

Interrogating Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Ethos in the Malay National Day Rally Speech 2013

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Each year the prime minister of Singapore addresses the entire nation through the National Day Rally speech. This important speech offers an occasion to analyze the ethos of the prime minister. This paper will interrogate three specific strategies that he employs to get his project across to the audience: the appeal for identification, the exploitation of *kairos*, and the effective use of his prominent bureaucratic status and authority. These strategies help him bolster his credibility (ethos) as a public figure and thereby enact a favorable rhetorical persona.

Each year, the prime minister (PM) of Singapore addresses the entire nation through the National Day Rally speech. As the words suggest, the *rally speech* is a platform through which the state rolls out new policies and legislations, makes special connections with the people, aligns the audience's belief towards a common stance, and promotes the confidence of the people in the state leadership. The speech is important within the sociopolitical milieu of Singapore as it is a platform through which the state attenuates the asymmetrical power structure and social stratification between itself and the people, especially the citizens of Singapore. A closer study of the 2013 National Day Rally speech, particularly the one that was delivered by the current prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong in Malay, will reveal the important attributes of the discourse that renders the speech powerful. In particular, this paper will interrogate three specific strategies that he employs to get his project across to the audience: the appeal to sense of identification or commonplace, the exploitation of *kairos* (appeal to timeliness and appropriateness), and the effective use of his prominent bureaucratic status and authority. I will show how these strategies help him bolster his credibility (ethos) as a public figure and thereby enact a favorable rhetorical persona. In this essay, the meaning of ethos is taken to be "a regularized set of verbal strategies resulting in a distinctive personal image" (Hart 211). Ultimately, I argue that PM Lee's steady ethos as a rhetor helps him to get the people to be on his side and thus to incline them towards accepting what he says.

Before analyzing his rhetorical moves, it is first worth noting that PM Lee Hsien Loong exerts a built-in ethical appeal through his pre-supposed reputation, credibility, and possession of expert knowledge. He attained these through several means, such as his esteemed position as the current prime minister (which gives him the legitimate, mandated sovereignty in the first place), his family background, and his personal rhetorical history.

Since the 1959 general election (GE), it has become a tradition that Singapore's prime minister is the secretary-general of the winning party with the most seats in the parliament. Thus, PM Lee Hsien Loong, who was the secretary-general of the People's Action Party (PAP)—Singapore's ruling political party since the 1959 GE—became Singapore's third prime minister, succeeding Goh Chok Tong, in August 2004. In its first democratic general election under the leadership of the newly-sworn PM Lee in 2006, the PAP garnered more than 65% of the overall votes, secured eighty-two out of eighty-four parliamentary seats and held the office of prime minister for a twelfth consecutive term. These results show the overwhelming support and national mandate to PM Lee

and his party from the people of Singapore. PM Lee Hsien Loong's charisma and credibility as a rhetor is further bolstered by the fact that he is the eldest child of Lee Kuan Yew, who is Singapore's first prime minister, founding father of Singapore, and co-founder of the PAP. Therefore, PM Lee Hsien Loong owes his authority, trustworthiness, and high ethos as a rhetor to his father and predecessor, who is a highly-esteemed figure by the general public.

The National Day Rally speech is delivered by the appointed prime minister and broadcasted live on local television channels every year. From 2005 onwards, PM Lee delivers his rally speeches in three different languages, namely English, Chinese, and Malay; he is proficient in all three. Through his frequent public appearances, the audience has formed a sense of familiarity with PM Lee's middle rhetorical style. This familiarity, along with his good standing in the society as well as people's confidence and positive impression of his leadership competence, would naturally gravitate the audience towards his person-self as a rhetor even before he utters a word; herein lies his *situated* ethos or the "accumulation of prior instantiations of ethos in the past" (Kopp). PM Lee has indeed built his reputation as an effective leader and communicator over many years of his public appearances. This situated ethos lays the foundation of his effective speech, which aims to inform and convey knowledge and understanding to the audience. A sustained ethical appeal generated by the speech itself, on the other hand, would help a rhetor in getting his project across to the audience successfully. It is precisely to this end that I will now turn to explaining how PM Lee's invented ethos works in his discourse.

