

## *The Linguistic Pragmatism of Mandarin in Singapore*

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The government in Singapore uses both English and three ethnic languages, known officially as Mother Tongue Languages, for economic and cultural functions. Traditionally, English has been valued primarily for its economic contribution while the Mother Tongue Languages - Mandarin, Malay and Tamil - for their cultural contributions. However, there has been an increasing emphasis on the economic value of the Mother Tongue Languages, especially Mandarin in Singapore. This emphasis on the economic value of languages is known as linguistic pragmatism. This paper examines this shift and explores the external and internal factors that contribute towards this phenomenon in Singapore. The discussion illustrates the dynamic interplay between the rise of China as an economic power and the language shift to English among Chinese students in Singapore which lead to the linguistic pragmatism of Mandarin in Singapore.

Singapore is a multi-ethnic country with about 4.2 million people comprising Chinese (78%), Malays (14%), Indians (7%) and other races (1%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000). A bilingual policy is adopted in Singapore where all students must take two languages in schools: English Language (EL) which is recognised as the first language, and a second language, known as Mother Tongue Language (MTL). The government chose three ethnic languages as the Mother Tongue Languages for students in Singapore—Chinese Language (CL) or Mandarin for Chinese students, Malay Language (ML) for Malay students, and Tamil Language (TL) for Indian

students. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore defines “mother tongue” by ethnicity and not by the first language learned by the student at home. This means that a Chinese student who grows up speaking English and Malay at home (as is the case for a number of Straits-born Chinese in Singapore) must still take Mandarin as his or her Mother Tongue Language. Malay, Tamil and Mandarin were chosen by the government due to pragmatic reasons. Malay was chosen as it was the home language of the Malays in Singapore. Tamil was selected as it was the home language for most Indians in Singapore whose ancestors came from South India where Tamil was the dominant language. The choice of Mandarin was the most contestable as it was spoken by less than 1 per cent of the population aged fifteen and over in 1978 (Gopinathan, 1988). At that time, most Chinese in Singapore spoke dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka. Mandarin was preferred by the government as it was seen as a neutral medium to overcome dialect divisions, as well as a functional language to connect Singapore to mainland China and Taiwan.

The government in Singapore uses both English Language and the Mother Tongue Languages for economic and cultural functions. Traditionally, English has been valued primarily for its economic contribution while the Mother Tongue Languages - Mandarin, Malay and Tamil - for their cultural contributions. However, a number of writers have noted that there has been an increasing emphasis on the economic value of the Mother Tongue Languages, especially Mandarin in Singapore (for example see Gopinathan, 1994; Kuo & Jernudd, 1994; Tan, 1995, 1996; Ho & Alsagoff, 1998; Pakir, 2000; Wee, 2003). This emphasis on the economic value of languages is known as linguistic pragmatism. This paper examines this shift and explores the external and internal factors that contribute towards this phenomenon in Singapore.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF JOSHUA FISHMAN**

The writings of Joshua Fishman are of particular relevance to the Singapore

context (Tan, 1995, 1996; Bokhorst-Heng, 1998, 1999a). Fishman introduces a number of key terms which are germane to our study of the language policy in Singapore. Firstly, he notes that many developing nations hope to establish a pattern involving both a Western Language of Wider Communication (LWC) and one or more favoured standardised vernacular(s) (Fishman, 1989a, p. 183). A LWC serves as a working language in a multi-ethnic society and as a key to technological and socio-economic progress of a nation. If the LWC itself is also ethnically or ideologically encumbered, it is more likely to be viewed as a threat than if the LWC is relatively unencumbered in the ethnic or ideological sphere (Fishman, 1989c, p. 245). Therefore he concludes that English is considered to be more acceptable for technology and natural science use:

Indeed, in much of the Third World, and elsewhere as well, the image of English may well be ethnically and ideologically quite neutral, so that it may be related much more to appreciably generalised, de-ethnicised, and de-ideologised *process variables* (modernisation, urbanisation, technological know-how, consumerism, and a higher standard of living in general) than to any ethnicity or ideology viewed particularly English or American (Fishman, 1989c, p. 246).

