

Straits Times, 18 Feb 2019, Public signs that don't carry all four official languages fuel concerns for cultural diversity (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/rooting-for-signs-of-multilingual-singapore>)

Nearly a decade ago, blogger Benjamin "Mr Miyagi" Lee heard about how Changi Airport, as well as other public agencies, had omitted Tamil on its directional signage, though the signs bore Singapore's three other official languages, and even Japanese.

Upset, Mr Lee called for the authorities to put the language back on public signboards.

"(The omission) suggests that there isn't a recognition of the need to protect the culture of people who are in the minority," Mr Lee, 49, the head of digital content at an advertising agency, told The Straits Times. He said the airport, as the first port of call for visitors, needs such signs as it sends a key message about Singapore's identity.

Well, the signs are mixed. A check by ST of 36 signs at memorials, national monuments, tourist attractions and public institutions found that about 40 per cent did not have all four official languages.

The failure to include all official languages in public signs and plaques, which suggests that Singapore is becoming more homogenised in its language use, was highlighted by former foreign minister George Yeo last month.

He gave the example of how a Sook Ching monument at Changi Beach that previously bore Japanese, as well as Singapore's four official languages, has been replaced by a plaque that is only in English.

"This is deliberately reducing our cultural genome. It is denying us of a powerful capability, a precious inheritance from the past which in fact will secure our future," said Mr Yeo at an Institute of Policy Studies conference, exhorting Singaporeans to preserve this diversity in spite of the difficulties of doing so.

"The day Singapore decides to reduce its genome so that we become homogenised, that would be a very uninteresting Singapore," he added.

Some agencies have been quietly making moves to reinstate this diversity on their public signboards.

Changi Airport now has all four official languages and Japanese on its signs at Terminal 2 and Terminal 4, which opened in 2017. But most signs at Terminals 1 and 3 still do not come with Tamil.

In Chinatown, a brown sign put up by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) that marked the Chinatown Food Street in Smith Street now bears a Tamil translation, though photos from 2009 showed that Tamil was missing then. The STB brown signs indicate tourist attractions or landmarks.

Tamil has also been added to the brown signs for Lau Pa Sat Festival Market and Merlion Park near the Esplanade Bridge, which did not have Tamil in photos taken in 2012.

The signs for the Burmese Buddhist Temple and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall in Ah Hood Road also now have Malay and Tamil translations.

In 2012, the sign for the temple had English, Chinese, Japanese and Burmese, while the sign for the memorial hall was only in English and Chinese.

But a sign for the Indian National Army monument in Connaught Drive is only in English and a sign for the Sultan Mosque is still missing Tamil.

The National Heritage Board, which is the agency behind the Changi Beach plaque, the Singapore Tourism Board and the Changi Airport Group did not respond to queries by press time.

Mr R. Rajaram, chairman of the Tamil Language Council, welcomed the inclusion of Tamil in more public signs, including those in Chinatown. "To a Tamil-speaking tourist, it conveys to him that this is Chinatown in Singapore, where there is diversity even in an ethnic enclave."

But disparities in the use of Tamil across Changi Airport's terminals seem to suggest an inconsistency, he said. The authorities can come up with a guideline to standardise policies on language use across the public institutions, he added.

Many public institutions and monuments do use all four official languages in their signage. They include the Singapore Conference Hall in Shenton Way and most public schools, which bear the Malay name at the top, followed by Chinese, Tamil and English.

This underlines the status of Malay as national language, Dr Peter Tan, a senior lecturer in the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of English Language and Literature, wrote in a 2011 paper.

In response to Mr Yeo's views, experts interviewed said a balance must be struck between pragmatism and the preservation of cultural identity.

War memorials such as the Sook Ching site at Changi Beach, for instance, warrant the use of four languages as they carry a deep meaning as public symbols of trauma and triumph, said literary and cultural critic Nazry Bahrawi.

Dr Nazry, who is also senior lecturer in humanities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, added that the four languages should also be used at heritage sites as diversity needs to be foregrounded at these sites, or at emergency exits, where safety is of paramount concern.

But it is not practical to expect this for all road signs due to space constraints, said Associate Professor Lee Cher Leng from NUS' Department of Chinese Studies.

However, given that the use of mother tongue languages is on the decline, encouraging the use of all four languages on these signs sends a strong signal of Singapore's commitment to preserving linguistic diversity, they said.

English is the most common language spoken at home, with 36.9 per cent of Singapore households who did so in 2015, compared with less than 2 per cent of households in 1957. By the late 1980s, English had become the main medium of instruction in schools.

"The depreciating use of vernacular languages has implications beyond signage. To put it bluntly, every ethnic community in Singapore today is seeing their younger generations become less proficient at using their mother tongues," said Dr Nazry.

Language historian and translator Tan Dan Feng said having more multilingual signs would expose Singaporeans to their mother tongues in their daily lives and affirm their status as "living languages" in society.

Other than tourist hot spots, he has observed that an increasing number of signs and notices in places such as wet markets or void decks are now solely in English.

In an ongoing study, Prof Lee observed that foodcourts - which started in the mid-1980s - tend to have only English stall names, unlike the multilingual signs at older hawker centres that may feature Malay, Arabic and romanised dialect names of Chinese stalls.

The use of Western names by Chinese Singaporeans, as well as hanyu pinyin rather than dialect names, is also on the rise, she added.

"(These trends) mark a decline of our rich diversity and identity," she said.

Mr Tan said increasing the use of all official languages on public signs and notices is an important and effective way to ensure that Singapore does not lose its polyglot DNA.

"In a world where most countries are seeing more linguistic diversity, it is worth reflecting whether Singapore can afford to move in the opposite direction."