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Title	Functional differentiation: A critique of the bilingual policy in Singapore
Author(s)	Charlene Tan and Pak Tee Ng
Source	<i>Journal of Asian Public Policy</i> , 4(3), 331-341. <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2011.630227">http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2011.630227</a>
Published by	Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Journal of Asian Public Policy* on 14/12/2011, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/17516234.2011.630227>

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Citation: Tan, C., & Ng, P. T. (2011). Functional differentiation: A critique of the bilingual policy in Singapore. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 4(3), 331-341.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2011.630227>

**Tan, C. & Ng, P.T. (2011). Functional differentiation: A critique of the bilingual policy in Singapore. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 4(3), 331-341**

**DRAFT**

**Functional Differentiation: A Critique of the Bilingual Policy in Singapore**

**Charlene Tan & Pak Tee Ng**

**Abstract**

This paper critically explores the ideology of the functional differentiation of languages that underpins the bilingual policy in Singapore. This ideology values English for its economic function and the indigenous languages for their role in cultural transmission. In the first part of the paper, we critique the ideology of functional differentiation by discussing two main challenges that arise from the bilingual policy in Singapore. In the second part of the paper, we explain how the ideology of functional differentiation is linked to the multicultural policy adopted by the government. We argue that this multicultural approach emphasises surface culture and is inadequate in enabling the chosen ‘mother tongue languages’ to serve as cultural and identity markers for the students. The Singapore case study contributes towards the international literature on the underlying ideology, contemporary issues and perennial challenges surrounding language policy in multicultural societies.

**Keywords**

bilingual policy; English, functional differentiation, multicultural policy, Singapore

**Functional Differentiation: A Critique of the Bilingual Policy in Singapore**

An important consideration for the formulation of public policy in multicultural societies is the need to provide a common language while acknowledging and preserving the indigenous languages of different ethnic groups. Accompanying the state initiative in conceptualising and implementing a language policy in schools are various complex and often controversial concerns faced by various cultural and linguistic groups. As a multi-ethnic country with 74.2% Chinese, 13.4% Malay, 9.2% Indian and 3.2% Others, Singapore offers a useful case study on the issues and challenges surrounding its bilingual policy in an Asian context.

The bilingual policy in Singapore requires all students in public schools (known as ‘national schools’ in Singapore) to learn English as the first language in schools and a ‘Mother Tongue Language’ (MTL) as a second language. This paper critically explores the ideology of the *functional differentiation of languages* that underpins the bilingual policy in Singapore. In the first part of the paper, we critique the ideology of functional differentiation by discussing two

main challenges that arise from the bilingual policy in Singapore. In the second part of the paper, we explain how the ideology of functional differentiation is linked to the multicultural policy adopted by the government. We argue that this multicultural approach emphasises surface culture and is inadequate in enabling the chosen ‘mother tongue languages’ to serve as cultural and identity markers for the students. The Singapore case study contributes towards the international literature on the underlying ideology, contemporary issues and perennial challenges surrounding language policy in multicultural societies.

## **Introduction to the Bilingual Policy in Singapore**

At the outset, it is helpful to give a brief historical overview of the bilingual policy in Singapore. The educational system in Singapore in the 1950’s and 1960’s was characterised by four-language stream curricula – Malay, Mandarin (putongua), Tamil and English. Aware of the problem of a lack of a common national syllabus, the Ministry of Education introduced a number of reforms in the 1960s. They included the provision of a new common syllabus for all school subjects in the four language streams, the training of teachers in the four different languages, the institution of common examinations for all streams at the primary, secondary and high school levels, and the availability of loan of free textbooks to all the four streams (Yip & Sim, 1994). By 1970s, a consolidated national curriculum was in place, which was further modified from the 1980s to the present time. But what has remained unchanged since its inception was the bilingual policy.

The bilingual policy which was made compulsory in the 1966 requires all students in the national schools to learn English as the first language in schools and an official mother tongue, known as ‘Mother Tongue Language’ (MTL) as the second language. Three MTLs were chosen initially – Mandarin or putonghua for Chinese students, Malay for Malay students, and Tamil for Indian students. All primary and secondary students have to take a MTL as their second language, and a pass in that language was required for admission to pre-university classes from 1979 onwards (Yip & Sim, 1994). The MTL for Indian students has since been expanded to include five other Indian languages. This means that a non-Tamil Indian may choose to take Tamil, or one of the following non-Tamil Indian Languages: Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu.