Fishman (1972) sees the compartmentalised roles of both LWC and the indigenous languages in a diglossic situation. While the LWC is valued economically for its utility and actual use in the domains of science and technology, the indigenous languages are valued for their cultural values and world views. This “diglossian compromise” will allow different races to coexist with a LWC as a common working language and thereby diminish the “internal linguistic strife” (Fishman, 1968, p. 47). Fishman (1972) also predicts that there will be a language shift from the use of indigenous languages to English in a neutral, evolutionary process where formal institutions tend to make individuals increasingly dependent on the use of English. In particular, he foresees a language shift among the young to accept the LWC. Such a language shift is possible when the people are open to

change, forward-looking and culturally not conservative (Fishman, 1989b). He posits that the younger populations appear less resistant to English, whether affectively or overtly, than were their parents and teachers during their own adolescent years. This is based on his observation that the young have “lesser ideological involvement relative to that of their elders, as well as a reflection of the generally lower level of nationalism throughout the world today in comparison to the 1875-1950 period” (Fishman, 1989c, p. 252).

A number of writers have agreed that the functional differentiation of languages with English as the LWC and official ethnic languages as cultural and identity markers applies to Singapore (for example see Platt & Weber, 1980; Saravanan, 1993; Tan, 1995; Bokhorst-Heng, 1999b). Tan (1995) avers that Fishman’s theoretical perceptions parallel the way Singapore’s language policies rationalise English-knowing bilingualism and the role of the Mother Tongue Languages as socio-cultural integrators. Various writers have used different terms to describe this phenomenon, such as Pendley’s “functional polarisation” of language (1983), Bokhorst-Heng’s “polarisation of languages” (1999a), Kuo and Jernudd’s “division of labour between languages” (1994) and Tan’s “natural division of labour” (1996). The Singapore government values English primarily for its economic role and the mother tongues for their cultural roles. The architect of the bilingual policy, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew explains that English was chosen in 1965 as it was and still is the language of commerce, science, technology and international intercourse (*The Straits Times*, 26 November 2004). It also has the advantage of being the neutral medium for the different races. But he adds that the Singapore government needs to teach students their Mother Tongue Languages because this is what gives them their identity and makes the society vigorous and distinctive. This has been the official position for the Singapore government since the country’s independence in 1965. For example, the then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reiterates the official position on bilingualism:

The Government’s long-standing policy on bilingualism and learning of mother tongues in schools remains unchanged. English is and will remain

our common working language. It is the language of global business, commerce and technology. But the mother tongue gives us a crucial part of our values, roots and identity. It gives us direct access to our cultural heritage, and a world-view that complements the perspective of the English-speaking world (Ministry of Education, 1999).

Fishman's hypothesis of a language shift from the use of indigenous languages to English, especially among the young populations, also applies to Singapore. Tsou (2002) notes that active government policy in Singapore has promoted English and Mandarin at the expenses of dialects which is a natural consequence of sociolinguistic engineering. This has been confirmed by official surveys showing the language shift between 1980 and 1990 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 1990; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000). In 1988, only 20 percent of the Primary One cohort came from English-speaking homes but the figure rose to 40 percent by 1998. Xu and Tan (1996) report that of the some 40 percent of the formerly Chinese-dominant homes which experienced language shift, over three quarters of them have become or are becoming bilingual, and less than one quarter have become or are becoming English-dominant. The latest survey by the Ministry of Education on 4500 students, 4600 parents, 320 principals and 1000 language teachers also shows that the number of Chinese students entering Primary One who speak predominantly English at home has risen from 36 percent in 1994 to 50 percent in 2004 (Chinese Language Review Committee, 2004). The survey also informs us that 59 percent of Primary Two students speak English at home. Parents with higher education are also more likely to use English at home with their children. 28 percent of Primary Four students converse with their friends and classmates in Mandarin, compared to 40 percent amongst secondary 4 students. The survey concludes that the trend of children entering school with little exposure to Mandarin in the home will continue. In other words, there is a generational change with more young Chinese students coming from English-speaking homes.

