

A Multidimensional Perspective on Language Planning and Policy in Singapore: Theory, Practice and Challenges

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Abstract

As a model of a multilingual country, Singapore's language policy has always aimed to balance linguistic diversity and social integration. Through the synergy of status planning, corpus planning, prestige planning and education planning, Singapore has successfully shaped a multilingual society with English as the lingua franca while preserving the cultural identity of the community. However, the new challenges posed by globalization and intergenerational linguistic change have prompted Singapore to continuously adjust its policy framework. Taking Singapore as an example, this paper explores the practical paths, effectiveness and inherent tensions of its language policy from the definitions of language planning and language policy, as well as from the perspectives of functionalism, social constructivism and critical theory.

Keywords : Singapore; language planning; language policy; language prestige; international cases

Suggested citation : Zheng, X., & Luo, N. (2025). A Multidimensional Perspective on Language Planning and Policy in Singapore: Theory, Practice and Challenges. Journal of Current Social Issues Studies, 2(5), 322–326. <https://doi.org/10.71113/JCSIS.v2i5.296>

Introduction

Singapore's language policy and language planning, as a model for the management of a multilingual society, have long attracted extensive attention in the international academic and policy research fields. Since its independence in 1965, the Singaporean government has established a pragmatism-oriented language governance framework. Rooted in its multiracial society (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other ethnic groups) and national security needs, this framework designates English as the administrative lingua franca while retaining Malay (the national language), Mandarin, and Tamil as official languages. This policy not only serves the country's economic construction (through the integration of English into the globalization system), but also assumes the political functions of balancing ethnic identities, maintaining cultural traditions and shaping the national identity.

Definition of Language Planning and Policy

Language Planning (LP) refers to the systematic and prolonged intervention in language selection, standardization and promotion, usually at the national or regional level. The process involves the collaboration of government agencies, educational systems, and other social forces.^[1] Fishman, one of the leading scholars in the field of language planning, emphasizes that the core of language planning lies in promoting the social functions of language, especially in enhancing social cohesion in multilingual societies.

Language Policy, on the other hand, is regarded as a superordinate concept of language planning, and its connotation is diversified according to the different perspectives of scholars. From the instrumental perspective of language, Robert B. Kaplan & Richard B. Baldauf (1997) emphasize language policy as a state-led normative framework covering language choice, education system design and standardization measures.^[2] From the dimension of power and authority, Bernard Spolsky (2004) points out that language policy is an institutional arrangement of language use by an authority^[3]; Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) combines it with social justice, and advocates that language policy should protect the language rights of ethnic minorities.^[4] From the perspective of dynamic construction, Thomas Ricento (2006) holds that language policy involves decisive measures for the role and position of language in the public sphere, and points out that it is not only the result of government decision-making, but also influenced by social forces and historical background.^[5] Michael Heller (2007) believes that language policy is not only a question of language selection and standardization, but also reflects social structure, identity, cultural identity and power inequality, so it involves complex political and social forces.^[6]

Theoretical basis of language planning and policy

Functionalism theory

Functionalism theory emphasizes the social function of language and its close relationship with social, economic and political needs. According to this theory, the choice and promotion of language is usually to meet the needs of a social group in communication, cultural identity and education.^[7] The Singapore government has positioned English as a strategic choice of economic language and successfully built a competitive advantage in the context of globalization. Through the implementation of English-oriented bilingual education system (English+mother tongue), Singapore has cultivated a highly internationalized labor market, and its English proficiency has ranked first in Asia among non-native English-speaking countries for eight consecutive years (EffEnglish Proficiency Index, 2022).^[8] This language advantage has helped Singapore attract more than 42,000 multinational companies to set up regional headquarters, forming a cluster effect in knowledge-intensive industries such as finance and science and technology, and promoting the average annual GDP growth rate to remain stable at 3.2% in the past decade (World Bank, 2023). More profoundly, English, as the common language of all ethnic groups, has effectively reduced the communication cost of a pluralistic society, making Singapore one of the top indicators of social cohesion in the global urban competitiveness index all the year round.

However, the excessive strengthening of language instrumental rationality is causing a structural crisis of cultural inheritance. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, the proportion of households using only English at home has soared from 32% in 2010 to 48% in 2020, while less than 15% of teenagers are fluent in their ancestral dialects (Khoa Vlt, 2024).^[9] This intergenerational language gap has led to a dilution of cultural awareness - about 63 percent of the Post-95s are unable to recognize dialectal phrases in traditional operas, and the loss of clan ritual phrases is particularly noticeable in the Chinese community. Despite the government's attempts to remedy the situation through policies such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign, most young people view their mother tongue as a test-taking tool rather than a cultural vehicle, and the trend of abstracting the historical memory of the community continues to intensify. This inherent tension between economic rationality and cultural values reflects the universal dilemma faced by post-colonial societies in the process of modernization.