It is important to clarify that the term ‘Mother Tongue Language’ (MTL) in Singapore refers not to the language used by the student at home or the first language he or she learned but by ethnicity (Kuo, 1980). For example, a Chinese student may come from a home background where English is the only language spoken from young, but her ‘mother tongue’ is officially Mandarin, not English. Today, the proportion of the resident population bilingual in English and the MTLs is about 56% overall, 48% of Chinese, 77% of Malays, and 38% of Indians. Most Singaporeans are ‘bicultural bilinguals’ in the sense that they “operate in two language communities without experiencing any conflict with the speakers of each community and they can recognise the value of the different aspects of the respective culture of each language group” (Saravanan, Lakshmi & Caleon, 2007, p. 59).

## The Ideology of Functional differentiation for the Bilingual Policy in Singapore

The bilingual policy in Singapore is underpinned by the ideology of functional differentiation of languages. This ideology, which values English for its economic function and the indigenous languages for their role in cultural transmission, is drawn upon the ideas of Joshua Fishman. Fishman (1972) sees the compartmentalised roles of both Western Language of Wider Communication (LWC) and the indigenous languages in a diglossic situation. 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. While the LWC is valued economically for its utility and actual use in the domains of science and technology, the indigenous languages are prized for their cultural values and world views. This ‘diglossian compromise’ will allow different ethnic groups to coexist with a LWC as a common working language and diminished the “internal linguistic strife” (Fishman, 1968, p. 47). Under this view, English, as a LWC, is treasured economically as a world language, providing access to economic development and social mobility while other languages are viewed mainly as repositories of ancient knowledge or cultural heritage (May, 2001; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992, quoted in Wee, 2003).

A number of writers have noted that the functional differentiation of languages with English as the LWC and official ethnic languages used in less formal contexts applies to Singapore (Platt & Weber, 1980; Saravanan, 1993; Tan, 1995; Tan, 2005, 2006; Bokhorst-Heng, 1999a). Tan (1995) avers that Fishman’s theoretical perceptions parallel the way Singapore’s language policies rationalise English-knowing bilingualism and the role of the official ethnic 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’ (1999b), Kuo and Jernudd’s ‘division of labour between languages’ (1994) and ‘natural division of labour’ (Tan, 1996). English was chosen as it was and still is considered by the Singapore government as the language of commerce, of science, technology and international intercourse. It also has the advantage of being the neutral medium for the different ethnic groups. But the Singapore government believes that students need to learn their ethnic mother tongues because this is what gives them their identity and cultural heritage.

It is interesting to note that the ideology of functional differentiation that underpins the bilingual policy has hardly changed over the years in official discourses. Commenting on the introduction of the bilingual policy in the 1960’s, Mr Lee Kuan Yew who was the architect of the bilingual policy said:

...if we were monolingual in our mother tongues, we would not *make a living*. Becoming monolingual in English would have been a setback. We would have lost our *cultural identity*, that quiet confidence about ourselves and our place in the world.” (Lee, 2000, italics added).

It is instructively that both the economic function of English (make a living) and the cultural function of the ethnic languages (cultural identity) are highlighted by Mr Lee – the essence of the ideology of functional differentiation.

The same position was reiterated in 1999 by then Deputy Prime Minister (now Prime Minister) Lee Hsien Loong:

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 (Lee, 1999).

The belief in the functional differentiation of languages continues to be echoed by the Minister of Education and other government officials in recent years (for example, see Masagos, 2008; Ng, 2009; MOE, 2010).

## **Contemporary Challenges**

### ***English or Singlish?***

There are two main challenges arising from the ideology of functional differentiation that underpins the bilingual policy in Singapore. First, despite the importance attached to English as a language of high economic value, a high proficiency in English remains a challenge to many students. While the goal of the government is good standard British English, a counter trend has emerged in practice of English in reality. As English is not the indigenous language for most Singaporeans, students, especially those from Chinese-speaking home background, struggle to learn standard English in school.