However, what Fishman fails to see is the changing roles of the ethnic languages *vis-à-vis* English as the LWC with the advent of globalisation. The

Mother Tongue Languages, especially Mandarin, have acquired an economic significance on top of their traditional cultural significance. Tan (1995) attributes this oversight to Fishman's positivistic sociolinguistics which focuses on the functional, static aspects of languages in contact. Quoting Lemke, she adds that Fishman fails to see that "communities are dynamic systems in which there is a constant struggle of competing interests, many of which are working to change that order, and some of which will in some form eventually succeed" (Lemke, 1989, p. 301, quoted in Tan, 1995, p. 25). Of course, Fishman would have not foreseen the changing perceptions of the ethnic languages during his time. He averred then that English was "not as uniquely identified with any of them, nor as *strongly* identified with any of them (because of its competing association with democracy, individual liberty, civil rights, religious tolerance, for example) as is Arabic with Islam, Russian with Marxist communism, Chinese with Maoist communism, or as was Spanish with conquistador Catholicism" (Fishman, 1989c, p. 246). Today, however, there is no such ideological or cultural association for the above languages. On the contrary, the recent years have seen the cultural languages evidently acquiring socio-economic prestige as well.

The acquisition of socio-economic prestige for Mandarin is the most distinct among the ethnic languages in Singapore. Gopinathan (1994) observes that the old consensus of different roles for English and the Mother Tongue Languages appears to have broken down with Mandarin being promoted as an economically valuable language. Mandarin is promoted for its increasing importance as a trade language which facilitates access to the expanding market in China (Kuo & Jernudd, 1988, 1994). Commenting on Mandarin as the language of business communication with the Chinese in East Asia, China and Taiwan, Saravanan (1996) points out that Mandarin is no longer associated with Mainland China and Chinese communism, and has now been depoliticised. In fact, the emphasis of Mandarin has nothing to do with Maoist communism, but with the rise of China as an economic power. This is most clearly laid out in the latest report of the Chinese language curriculum and pedagogy:

Bilingualism in the English Language (EL) and the Mother Tongue Languages (MTLs) is an imperative for Singapore. As the common language or *lingua franca*, EL facilitates inter-ethnic communication. EL will also remain the language of global business, commerce and technology in the foreseeable future. Competence in EL will continue to be a source of competitive advantage for Singapore. Knowing our Mother Tongue Languages gives us confidence in our culture, roots and identity as an Asian society. A command of the MTLs will also help Singaporeans ride the wave of growth in Asia, the fastest-expanding region in the world. In particular, the advantage of learning CL will increase with China's growing global influence (Ministry of Education, 2004b).

There has also been an emphasis on the economic value of the other Mother Tongue Languages in Singapore, although to a lesser extent. The Malay community and business leaders have articulated their desire to promote the Malay language and culture in order to better understand and foster closer ties with Singapore's neighbours (*The Straits Times*, 26 June 2004). Likewise, the Indian community stresses on the need for bicultural Indians who can appreciate India's cultural, linguistic and religious diversity in order to navigate the terrain of business and government (*The Straits Times*, 26 February 2004). Apart from the Mother Tongue Languages (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil), there has also been a growing interest among Singaporeans in studying other languages like Arabic for instrumental reasons to help them in their business in the Middle East (*The Straits Times*, 26 October 2004).

## **THE LINGUISTIC PRAGMATISM OF MANDARIN IN SINGAPORE**

To further understand the shift towards an emphasis on the economic value of Mandarin, it is important to have a better grasp of the ideology that shapes language policy and planning in Singapore. A number of writers have pointed out that language planning in Singapore is driven by pragmatism or economic instrumental rationality (for example see Vasil, 1984; Chua, 1985; Ho &

