other cultures

The inheritance of traditional cultures can enhance various interactions. Through implementation of bilingual policies in Singapore, the interweaving of languages occurs: many vocabularies from Malays could be easily found in spoken Chinese, and words borrowed from English are often applied by Malays. Now that languages function as the conveyance of cultures, exotic cultural elements could also be seen in many Singaporean families: traditional customs in China could be easily seen in Malay families and British colonial culture could be often seen in many Singaporean households etc. In one word, this setting of official languages enables many people to have access and tolerance towards different languages and culture so that better understanding will be easily built among people and the interactions with other cultures will be greatly enhanced.

5. Conclusion

Now that Singapore is a country with various kinds of culture, the selection of official languages would be of great priority. Through complex historical development, the government has selected English, Malay, Chinese and Tamils as four major official languages, which can promote the long-term stability in the society, boost economic prosperity, strengthen their relations of traditional cultural values, and enhance the global interactions. However, future researches should continually excavate many historical events. Besides, the influence should be analyzed from more angles. With the rapid development of ecology linguistics, following studies could analyze the significance of official language from ecological perspective so that relevant researches could be more comprehensive [12].

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