Compounding the challenge is the interference from and popularity of Singlish – a vernacular form of English that incorporates words from the Chinese dialects, Malay and Tamil. Over the years, English has been used alongside the various mother tongues and even dialects in Singapore. Therefore, there was a strong native influence upon English and the result was the emergence of Singlish. While Singlish is not standard language, common everyday usage of it incorporates and thus legitimates deviations from the official language (Kuo and Jernudd, 1994). Many Singaporeans use Singlish at home and with friends and enjoy local TV comedies featuring Singlish-speaking characters. They tend to include Singlish words (like “lah” and “wah lao”) and phrases (“like that cannot meh?”) when they speak and write in English. Pakir points out that Singlish, not formal or standard English, is most common in “peer group interaction, sibling interaction, adult-child interaction and even adult-adult orientation in many contexts of situation here” (1994, p. 176). Hence, contrary to the state's aim of promoting the MTLs as cultural and identity markers, Singlish – to the dismay of the state – has become a symbol of the Singaporean identity (Rubdy, 2001).

Given that English is supposed to fulfil an economic function as the language of commerce, of science, technology and international intercourse, especially with the English-speaking world, the negative impact of Singlish on the learning of standard English is a cause of worry for the government. Unsurprisingly, the government appealed to the pragmatic side of the citizen. In the words of then Deputy Prime Minister:

If we give up our mother tongues, only to learn and speak Singlish, we will be worse off. Our mother tongues carry with them values, ancient cultural heritages and a sense of identity. To lose some of this, because we need to speak standard English, an

international language of business and science, is painful, but it is a rational trade off to make. But it does not make sense to replace our mother tongues by a Singapore English dialect which is unintelligible to the rest of the world. Then we would be better off sticking to Chinese, Malay or Tamil, for then at least some other people in the world would understand us (Lee, 2001).

In 2000, the government intervened in two major ways. Firstly, on 29 April 2000, it officially launched the Speak Good English movement (SGEM) in a determined effort to promote the use of Standard English among Singaporeans. This movement continued to be an annual affair until today. At the same time, the Ministry of Education took several measures to raise the standard of English used in school. The English language syllabus was revised to attain higher rigour in the teaching of English. English teachers were sent on courses on the latest methods of teaching the language and all teachers are exhorted to use proper English in all subject areas. The government went on an all-out effort to prevent an erosion of English language standards in the country, especially among the young.

Despite this all-out ‘creative destruction’ (Rubdy, 2001), it appears that the unsatisfactory standard of English continues to plague Singapore. At the Speak Good English 2009, Minister Lim Boon Heng reminded Singaporeans to “it is important that we raise the standard of speaking and using good English as a nation, starting with our workplaces and our homes” (Lim, 2008). In the same year, then Minister of Education, while acknowledging that some progress has been made in the teaching of English, opined that “While most teachers are proud of our standards in say Maths and Science, we are less enamored of our standard of English. ... we should begin concerted efforts to raise the standard of English. (Ng, E H, 2009b).

The question is why this problem seems so resistant to policy intervention and solution. Modern linguists theorise that any concept can be expressed in any language (Kecskes & Papp, 2000) and reject the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis which posits the language one speaks in large part determines the thoughts one can entertain (Kecskes & Papp, 2000). If this is the case, then the expression of thoughts of any ethnic or cultural origin could be best served by an ‘indigenous’ language, rather than pure ones such as standard English or Mother Tongue. If we subscribe to a Vygotskian-based socio-cultural theory of the relationship between language and thoughts, then the complexity of the social interactions in such a cultural melting pot as Singapore cannot be controlled. There is a limit to the success of the government in wanting only pure languages to be used. Indigenised languages have more power to carry out the desired function of passing on culture, values and norms. Even at the inception of the Speak Good English Campaign, then Deputy Prime minister acknowledged that it is an up-hill task to get away from Singlish: he said that “*the course of least resistance* (italics mine) is to end up with Singlish, because that is what we get when the English language is mixed with Malay words, Chinese grammar, and local slang” (Lee, 2001).

Therefore, in the case of Singapore, while it is linguistically pragmatic to practice only pure English (and indeed pure mother tongues), the issue of language mutation will continue to plague the government. Language practice in a society is a form of societal learning and social capital. The process of language change, as part of a learning system, is better described as complex than clinical. However, complexity asserts that in such a system, the exchanges among the many interacting agents and impinging factors are non-linear, highly inter-twinned and magnified over a multitude of iterations, making the outcomes of clinical interventions virtually impossible to guarantee (Ng, P. T., 2009). Therefore, policies and

campaigns which serve as system interventions will have to contend with societal dynamics at a deeper level.

