

# **“The world only needs one language- the English language.”**

## **Do you agree?**

By Siow Mein Yeak (17S44)

Upon reflection on his three decades serving Singapore as Prime Minister, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew found one of his lifelong regrets: not learning Mandarin from young. In his book detailing his experiences with Mandarin, Mr Lee shared how ostracised he often felt from the rest of the Chinese locals, as he was unable to speak Mandarin with them. He wrote that language creates the ties that bind peoples all over the world. This sentiment is one that I concur wholeheartedly with. It is also one reason I largely disagree with the view that the world only needs the English language. Although it can be conceded that such a world can hypothetically exist, this world needs more than just English, because the statement is itself discomfiting. Moreover, languages create unique cultural identities and enable us to express ourselves fully.

It can be argued that hypothetically, we only need English for the world to function. As the lingua franca, English is spoken widely across the continents, and its reach is only ever expanding. Such a situation, coupled with the fact that English is known to be one of the easiest languages to learn, reinforces the possibility of an integrated, English-only world. There would be no linguistic barriers to speak of. Moreover, the implementation of a common language would result in great ease of doing business and in politics without the need for translators. However, this hypothesis insufficiently validates the statement that the world needs only English, as such an argument fails to consider the benefits that our plethora of languages brings to us.

I disagree that we only need the English language, because such a statement in itself is deeply discomfiting. It is filled with a sense of linguistic superiority and unbridled arrogance. There is nothing wrong with taking pride in one's language. Yet, such an entirely Anglo-centric and chauvinistic positioning of English on a solitary pedestal alienates originally non-English speaking peoples. Such ethnic groups are spread particularly across Asia and Africa, and form a majority over those who speak English. Naturalising them to English engenders a fundamental sense of detachment from native English speakers, as it is not the tongue of their race. Such a detachment is precisely why governments in many countries emphasise learning both English and the mother tongue, so as to connect people to their ethnic roots. Replacing all languages with just English can very possibly create a more fractured world, where we feel alienated from each other as we lose our own unique languages.

These aforementioned languages also create unique cultural identities. Each language, through its idiosyncrasies and mannerisms, provides the special traits that characterise different peoples. The Japanese, for instance, place great emphasis on honorifics in daily life, much more so than English. Close female friends are greeted with “ちゃん” (*chan*), while colleagues at work are addressed with “さん” (*san*). The Japanese are so unique due to their ordered social interaction and strict adherence to tradition, as reflected in their language. Such a social compact is a quintessential source of pride for the

Japanese. Their language has strengthened the fabric of Japanese society, by sewing tighter the ties that bind. As seen from the Japanese, languages create a whole gamut of cultures. Languages foster a sense of belonging in societies worldwide, as people feel connected to their society through their shared languages. Each language is fundamental to such a collective identity, and English is an inadequate replacement for that.

The world also needs more than just English, because having different languages provides us with the means to express ourselves more variedly and fully. We always joke about meaning being “lost in translation”. This phenomenon stems from the fact that we are often unable to fully express what we want to express in different languages. Though translation provides a workable substitute, the original language that said sentence or phrase is from has no true replacement. Mandarin has its “成语” (*chengyu*), which are sets of four characters. These sets are pithy expressions of almost everything under the sun. Yet, such concision is lost when translated to English. For instance “比上不足，比下有余” means in English that someone is not better than those who are brilliant, but is better than those who are not so bright. The difference in sentence length highlights how clumsy and contrived translations often are, and the poetic and rhythmic aspect of the proverb has just been lost in translation. This shows that English is a poor replacement for other languages. The intrinsic linguistic differences, in sentence structure or otherwise, prove how impossible it is for the sole use of English to fully express the human experience.

Hence, the world needs more than just the English language to function as beautifully and diversely as it does now. English is one of the working languages of the international community, but it cannot replace the other languages we have here on Earth. Different peoples should seek not to obliterate linguistic differences through a common language, but instead accept these differences with mutual respect. If we can do so, we thus take one more step forward in the continuation of the diverse world we live in.

**Comments:**

*Robustly and cogently argued. You could consider debunking the assumption that everyone learning English would eliminate the misunderstandings and lack of comprehension amongst the people. English will develop into regional varieties with incomprehensible accents and slangs... (we already see that now- e.g. Scottish English is quite unintelligible to many English-speaking people outside Scotland). Your examples are effective but both are from East Asia- Japanese and Chinese. More diverse range?*