Alsagoff, 1998; Bokhorst-Heng, 1999a). Various terms have been proposed to describe this phenomenon, such as “linguistic pragmatism” (Ho & Alsagoff, 1998), “pragmatic multilingualism” (Saravanan, 1996; Ho & Wong, 2000), and “linguistic instrumentalism” (Wee, 2003). Linguistic pragmatism in Singapore has three key features. First, it is a logical extension of pragmatism as the forces of the marketplace determine the worth and fate of languages as economic instruments (Ho & Alsagoff, 1998). The existence of the language is justified in terms of its usefulness in achieving specific utilitarian goals, such as access to economic development or social mobility (Wee, 2003, p. 212). This trait has been observed by a Malaysian journalist who comments as follows: “Singaporeans are always seizing opportunities! As far as Singapore is concerned, attaching importance to Chinese language is synonymous to gaining the upper hand in more areas amid the trend of globalisation” (*Chinese Press*, reproduced in *The Straits Times*, 11 December 2004). Secondly, the discourse of linguistic pragmatism is a later addition to an earlier discourse where the language is viewed as marker of cultural identity (Wee, 2003). This phenomenon has been observed for languages such as French and Spanish where emerging globalising orientation has resulted in a shift towards seeing these languages as economic resources, and not just markers of cultural authenticity (Heller, 1999b; Pomerantz, 2002, quoted in Wee, 2003). Thirdly, linguistic pragmatism entails that a particular culture, not only a particular language, may be used for an economic purpose (Heller, 1999a, quoted in Wee, 2003). Ho and Alsagoff (1998) write that the significance of heritage languages and cultures is popularly perceived as giving Singapore entrepreneurs an extra edge in penetrating the fast-growing Asian markets. The cultural values that are perceived to contribute to the nation’s well-being and growth are incorporated into the official discourse as an elementary part of socio-economic achievement (Tan, 1995).

A survey of the political speeches will show that while the cultural value of Mandarin was emphasised by the government in the 1970s, the economic value gained prominence in the 1990s. The former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew commented in 1972 that the study of the Mother Tongue Languages



must continue because Singaporeans needed to retain “the core of our basic cultural values, a keen sense of our own identity, our different inheritance and history and the self-confidence this awareness gives” (Lee, 1978, p. 45). The shift became evident in the 1992 report of the Chinese Language Review Committee where both cultural and economic reasons were cited for the learning of Mandarin:

The Chinese language is the main conduit through which Chinese Singaporeans absorb and learn about their roots, their culture and traditional customs and values. In addition to its social function, the Chinese language is also important to Singaporeans in the areas of business, commerce and diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. This will become increasingly so as China opens its door to the world economy, and Taiwan’s economic strength develops further (Chinese Language Review Committee, 1992, p. 8).

This emphasis was reiterated by the former Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at his launch of the “Speak Mandarin Campaign” in 1997. He repeated the refrain that English was the language of business and administration in Singapore and the world. However, what was interesting was his dual focus on the economic and cultural value of the Mother Tongue Languages. He noted that being bilingual and bicultural “anchors our society in our traditional values, and enables us to plug into the international world of science, technology and economics” (Ministry of Education, 1997). Appealing to the IT-savvy Singaporeans, he reminded Singaporeans that they could take their advantage of knowing Mandarin into cyberspace. He noted that being bilingual allowed Singaporeans to tap into the wealth of both the English and the Chinese Internet universes; Singaporeans should become as adept at exploring Chinese cyberspace as they were at exploring English cyberspace. However, the push towards the economic value was moderate at this point as Mr Lee switched back to the cultural value of the Mother Tongue Languages. Commenting on the subject “Higher Chinese” where capable Chinese students studied Mandarin at a more advanced level, he clarified that teachers

should ensure that the Chinese syllabi and textbooks conveyed Chinese cultural values and heritage, and that Chinese teachers should not just teach the language for utilitarian purposes. He added that conveying the values and roots of one's culture was "a primary aim of teaching the mother tongue" (ibid.).

The focus on the economic incentive for the learning of one's Mother Tongue Languages became more visible in subsequent speeches by the government ministers. In a 1998 speech by the then Minister for Education Teo Chee Hean to the Singapore Chinese teachers' union, he highlighted the traditional cultural role of the Mother Tongue Languages in transmitting "values and roots to our young". However, what is significant is the mention of economic factors to complement the cultural function of the Mother Tongue Languages. He referred to the emerging opportunities for Singaporeans to work and reside overseas and the challenge for Singaporeans to remain rooted to Singapore. The inculcation of values and roots through the teaching of Mandarin, he added, was needed to ensure that the young grew up with a strong sense of attachment and belonging to Singapore as their home. This was followed by an explicit reference to the economic value of Mandarin:

On the positive side, our parents and students also see that learning the mother tongue does not just help to provide roots and a link to the past. Knowing the mother tongue is also useful for future success. Language skills provide an important advantage that helps us to strengthen and build new ties with the region and the economies around us (Ministry of Education, 1998).