### ***Linguistic Pragmatism***

The second challenge that arises from the ideology of functional differentiation of languages is that this ideology contradicts another state ideology that underpins the bilingual policy in recent years – linguistic pragmatism. The latter justifies the existence of a language in a community “in terms of its usefulness in achieving specific utilitarian goals, such as access to economic development or social mobility” (Wee, 2003, p. 212). Linguistic pragmatism entails that a particular culture, not only a particular language, may be used for an economic purpose. Ho and Alsagoff (1998) write that “at the ethnic level, the significance of heritage languages and cultures is popularly perceived as giving Singapore entrepreneurs an extra edge in penetrating the fast-growing Asian markets” (p. 213). Cultural values that are perceived to contribute to the nation’s growth and help maintain social consensus are co-opted into the official discourse (Tan, 1995). Linguistic pragmatism is a later shift of discourse where the language is viewed primarily as marker of cultural identity. This phenomenon has been observed for languages like French and Spanish which were traditionally seen as markers of cultural authenticity and integrity. Emerging globalising orientation has resulted in a shift towards seeing these languages as economic resources (Heller, 1999a, 1999b; Pomerantz, 2002, both quoted in Wee 2003). Other writers have used different but related terms to expound the pragmatic underpinnings in bilingualism and the bilingual policy in Singapore, such as ‘pragmatic multilingualism’ (Ho & Wong, 2000; Saravanan, 1996), and ‘linguistic instrumentalism’ (Wee, 2003). Linguistic pragmatism 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 focus on the economic incentive for the learning of one’s mother tongues is emphasised by the government in recent years. For example, then Senior Minister of State for Education appears to endorse linguistic pragmatism in his speech in 2002:

[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, 2002, italics added).

Linguistic pragmatism, which values languages, not just English, for their economic purposes, implies that Mandarin should be learnt for all ethnic groups for its utilitarian benefit. Mandarin is promoted for its increasing importance as a trade language which facilitates access to the expanding market in China (Kuo & Jernudd, 1988, 1994). This is most clearly laid out in the latest report of the Chinese language curriculum and pedagogy where it states that 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, 2004). A pool of Chinese cultural elite is expected to lead in establishing better economic and political ties with China. Known as the Bicultural Studies Programme (Chinese), a group of students will be groomed to become 'bicultural elite' to promote Mandarin and Chinese culture in Singapore, and serve as a bridge between Singapore and (Tharman, 2007). That the government has increasingly underscored the economic value of Mandarin is seen in the Minister of Manpower asserting in 2010:

Countries like India, America and Europe are recognising the rising importance of China and are stepping up their presence in the Chinese market. ... This puts Singapore at a very advantageous position with our bilingual ability. Today, many Singaporeans are able to leverage on our bilingual and bicultural edge to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves in China (Gan, 2010).

However, the ideology of linguistic pragmatism contradicts the ideology of functional differentiation where the MTLs, especially Mandarin, are supposed to be valued not for their economic but cultural value. Recognising and encouraging the learning of Mandarin for its economic benefit open up tricky questions of equity and access for non-Chinese Singaporeans. First, there is the issue of equity when one compares the attention and resources devoted to Mandarin vis-à-vis other MTLs. Since her independence, the government has given more help and support to the teaching and learning of Mandarin compared to other official mother tongues. For example, the government organises the annual Speak Mandarin Campaign (SPC) to exhort more Chinese Singaporeans to speak Mandarin, and set up Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools which are elite schools to encourage more students to take English and Mandarin as their first languages. There is no similar 'Speak Malay Campaign' or 'Speak Tamil Campaign', nor elite schools to promote a mastery of these mother tongues for students.

The same disparity applies to curricular changes. Since 2001, the government has embarked on an ambitious plan to revise the structure, content, pedagogy, and assessment methods used in language teaching and learning for Mandarin. A number of non-Chinese Singaporeans have publicly pointed out the unequal treatment of the mother tongues and asked for more attention to be given to Malay and Tamil. Commenting on the government's plan to groom a group of bicultural Chinese, the Malay community and business leaders say such a group is also needed for the Malay/Muslim community 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). The case in Singapore illustrates that there is no equal nor direct access into the domains of power, neither are language choices equal among the different ethnic groups (Tan, 1996). Gopinathan (1994) cautions that a response conditioned by the need to accommodate one ethnic group will alarm the minorities.

