

SPEECH BY DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG AT THE LAUNCHING CEREMONY OF MALAY LANGUAGE MONTH, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AUDITORIUM, FRIDAY, 2 JULY 2004, AT 5.00 PM

Mr Yatiman Yusoff, Chairman of Malay Language Council of Singapore

Mr Hawazi Daipi, Chairman of Malay Language Month 2004

Ladies and gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

I am happy to join you this evening for the launching of the Malay Language Month 2004. Events like this, which promote the use of mother tongues in Singapore, reflect the strong desire of the communities to retain the use of their ethnic languages. I am deeply encouraged by this. Learning the mother tongue will help Singaporeans to understand and access our heritage, culture and identity and bolster our confidence as a people.

CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

We must always keep in touch with our roots. As a young immigrant nation, we have done well in developing a unique Singaporean identity, but it is not as deep and profound identity as the cultures of China, India or Southeast Asia. They have experienced centuries of evolution, whereas we are only 39 years old. We must therefore draw on our ancestral cultures, to build our new Singaporean identity.

Further, Malay is the dominant language of our two closest neighbours. We have close official and commercial ties. Our peoples interact frequently with one another. Our fates are intricately linked to each other. As we co-operate more to overcome common challenges, and ASEAN economic co-operation progresses, our relationship will deepen further. Knowing Malay will become more important in helping us understand our neighbours, get along with them, and build firmer links.

However, globalisation means that we are increasingly subjected to external influences. Our people are more exposed to English, and find it more necessary to use English. Our young pick up pop culture. TV programmes, international news, blockbuster movies are in English. Many internet sites are in English, and so are books, journals and articles on many subjects. English has become an indispensable language of business worldwide. All Singaporeans have to learn it.

Because of this, the language profiles of our communities are changing. More parents are English-educated. More families are speaking English at home. In 1988, only 8% of Malay pupils in Primary One came from English-speaking homes. Ten years later, in 1998, this figure

increased to 20%. Now, it is 25%. In this environment, we need to double our efforts to keep alive our mother tongues.

PROMOTING THE USE OF MALAY

Bilingualism is the cornerstone of our education system. Our goal is unchanged – to encourage each Malay student to study Malay in school for as long as possible and to as high a level as he is capable of. To achieve this, we need to update the bilingual policy to changing circumstances.

We have introduced Malay Language B Syllabus, to help students who are weaker in language cope. At the same time, we are giving more promising students the opportunity to offer Higher Malay Language in primary, secondary and pre-university levels. We set up the Malay Language Elective Programme for Secondary School, in short 'EMAS', in Bukit Panjang Government High School, and offered the Malay Language Elective Programme or 'MLEP' at Tampines Junior College. This will nurture a group who have deep appreciation of the language, and who can contribute to the development of the language through writing, teaching and research. I hope parents will encourage their children who show interest and aptitude to apply for these programmes.

We are also refining the method of teaching Malay in schools. It is acceptable to speak bazaar Malay at home or at market place. However, we should use proper Malay for formal occasions. We encourage this by the use of standard Malay or 'Baku' Malay in schools. Students learn standard Malay grammar, vocabulary and terminology, including the standardised pronunciation system or 'Sebutan Baku'. Schools started using Sebutan Baku in the early 1990s. Since then the performance of our students in oral examinations has improved.

Strong support from the community will also encourage the Malay community to use the Malay language more widely. I applaud the efforts of the Malay Language Council of Singapore in this respect. This Malay Language Month will include activities at community clubs, institutions of higher learning and schools. The Malay Language Society of NUS is organising the 'Learning Journey' or 'Kembara Ilmu' at the National Youth Park, which is targeted at the younger generation. The various MAECs are also collaborating to organise activities. This shows the willingness of community leaders to come together for the good of the community.

CONCLUSION

The theme of the Malay Language Month 2004, 'Effective Use of the Malay Language' ('Keterampilan Bahasa Melayu'), is very relevant to the current environment in Singapore. I congratulate the organisers of the Malay Language Month, and wish you a successful campaign. I now declare the Malay Language Month 2004 open. Thank you.