In the following year, the former Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong elaborated on the economic importance of Mandarin. He began by reiterating that the purpose of teaching Mandarin was "not purely utilitarian, but to transmit heritage and values" (Ministry of Education, 1999). Then he made a specific reference to the continued rapid growth and opening up of China. He reminded Chinese Singaporeans that a strong command of Mandarin would be a valuable asset for many jobs and careers, even if the person did not live

or work in China. The economic reason was again an appendage to the cultural reason for the learning of Mandarin in the speeches by Dr Aline Wong, the then Senior Minister of State for Education in 2000. After underscoring the cultural value of Mandarin, she pointed out with the “continuing rapid growth and opening up of China, there is, moreover, an important practical purpose to the learning of the Chinese Language” (Ministry of Education, 2000).

An interesting twist came in 2002 in the speech of Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the former Senior Minister of State for Education. The excerpt is produced as follows:

[I]t is too simple to say that English is the language of economic development and our mother tongues the means of preserving culture. Through English, we can tap a world of *culture* - not just the cultures of the Anglo-Saxon countries, but the literature, drama or ideas of other societies that has been translated into English. We are enriched by being able to access, understand and appreciate these cultures. Just as important is the fact that the mother tongues have gained in *economic value* for Singaporeans. .... We are seeing the emergence of a new Asian community, including India, China and Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia ... . Our mother tongue languages will play a vital role in ensuring that Singapore is plugged into these networks, and serves as a hub in this evolving Asian economic community (Ministry of Education 2002a, italics added).

Mr Tharman openly challenged the functional polarisation of languages in this keynote speech. He noted that English could serve a cultural function too by providing access to the cultures of the English-speaking world. Similarly, he acknowledged that the Mother Tongue Languages have economic value as well in view of the evolving Asian economic community. In another speech, he told Singaporeans that with the rapid modernisation and growth in China (where Mandarin is spoken), India (where Tamil is spoken) and other parts of Southeast Asia (where Malay is spoken), the multiple language capabilities of Singaporeans will open doors to business and give them an economic edge (Ministry of Education, 2002b). In his subsequent speeches in 2003, Mr

Tharman continued to bring home the point that proficiency in the Mother Tongue Languages has assumed greater economic importance, with opportunities in China, India and Southeast Asia (Ministry of Education, 2003a; 2003b; 2003c).

## **FACTORS FOR THE LINGUISTIC PRAGMATISM OF MANDARIN IN SINGAPORE**

### **The External Factor: The Rise of China**

Researchers have pointed to the rise of China as an external factor that promoted the shift from the cultural to the economic value of Mandarin (Gopinathan, 1994; Gupta, 1994; Kuo & Jernudd, 1994; Tan, 1995, 1996; Ho & Alsagoff, 1998; Pakir, 2000; Wee, 2003). Indeed, the rise of China is a force to be reckoned with. Bilingual trade between China and Singapore is expected to multiply seven-fold from \$5.3 billion in 1991 to \$36.9 billion in 2003. The then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong reminded Singaporeans that China's transformation has been spectacular since 1978 and that she could overtake Japan as the world's second largest economy by 2050 (*The Straits Times*, 22 March 2004). The sense of urgency is highlighted in Mr Goh's use of the phrase "this window of opportunity" for Singaporeans to ride on its growth and secure a niche for themselves in China. Elsewhere, he said: 'We need to learn our mother tongue, both for our self-identity, also because of Asia coming up .... If we don't, we are fools' (*The Straits Times*, 24 August 2004). The significance of Mandarin is seen in the fact that more and more non-Chinese in Singapore are learning Mandarin as they see it as an important global language with the emergence of China as an economic powerhouse. For example, half of the 500 foreign students at the United World College in Singapore choose to study Mandarin because their parents acknowledge its cultural and economic values (*The Straits Times*, 9 April 2004). Chinese studies are also booming throughout Asia. This is evidenced,

for instance, in the establishment of a Chinese institute in Malaysia, and in Mandarin replacing French as the second most popular language after English in Japan.