There is also the issue of access for non-Chinese students who are denied the opportunity to learn Mandarin as their MTL, and thereby deprived of the economic benefits that come with the ability to speak and write in Mandarin. Under the functional polarisation of languages where English was used as the common working language and the mother tongues were valued as cultural markers, the government's policy of reserving Mandarin for the Chinese students appeared reasonable to the other ethnic groups. But with the shift to value the

economic worth of the mother tongues, especially Mandarin, this policy has become contentious. The consequence is that unequal opportunities are given to different races to learn Mandarin and penetrate the China economic market (Wee, 2003). A poll of 750 undergraduates at the National University of Singapore by its Students Political Association reveals that a number of non-Chinese Singaporeans complain that their inability to speak Mandarin closes many doors to them when they look for jobs in Singapore (*The Straits Times*, 11 September 2004). The economic value of Mandarin has prompted other ethnic groups to clamour for the right to learn the language as well. It has been reported that even non-Chinese are being bitten by the China bug and Malay parents wonder if their children should also know Chinese so that they would not lose out in future economic opportunities (*The Straits Times*, 26 June 2004). Consequently, non-Chinese parents are rushing to make sure their children have at least some familiarity with Mandarin. Some Singaporeans have questioned the official bilingual policy of learning one's mother tongue based on one's ethnicity. One writer asked why one's choice of a second language cannot be Bahasa Indonesia, Thai, Vietnamese and so on, instead of Chinese, Malay and the Indian languages, regardless of one's ethnicity (*The Straits Times*, 31 March 2004).

### **Functional Differentiation and the Multicultural Policy in Singapore**

The perennial challenges facing the bilingual policy have not been resolved over the years because the underlying ideology – functional differentiation – has not changed over the years. The ideology of functional differentiation has persisted to the present time because it is linked to another long-standing public policy in Singapore – the multicultural policy.

The Singapore government adopts a model of multiculturalism known as 'hard multiculturalism' (Vasu, 2008). Under this framework, the state affirms cultural differences in the public sphere and members of the diverse groups are permitted to retain their cultural ways as long as they conform to those practices deemed necessary for the survival of the society (Taylor, 1994). The government classifies everyone based on four racial identities according to one's paternal line: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO). The state essentialises the cultural identities by investing each race with specific cultural characteristics through homogenisation and erasure (Chua 2003; Bokhorst-Heng, 2007; Vasu, 2008; Tan, 2009). Recursive practices seek to homogenise the ethnic, linguistic and religious differences within each racial category. The 'race' is reflected on everyone's identity card and reinforced through various public policies, including the language policy. Specific cultural attributes, including the 'mother tongue languages' of the various 'races' are ascribed to Singaporeans to affirm and perpetuate their ethnic identities.

The multicultural policy helps us to understand why the Singapore government adopts a bilingual policy where a specific 'mother tongue language' is assigned for each of the three 'races' – Mandarin for the Chinese, Malay for the Malays and Tamil for the Indians. The privileged MTLs are supposed to fulfil the cultural function of affirming and perpetuating the cultural attributes and identity of the individual based on one 'race'. This link between one's MTL and the formation of one's 'racial identity' was noted by the former Prime Minister: "To ensure that Singaporeans remain grounded in our ancestral Asian culture and values, we require our young to study their mother tongues in schools, be they Mandarin, Malay or Tamil" (Goh, 2004). The state also erases the differences of languages and dialects within the groups and creates linguistic commonality. The different Chinese languages were erased and the Chinese 'race' was perceived as united under the banner of Mandarin. Similarly, the state

recognises all Malays as speakers of Malay, and the linguistic, religious and geographical differences of the Indians were erased through the promotion of Tamil and Southern Indian languages.

However, this multicultural approach emphasises surface culture and is inadequate in enabling the chosen ‘mother tongue languages’ to serve as cultural and identity markers for the students. While surface culture covers areas that are often observable, shared and uncontroversial, deep culture engages with sensitive issues in cultural meanings and challenges cultural stereotypes ([Bokhorst-Heng, 2007](#)). The emphasis of multiracialism in Singapore schools is on learning the observable and shared cultural manifestations such as language, food, attire, religious and cultural festivals of the three ‘races’: Chinese, Malay, and Indian. But surface culture poses problems for students to construct and articulate their own (real) mother tongue, ethnicity and identity.