Social Constructionist Theory

The social constructivist perspective, on the other hand, argues that the formulation and implementation of language policy is not only a product of social needs, but also a reflection of social power, cultural identity and historical context.^[10] This perspective focuses on the relationship between language and power, and argues that political and social power plays are often hidden behind language policies. The formulation of certain language policies may help to maximize the interests of one social group while ignoring the language needs of others. The formulation of language policy in Singapore, a multicultural island nation, is a stark example of this. Singapore's language planning not only reflects respect for multiculturalism, but also has a profound impact on the country's governance and social cohesion. Singapore has implemented a multilingual system where Malay is the de jure national language, while English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are all recognized as official languages. Such a language policy aims to reconcile the differences in the use of mother tongues by various ethnic groups and to promote communication and integration among different ethnic groups, reflecting the response of language policy to social needs from a social constructivist perspective.

However, when analyzed in depth from the perspective of social constructivism, the formulation of Singapore's language policy also reflects the game of social power and cultural identity. The fact that Malay is used as the national language reflects the respect for the indigenous Malay culture, while English is used as the administrative language and the main tool for international communication, which to a certain extent reflects the importance Singapore attaches to international communication as an internationalized metropolis. At the same time, the extensive use of English in administration and business also ensures administrative efficiency and smooth international communication, which is implicitly based on considerations of economic and political power.

In addition, the Singapore government has vigorously promoted Chinese language education, both in response to the language needs of the Chinese community and in recognition of the importance of Chinese culture. As China's international status continues to rise, the status of the Chinese language in Singapore has also become increasingly prominent. By promoting Chinese language education, the government not only meets the language needs of the Chinese community, but also strengthens the cultural ties with mainland China, which to a certain extent reflects the pursuit of maximizing the benefits of the social groups by the language policy.

Critical Language Policy Theory

Critical language policy theory is based on the framework of critical theory, with special emphasis on the close connection between language policy and the issues of social inequality, class and ethnicity.^[11] The theory holds that language is not just a tool for communication; it contains behind it a struggle between cultural and political forces. In a multilingual society, the promotion of certain languages may strengthen the cultural hegemony of the dominant group and weaken the language rights of marginalized groups. This theory pays special attention to the social justice dimension of language policy, emphasizing that language planning should protect the linguistic rights of minority languages and disadvantaged groups.

Although Singapore's language policy formally advocates multilingual coexistence, it essentially constructs an implicit hierarchical order in which "English is the dominant language and the mother tongue is the secondary language". This order is not only embodied in the design of the system, but also permeates the deep logic of social operation. In the legal field, for example, although the government requires public documents to be published in the four official languages (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil), the English version always has the highest legal effect. For example, in the revised Employment Act 2021,

in the event of ambiguity between the different language versions of the provisions, the English version shall prevail in the final interpretation. This provision ostensibly safeguards multilingual services, but in fact reinforces the authoritative status of English through institutional arrangements, leaving non-English-speaking groups in a passive position when it comes to understanding legal rights and interests. As sociolinguist Tan (2021) points out, "Singapore's language policy masks the hegemonic nature of English as a 'meta-language' through the rhetoric of 'multilingualism', a symbolic inclusion that essentially is an instrumentalization of linguistic diversity that serves the efficiency needs of state governance."^[12]

Types of language planning

Language Status Planning

Language status planning refers to the determination of social status for the languages in a language bank, which mainly involves language selection and is developed by the government or a policy-making body. Heinz Kloss, a famous German linguist, proposed a dichotomy of language planning research in 1969, namely status planning and corpus planning.^[13] Language status planning, also known as language function allocation, language status policy, etc., is more related to the external social environment of language, including activities such as language choice (e.g., national language, official language) and dissemination.

Singapore's language planning and language policy is an exemplary case of global language status planning, and its characteristics are highly compatible with Heinz Kloss's theoretical framework. As a microstate with a multiracial and multilingual society, the Singaporean government has achieved the dual goals of social integration and economic development through systematic language status planning.

