



LINDA YEW

# Language can be a weapon

Truly, a language is more than just words strung together. CHEW WEI SHAN shares a conversation about how we use the languages we know.

Today, Adhiti and Mazri share their thoughts about how choice of language matters.

**Shan:** When people say “I speak Chinese”, they often mean that they speak Mandarin. As you know, there are many other Chinese languages and dialects such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, and so on. Adhiti, there are hundreds of Indian languages too, aren’t there?

**Adhiti:** Yes. But, “Indian” is not one of them. People ask me, “Why don’t you speak Indian?” I tell them that there is no such thing as “speaking Indian”. “Indian” is not a language; it is a race. There are many types of Indians from different parts of South Asia, each with their own unique language.

Then, they will say, “I meant Tamil. How come you don’t speak Tamil?”

Tamil is an official language in Singapore, spoken by more than half of Singapore’s Indians. But, it is not the only Indian language. It is not my mother tongue. There are many other Indian languages such as Hindi, Malayalam, Punjabi, Gujarati, Bengali, and so on.

**Shan:** Yes! Isn’t that like asking a Chinese person why she doesn’t speak Hokkien, when her dialect is Teochew?

**Adhiti:** Exactly. I’m Malayali, so my mother tongue is Malayalam. Malayalam is not offered in Singapore schools, so I could not learn it formally. Instead, I took Chinese in school.

## WHAT'S UP

**Mazri:** To me, all languages are equally beautiful and important! I wish everyone could see that.

**Adhiti:** Because I am Indian, people don't expect me to understand Chinese. Sometimes, I would hear Chinese schoolmates saying bad things about me in Chinese, thinking I had no clue what they were saying.

One day, in perfect Chinese, I finally replied, "Wow, you're so funny!" That really shocked them (*laughs*). From that day on, they stopped making fun of me.

**Mazri:** That happens to me too, Adhiti. People around me suddenly switch from English to their mother tongue. I do understand that sometimes, people may speak their mother tongue at home and simply feel more comfortable speaking it with friends. But... when people speak in a language I cannot understand, while I am right there... I cannot help but feel excluded, or sad that I cannot be part of their **inside jokes**. Sometimes, I even wonder if they're complaining about me.

I work at an international agency. Our staff comprises a mix of foreigners and locals. We have colleagues from all over the world. Yet, when colleagues from the same race gather, they often switch to using their mother tongue. During lunch or social gatherings, this often makes those who cannot understand the language feel left out and awkward.

**Shan:** Hmm...

**Mazri:** Sometimes, they even do this during work meetings, with colleagues of different ethnicities and nationalities seated at the same table.

Do they not realise how abrupt the shift is for our other co-workers? They are earnestly following the discussion, and suddenly, they cannot understand what is being said.

**Adhiti:** I get that at work too! On special occasions, my office likes to organise karaoke sessions. We book a KTV lounge and sing to our hearts' content. But, so many times, my colleagues choose to sing dozens of Chinese songs in a row. They are just having fun, but don't realise that for the rest of us who don't understand Chinese or didn't grow up listening to Chinese music, it just isn't fun.

**Mazri:** Yeah! Maybe they don't mean to, but it really excludes people from the experience.

You know, there's this funny thing I do. I often find myself trying to use Chinese slang in daily conversation. I'll pepper my speech with whatever little Chinese I know, like "*ma fan*" when I mean "troublesome", or "*tian ah!*" when I want to say "oh no!".

It has become such a habit that I even speak like this at home with my parents, who get very confused! (*Laughs*)

**Adhiti:** Oh my gosh! Me too!

**Mazri:** It was then that I realised, through my experiences in school and at work, "acting more Chinese" has always helped me to break the ice. Sometimes, I find that it makes people feel more comfortable around me. It helps me show others that they can be friendly and joke around with me, too.

Now, it makes me wonder. I wish I didn't have to **downplay** my Malayness and sound Chinese just to fit in.

The author did not know what it was like to experience racism here. So, she decided to learn more about it by interviewing ethnic minorities. She wrote this series of articles to share their stories with you. The people's names have been changed to protect their privacy.

**Adhiti:** Wow, that really resonates with me. I use Chinese a lot, for the same reasons as you. Many times, I become a party trick! People's jaws drop when they hear Chinese coming out of my mouth. They think it's so ridiculous and funny.

It does make me a little sad that I can speak better Chinese than Malayalam, though. Does that make me less Indian? Am I less

connected to my own Malayali roots? I wonder all the time.

**VOCAB BUILDER**

**inside jokes** (say "in-said joekez"; noun) = jokes that are meant to be understood only by some people and exclude others.

**downplay** (say "daun play"; verb) = make something seem less important than it really is.

## Let's include everyone

Language and race have a complex relationship. We cannot assume we know what languages someone speaks just by looking at them. If we would only ask, we may learn a lot about somebody's family, culture, and interests.

Adhiti and Mazri have made me think much more deeply about languages in Singapore.

Languages have huge practical benefits. They are like keys that open up whole worlds. Today, many Americans are learning Chinese to help them do business with China. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of people in China are learning English, Japanese, Korean, and other languages so that they can work in other parts of the world.

Languages are not just for work. They also help people connect — or disconnect. They can lock the door separating people. This is what happens when we thoughtlessly use a language that others do not understand.

Later in our conversation, Mazri shared that his music teacher spoke mainly in Chinese when he took violin lessons. Mazri could barely understand what was going on, but he was passionate about music and tried his best. It was just too difficult to keep up. He gave up the violin after a few years. It saddens me that he did not have a fair chance at mastering the instrument.

After listening to Adhiti and Mazri, I see how language choice matters. I must ensure that I do not make anyone feel excluded because of the language I use.



### WHAT IS EVERYDAY RACISM?

Racism means to treat some people worse than others, just because they are of a different race or skin colour, come from a different place, or have a different culture. Everyday racism is a form of racism where people say or do hurtful things without intending to be unkind. Everyday racism is also called "casual racism", although there is nothing casual about it for the person at the receiving end.

**This series is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Singapore. You can find more articles about casual racism at <http://more.whatsup.sg>.**