The identification of one’s race to an assigned ‘Mother Tongue Language’ does not reflect the realities of Singaporeans, especially the Chinese. The government assumes that Mandarin provides the cultural and identity foundation for Singapore Chinese as it is their ‘mother tongue’. However Mandarin is not the mother tongue for the majority of the Singapore Chinese; their mother tongues are Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew as their ancestors hailed from southern China. Mandarin was actually a dialect spoken by people from northern China. However, Mandarin was preferred by the government for two reasons ([Tan, 2006](#)). Internally, Mandarin was seen as a neutral medium to overcome dialect divisions among the Chinese. Externally, it connects Singapore to mainland China and Taiwan as it is the national language for mainland China and Taiwan. Even after several decades of advocating Mandarin as the mother tongue for the Chinese through public programmes (such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign) and education (such as the establishment of elite schools to promote Mandarin), only 45 per cent of the Chinese today use Mandarin as their home language. It is also noteworthy that many Singapore Chinese themselves do not necessarily see Mandarin as an important factor in establishing and transmitting Chinese identity. Studies show that descent, surname, Chinese customs and beliefs are more important to the English educated Chinese in Singapore than competence in Mandarin ([Tan, 1995](#)). These are aspects of deep culture that matter more to an individual’s cultural identity.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explained how the bilingual policy is underpinned by the ideology of functional differentiation. We had critiqued the ideology of functional differentiation by pointing out two main challenges arising from the bilingual policy in Singapore. First, we argued that the goal of using English for its economic value is vitiated by the unsatisfactory standard of the language among Singaporeans due to the interference from and popularity of Singlish. Secondly, the ideology of functional differentiation contradicts the other state ideology of linguistic pragmatism, leading to problems of equity and access for non-Chinese Singaporeans.

A current dilemma faced by the government is whether to allow non-Chinese students to replace their MTLs with Mandarin. This is a sensitive matter because the government does not want to be seen as encouraging Mandarin at the expense of the other mother tongues. However, to deprive the non-Chinese Singaporeans of learning Mandarin as an economic

resource might seem to be unfair to the non-Chinese as well. In response, the government reiterated the principle of bilingualism and affirmed the current bilingual policy. Rather than allowing non-Chinese students to take Mandarin as their MTL, the government allows secondary one students who have the “interest and inclination” to study it as the third language from 2004 onwards (Hawazi, 2004). While this option is good news for the non-Chinese students, it will probably be feasible to only a small group of students who can cope with learning three languages, on top of their other academic subjects. The government’s stand is unsurprising as it has repeatedly stated the need to for all the ethnic groups to preserve their own mother tongues, culture and values for national survival. In other words, the ideology of functional differentiation is reiterated. But such a position is unsatisfactory as long as the government continues to subscribe to the ideology of linguistic pragmatism where Mandarin has a higher economic value than Malay and the Indian languages. The government will continue to face this dilemma as long as it holds to both the ideologies of functional differentiation and linguistic pragmatism.

A way ahead for Singapore is to review just its ideology of functional differentiation that underpins the bilingual policy. This does not mean that the functional differentiation of languages should be rejected wholesale; after all, there are Singaporeans who see English merely as a working language that satisfies their economic needs, and hold dearly to their mother tongues as cultural and identity markers. But this does not apply to all Singaporeans. To assume that all Singaporeans subscribe to the functional differentiation of English and their MTLs is erroneous, as it ignores the fact that individuals cannot be stereotyped by a ‘race’ and a prescribed ethnic language. What is needed for Singapore is to move away from a fixed and artificial assignment of economic vis-à-vis cultural roles of languages, to an understanding that acknowledges the different and varied roles languages play in different contexts. Rather than holding to a prescribed definition of ‘race’ with its well-defined cultural and linguistic attributes, the state should see individuals as comprising and articulating multiple (inter)-cultural identities that are complex, fluid and evolving. The challenges surrounding the bilingual policy in Singapore serve as a useful case study on the the attempts and challenges faced by many states, especially in multicultural contexts, to design and carry out their language policies strategically to further their national agenda. It demonstrates how the conceptualisation and implementation of public policies are problematic when they are underpinned by ideologies that are at odds with each other.

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