At the level of language status planning, Singapore has adopted the strategy of functional multilingual stratification. First of all, the four official languages (English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil) were established through the Constitution, among which Malay was positioned as a symbolic national language, which not only respected the historical status of indigenous people, but also avoided political disputes caused by a single national language. English has been given the status of the actual administrative language. As the common language of cross-ethnic communication, this choice has profound political and economic considerations: maintaining connections with western economies while avoiding strengthening the cultural hegemony of any native ethnic group. In terms of language function distribution, the government has built a fine language hierarchy system. As the top language, English dominates government affairs, judicial system, higher education and business; Each mother tongue (Chinese, Malay, Tamil), as a second language, undertakes the functions of cultural heritage and ethnic identity, and implements a mandatory mother tongue policy in school education; At the same time, language communication projects such as Speaking Mandarin Campaign are introduced to integrate dialect groups into standard Chinese. This bilingual structure of English + mother tongue not only maintains multiculturalism, but also creates a unified foundation of national identity. Singapore's experience has also successfully verified the practical value of Kloss theory.

Language corpus planning

Language corpus planning generally refers to the standardization and standardization activities of language itself. The concept of corpus planning was first put forward by the famous German linguist Heinz Kloss in 1969. Together with status planning, it constitutes a dichotomy of language planning research classification. Language corpus planning mainly involves literalization, standardization and modernization. Literalization involves the creation and improvement of characters, such as the design of pinyin characters for ethnic minorities in China and the adoption of new Latinized alphabets in Turkey. Standardization aims to unify the orthography, grammar, vocabulary, etc. of the language, and is achieved by compiling dictionaries and formulating norms. In terms of writing, the Singapore government has implemented a differentiated strategy for different ethnic groups: Chinese adopts simplified characters and Chinese Pinyin, Malay follows the Rumi system, and Tamil uses Grantha characters, which promotes written communication. In terms of standardization, language management organizations, such as the Chinese Language Council for the Promotion of Chinese Language, should be set up to standardize vocabulary and flexibly standardize Singapore English. In the process of modernization, Singapore has innovated language planning, such as translating scientific and technological terms, creating new words, and digitizing multilingual teaching resources.

Discussing the sequence between language status planning and language corpus planning has always been one of the core topics to study the relationship between them. In this regard, Joshua Fishman pointed out that there are the following three situations: one is that status planning is carried out before corpus planning; The other is that corpus planning is carried out before status planning; There is also a situation where the two go hand in hand and at the same time.^[14] The three forms of interaction proposed by Fishman are all reflected in Singapore's language ecology:

1. Parallel promotion: While establishing English as the administrative language (status planning) in the early years of the nation's existence, the standardization of the scripts of the official languages (corpus planning) was simultaneously promoted, forming a dual-track system in which "English is the language of use and the mother tongue is the language of the body".

2. Status-led: After Malay is designated as the national language (status planning), its ontological planning will be gradually improved through standardized texts such as the Malay Grammar Guide to strengthen the function of national identity symbols.

3. Ontology-forced: Singlish (Singaporean English) grows spontaneously in the private sector (implicit corpus planning), prompting the government to introduce the Guidelines on Language Use in Public Places (explicit status planning), forming a reverse regulation.

Language Prestige Planning

The term “prestige” was first proposed by Uriel Weinreich in 1968, who pointed out that the value of language in the process of social development can be called prestige.^[15] Haarmann introduced the term prestige into the field of language planning in 1984 and suggested that prestige planning should be considered as a new dimension of language planning, involving different levels such as governments, organizations, groups and individuals. Prestige planning is divided into prestige related to the production of language planning (e.g., prestige of planners and policies) and prestige related to reception (value judgments of the audience about planning activities). It is not dependent on status or ontological planning, but can influence its process and determine the success or failure of planning.

The Singaporean government builds the prestige of planners through policy authority and implementation effectiveness, such as the 1979 “Speak Mandarin Campaign”, which combined with the country's modernization strategy to build a positive reputation for the Mandarin language and create a cycle of policy legitimacy. In terms of audience acceptance, English as an economic language has gained instrumental prestige through the education system and the demands of the workplace, while the mother tongue maintains emotional prestige through cultural heritage policies. Prestige planning interacts with status/corpus planning, e.g. the “Speak Chinese Campaign” to enhance the prestige of the Chinese language. Singapore has developed a “multi-layered prestige” model, with Malay reinforcing symbolic prestige and Tamil maintaining communal prestige. The rise of prestige planning in the digital realm, such as the TikTok dialect project, which reconfigures the prestige of dialects, demonstrates a shift towards multi-actor negotiation in prestige planning. Singapore's experience shows that effective prestige planning requires balancing institutional authority and audience perceptions, and maintaining a dynamic balance between linguistic tools and cultural values.

Language Education Planning

Language education planning is a kind of conscious intervention in the process of language education and language learning, which is also called “(language) acquisition planning” or “language planning in education”. Language education planning is the specific practice of language planning in the field of education, which is consistent with the goals of national or local language planning, and involves schools, universities, primary and secondary schools, as well as family education, with the main body being the education authorities, as well as nongovernmental organizations and individuals. Its responsibilities include determining the language of instruction, teacher training, community participation, the selection of teaching materials and curricula, the establishment of testing systems, the determination of financial inputs, and the selection or modification of teaching methods.