To pave the way for a more effective rally speech, PM Lee successfully establishes an intimate connection with his target audience, the Malay-Muslim¹ community, which is a minority group in Singapore, by highlighting the affiliations he has with them and thereby creating a sense of identification with the community. In particular, there are three ways in which he demonstrates these affiliations and familiarity with the Malay-Muslim community. First, delivering the speech in fluent Malay (when he is actually a Chinese) allows PM Lee to garner admiration and make the audience feel important and honored as the prime minister made a genuine effort to create a common ground and to relate to them. This establishes a sense of affiliation and special connection with the Malay audience such that he can convey his message to them more effectively and convincingly. Therefore, the closeness and proximity with the audience, which have already been established even before he started to deliver the content of his discourse, will only compel the listeners to side with PM Lee throughout the speech.

Additionally, an equally significant strategy to create an affiliation with his audience is to demonstrate his awareness of Malay culture by highlighting a social concept that tugs at the heart-strings of the Malay-Muslim community. In particular, he started his speech by lavishing praise on the Malay community for possessing the "gotong royong" spirit, a complex social concept distinct to and cherished by the Indo-Malay community ("Prime Minister's Office"). This term, in short, means a mutual co-operation among the people in a society to achieve a shared vision or goal. PM Lee commends the positive quality and uses honorific terms when alluding to their hard work, "passion and enthusiasm" to "[help] the needy" ("Prime Minister's Office"). The praise, which is directed to the audience's singular quality or virtue that they subscribe to, serves as an affirmation of their values or, as Mark Garrett Longaker and Jeffrey Walker put it in their book, an "ideological perspective [that helps the] community come together" (188). By praising the tangible, outward manifestation of the sophisticated, unique concept of "gotong royong" embraced by the Malay community, PM Lee's depicts himself as a perceptive, broad-minded, and genuine speaker who has a good will to relate to them as an audience. The enactment of these positive qualities would ultimately compel the audience to regard PM Lee favorably and hence to accept what he says.

Lastly, PM Lee makes a personal appeal as he shares his firsthand experience and engagement in Malay culture with the audience, particularly the time when he visited "An Nur Mosque for

breaking of fast event during Ramadan” (“Prime Minister’s Office”). Breaking of fast during the month of Ramadan in the mosque together as a congregation is a commonplace experience for the Malay-Muslim society in Singapore. Such a unique experience that PM Lee and his audience mutually share is able to make the audience imagine themselves as, to borrow from Kenneth Burke’s term, *consubstantial* or “substantially one with a person other than himself [the rhetor]” (21). In this effort, it appears to the audience that PM Lee becomes just like one of them and that he deserves their acceptance and trust. From the three instances discussed above, we can draw a unifying conclusion; presenting himself as a member of the Malay community who embraces their culture and traditions, PM Lee is able to win their trust and establish a bond with the Malay audience. This way, the audience would gravitate towards him and be more deferential and receptive towards what he would say later in the speech.

Apart from creating identification with the audience, PM Lee also appeals to timeliness and appropriateness (*kairos*) so as to create a caring and benevolent persona. *Kairos* has been a popular topic within the study of writing and rhetoric. James Kinneavy, a writer on the topic of *kairos* in relation to rhetoric and composition, defines *kairos* as “the *appropriateness* of [a] discourse to the particular circumstances of the *time, place, speaker, and audience* involved” (emphasis added, 84). PM Lee is very much aware of the rhetorical situation that he is in and by that, he leverages upon *kairos* to craft rhetorical serendipity.