The resurgence of China has led to an emphasis on not just Mandarin but Chinese culture as well. Academics have long pointed out that being bicultural is important as using language without understanding its cultural underpinnings is inadequate. Chinese historian Lee Guan Kin cautioned that if “we are fluent speakers, but cannot understand the culture, we will be at a disadvantage” (*The Straits Times*, 26 June 2004). While the Chinese in Singapore and China both use Mandarin, the values are not the same. For example, Singapore Chinese are influenced by socialist-democratic values in Singapore, while mainland Chinese are educated in Communist beliefs. Addressing this deficiency, the shift now is from the Chinese language to Chinese language *and* culture. Essentially, this means that it is no longer enough to just speak, read and write functional Chinese for Singaporeans; what is needed is a deeper appreciation of Chinese culture, history, literature and the arts. For example, the latest “Speak Mandarin Campaign”—an annual campaign launched in 1997 to encourage more Singaporean Chinese to speak more Mandarin—focuses on Chinese popular culture, and not just on the language itself. In a recent interview, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew explains the link between the campaign and China:

This year’s campaign will use the mass media and pop culture to arouse interest in Mandarin. As China develops into an economic and cultural world player, it will export its cultural products. We will see more Chinese television series, films and drama, text messaging, traditional print media, kung-fu movies, story and comic books. They will spread worldwide, including translations (*The Straits Times*, 14 December 2004).

### **The Internal Factor: The Language Shift in Singapore**

However, the rise of China alone cannot be the reason why the Singapore government is increasingly underlining the economic value of Mandarin. As

pointed out earlier, the government has been highlighting the usefulness of Mandarin to help Singaporeans do business with China since the early 1990s. But the shift from the cultural to the economic value of Mandarin gains momentum only in recent years. It is likely that there are internal factors which contribute to the linguistic pragmatism of Mandarin in Singapore. This has to do with the language shift among primary and secondary students in Singapore, coupled with the prevailing attitude among young Singaporean students towards Mandarin. As mentioned earlier, the number of Chinese students from English-speaking homes has risen from 10 per cent in 1980 to 49.8 per cent in 2004 (Ministry of Education, 2004a). More significantly, English has now overtaken Mandarin as the primary language spoken in homes of Primary One Chinese students.

This group of Chinese students from English-speaking homes are placed in an awkward situation where Mandarin is officially their Mother Tongue Language but it is practically a foreign tongue to them. This means that it is unlikely for them to see Mandarin as an identity marker, and very challenging for them to learn the language in schools. As this group is already linguistically weak in Mandarin and culturally more detached from the Chinese culture, they are more likely to resist any link between the learning of Mandarin and the Chinese culture to their identity as Chinese. Studies have shown that the English educated Chinese in Singapore do not see Mandarin as the most important factor in establishing and transmitting Chinese identity; rather descent, surname, Chinese customs and beliefs are more important (Tan, 1995). For example, one Singaporean Chinese argues that Mandarin should not be an identity marker for the Chinese since their Chinese ancestors who passed down Chinese values to them did not know Mandarin:

Many Chinese scholars link the acquisition of cultural values with competency in the language. This may not necessarily be so as our forefathers who were not literate were no less Chinese in their values. In fact, we pick up as much Chinese values from our illiterate parents as in Chinese class (*The Straits Times*, 30 January, 2004).

It is also important to note that Mandarin is actually a spoken language based on a dialect spoken by people from northern China, and therefore is not the traditional spoken language of the majority of Singaporean Chinese whose ancestors hailed from southern China. A common gripe by Singaporean Chinese from English-speaking homes is that they suffer from a “cultural imposition” in being forced to learn Mandarin as their Mother Tongue Language. They resent the government’s presupposition that they have a natural affinity for a language which is actually not their native tongue. Besides, as one English educated Singaporean Chinese argues, a Chinese who does not know Mandarin but knows a Chinese dialect such as Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew is just as Chinese (*The Straits Times*, 30 January 2004).