Singapore's language education planning is a key part of the national language policy, showing the systematic nature of multilingual governance. As one of the few countries whose constitution guarantees multilingual education, Singapore has established a bilingual system of English + mother tongue through careful planning, respecting multiculturalism and adapting to the needs of globalization. The implementation characteristics include: 1. The selection of instructional language has political and economic considerations, English is the administrative language and teaching medium, and mother tongue is a compulsory subject to ensure international competitiveness and ethnic cultural identity. In 2022, 15% of the education budget will be used for bilingual teacher training and teaching materials development. Second, planning and policy coordination, such as the 2011 Mother Tongue Education Review Plan, to refine the Chinese curriculum and improve the Chinese passing rate of secondary school students. Third, the embedded characteristics of society, the deep participation of non-governmental organizations, such as the Speak Chinese Campaign and the family language learning program, have increased the bilingual usage rate of families to 71%. In terms of technology empowerment, the Ministry of Education has developed the Yulin AI auxiliary system to provide personalized learning solutions and improve learning efficiency. Singapore's practice shows that successful language policy requires institutional flexibility, coordination of multiple subjects, and intelligent technical means, which provides a model for language planning with national strategic orientation, educational innovation, and social participation.

The four types of language planning (status planning, corpus planning, prestige planning and educational planning) do not operate in isolation in practice, but form an organic whole with dynamic linkage. As the cornerstone of the policy framework, status planning needs to standardize the language system through corpus planning, and rely on prestige planning to enhance the social identity of the target language, and finally penetrate into intergenerational inheritance through educational planning. Taking Singapore as an example, the success of its language policy benefits from the coordinated advancement of four types of plans:

In Singapore's language planning, the government first established English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil as the official languages from the status planning level, in which English serves as the administrative lingua franca to promote cross-ethnic communication, while the mother tongue assumes the function of cultural heritage. Then, at the level of corpus planning, the Ministry of Education set up the Chinese Curriculum and Teaching Method Review Committee to simplify grammar (such as reducing the use of traditional characters) and promote the localization of vocabulary (such as incorporating local concepts such as HDB—Housing and Development Board and hawker center) by revising Chinese textbooks and formulating Singapore Chinese Curriculum Standards, so as to enhance the practicality of the language. To further enhance the social prestige of the mother tongue, the government launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign and the Mother Tongue Fortnight campaign, using celebrity endorsements and social media challenges (such as # MyMotherTongue #) to enhance the emotional identity of the younger generation with the mother tongue. However, at the level of educational planning, despite the implementation of the bilingual education policy, which requires all students to use English as their first language and take their mother tongue,

excessive emphasis on English leads to the weakening of their mother tongue ability. This contradiction reveals the internal tension in language planning: if corpus planning fails to match the resource allocation of educational planning, or prestige planning lacks continuity, the long-term effect of language policy will be compromised.

Conclusion

Singapore's language planning and policy, as a model for the management of a multilingual society, demonstrates its unique wisdom in balancing linguistic diversity with social integration. Through the synergy of status planning, corpus planning, prestige planning and education planning, Singapore has successfully built a multilingual framework with English as the *lingua franca*, while retaining Malay (national language), Mandarin (Putonghua) and Tamil as official languages. This policy system has not only facilitated the country's economic development and international exchanges, but has also effectively preserved the cultural identity of the ethnic groups and strengthened social cohesion.

However, with the acceleration of globalization and the intensification of intergenerational linguistic change, Singapore's language policy is facing new challenges. On the one hand, the over-enforcement of the instrumental rationality of English has triggered a structural crisis in the cultural heritage, leading to the weakening of mother-tongue competence and the dilution of cultural cognition; on the other hand, the process of formulating and implementing language policy has also mapped out the complex game of social power and cultural identity. Therefore, Singapore needs to continuously adjust its policy framework to cope with these emerging challenges.

In the future, Singapore's language planning and policy should pay more attention to the dynamic balance between language tools and cultural values, strengthen the status of mother tongue education, and enhance the public's sense of identity and frequency of use of the mother tongue. At the same time, the government should also strengthen communication and collaboration with all sectors of the community to ensure that language policies are formulated in a more scientific and rational manner, and are more in line with the actual needs of the public. Through these efforts, Singapore is expected to continue to maintain its unique charm of linguistic diversity amidst the wave of globalization, and to make positive contributions to the building of a more harmonious and inclusive multilingual society.

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