The government is aware of the sentiments of the English-educated Chinese in Singapore. The then Minister of State for Education Chan Soo Sen commented that the Government has to be careful in not being seen to be too pushy in urging Chinese Singaporeans to learn Mandarin for cultural reasons (*The Straits Times*, 10 December 2004). How then can the government motivate this large group of Chinese students and their parents to be positive about the learning of Mandarin? Although more Chinese students come from English-speaking homes, the survey by the Ministry of Education also reveals that most parents and students recognise the importance of learning Mandarin. Among the students who said that they liked learning Mandarin, about half of the primary students (48.5 per cent of Primary Two students and 51 per cent of Primary Six students) and more than a third of the secondary students (39.3 per cent for Secondary Two students and 35.7 per cent for Secondary Four students) chose this reason: “Chinese is an important subject for my future”. The survey also tells us that 99.6 per cent of parents for Primary Two students and 96.2 per cent of parents for Secondary Four students felt that it was important for their child to learn Mandarin. On average, 80 per cent of students from English-speaking homes feel that it is important to learn Mandarin. The survey results by the Ministry of Education are also attested to by another survey conducted by the largest Chinese

newspaper in Singapore, *Lianhe Zaobao*, of 400 secondary school students which shows that 90 per cent think Chinese is important (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 22 February 2004). Despite the fact that more young Chinese students come from English-speaking homes, there is a strong utilitarian reason for them to learn Mandarin. In fact, the economic value, not the cultural value, of Mandarin is a commonly cited reason by Chinese students when they were interviewed in the newspaper. An eighteen years old student said: 'It's my chance to get close to my culture and get a better understanding of Chinese history, which will benefit me should I choose to do business in China' (*The Straits Times*, 24 March 2004). The desire to learn another language well due to pragmatic reasons is not unfamiliar to Singaporeans. There was a similar rush among Singaporeans to learn Japanese in the 1970s due to the bullish Japanese economy.

The use of economic, rather than cultural reasons, for the learning of Mandarin is therefore a more effective way for the government to motivate the English-speaking students to learn Mandarin. The opening of its market by the People's Republic of China has made Mandarin an important economic language, resulting in a change in the Singaporeans' attitude towards Mandarin (Pakir, 2000). The Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated in a recent speech that parents – both from English- and Chinese-speaking home backgrounds - will support their children learning the language as they can see how valuable it will be for their children in work to business in China (*The Straits Times*, 20 October 2004). The Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew explained how economic factor, not cultural factor, is the underlying motivating factor for pragmatic Singaporeans:

In 1965, the PAP Government decided on teaching the mother tongue because my colleagues and I strongly believed that it gives a person confidence in himself and pride in his language and culture. We thought it important enough to make it compulsory for every Chinese child to study Mandarin. We gradually realised that while parents and students wanted emotionally to keep their mother tongue, sentimental reasons are not as strong as the economic value of the language. With China's economic



resurgence, parents and students now know that the Chinese language is a valuable skill. The motivation is now much stronger.... Several writers in *Zaobao* (the Chinese daily) have deplored the fact that the present enthusiasm of parents and students for learning Chinese is because of its economic value. But let us not berate the pragmatism of Singaporeans (*The Straits Times*, 26 November 2004).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the linguistic pragmatism of Mandarin in Singapore stems from both external and internal factors - the rise of China as an economic power and the language shift to English among Chinese students in Singapore. Knowing that many Chinese parents and students are more motivated by the pragmatic value of Mandarin, the government has highlighted the economic value of Mandarin to encourage more Chinese students to learn the language well. The Singapore experience demonstrates that such a shift is accompanied by a dynamic interplay between external and internal factors existing in the country. What is interesting about the situation in Singapore is that the emphasis on the economic value of the Mother Tongue Languages is not at the expense of the English Language. The government in Singapore continues to uphold the bilingual policy where English remains as the first language in schools and the common working language in formal settings. What Singaporean Chinese students are exhorted to do is to continue to be English-Mandarin bilingual, knowing that the economic value of both languages will put them in a good stead. Such a move is consonant with the phenomenon occurring elsewhere where English, as the international language for trade and communication, coexists with the ethnic languages as economic resources (Heller, 1999b; Pomerantz, 2002; cited in Wee, 2003). With globalisation, the rise of China and India, and economic liberalisation in other parts of Asia, it is likely that many countries in the Asia-pacific region will see a similar shift in valuing their ethnic languages as economic resources.

## THE AUTHOR

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