It is, first of all, worth noting that the National Day in 2013 coincides with the Hari Raya Aidilfitri,² an important religious festival for the Malay-Muslim community. This is an important contextual background that needs to be considered in analyzing the intertextual strand of the speech or the bigger picture in which the speech was situated. Just before he started the content of his speech, PM Lee tops off the joyous mood of the festivities and thereby sets the right tone by trumpeting the completion of “three new mosques . . . [and] 18,000 additional prayer spaces [by 2016]” (“Prime Minister’s Office”). The mosque, a place of worship for Muslims, has a central importance for the Malay community as their culture and traditions are very closely related to and deeply-rooted in Muslim practice. This special bond with religion, for instance, may not garner the same reverence in other homogeneous groups. By making use of the opportune moment to promote religious affairs (i.e., by promising to build and upgrade mosques), PM Lee signals a great commitment to the Malay community and lays the first stone to boost the audience’s confidence in him as the speaker and in the competence of state leadership. Not only does he use such an annually recurring religious event to rally his audience, but he also devotes himself to giving more attention to issues which are highly relevant and urgent to the Malay community at the present moment; the ideas of here and now allow PM Lee to make a strategic appeal to appropriateness and timeliness.

First, he displays appropriateness in his speech by assuring the target audience of his speech (the Malay community) that the government knows their concerns and apprehensions. In fact, to do this, PM Lee implicitly convinces the audience that their concerns are valid as the collective Singapore community also feels the same. For instance, PM Lee purposefully acknowledges and reproduces their concerns by employing the mnemonic “5Ps,” which stands for *perumahan* (housing), *penjagaan kesihatan* (healthcare), *pendidikan* (education), *pekerjaan* (jobs) and *peluang* (opportunities) (“Prime Minister’s Office”). This apt abbreviation for his five points, “5Ps,” will most likely ring a bell with the audience for it is a more practical and downsized version of the well-known Singaporean jocular mnemonic of “5Cs” (cash, car, credit card, condominium, and country club), which describes Singaporeans’ idealized way of life and their materialistic obsession; when put in juxtaposition, “5Ps” constitutes essential needs, while the latter mere wants. However, rather than accentuating the very antithesis of these two ideas, he fittingly gives the Malay audience a sense of commonplace and uniformity with other Singaporeans as they “share the [same] concerns” (“Prime Minister’s Office”). The warrant is this: Such an invocation of a

sense of sameness through shared concerns gives his audience an assurance that their worries are not groundless and unjustifiable as the majority of the population of Singapore is also plagued by the same anxieties.

Moreover, he also exploits timeliness in his speech by exhibiting a great awareness towards his audience and displaying a genuine will to tackle urgent issues, which had specifically burdened the Malay community for some time. The same mnemonic “5Ps” that he employs creates a state of perturbation or a sense of crisis, which calls for and necessitates an urgent action to resolve these problems. Taking advantage of the kairotic moment presented by the pressing issue of education, for instance, he then makes a clever move by announcing the long-awaited policy, which allows the use of “Edusave accounts,” or student’s personal fund for education contributed by the government, for students who attend “madrasahs,” which are schools based on Islamic teaching (“Prime Minister’s Office”). Like the mosques, these schools, which specifically cater to the Malay Muslim community, have a special significance to the community as in addition to academic subjects, such as mathematics and science, madrasahs also teach religious subjects to impart Muslim values to the students. By addressing the issue of education that is important and germane to the Malay community, PM Lee exploits the timeliness and immediacy (kairos) of the occasion. Moreover, PM Lee displays himself as a generous and perceptive leader who is committed to the Malay community and its problems. This ultimately helps him create a favorable persona for public inspection and ultimately informs the audience about the new policy in the most compelling and persuasive manner.

It has been observed that identification with the audience and an appeal to kairos can build the speaker’s ethos. To boost his ethos further, Prime Minister Lee also attempts to bridge the apparent gap that separates the representation of the state (*speech producer*) from the people (*speech receiver*) by adopting certain linguistic styles, such as his use of pronouns, and employing an appeal to the citizens’ sense of patriotism throughout the speech. A rally speech should create a mutual understanding and build people’s trust in the government’s capability to make legal decisions. The nature of such a National Day Rally speech causes the speaker, having been granted supremacy by the state, and the people to have an imbalance of power and hierarchical relationship; the more domineering figure with the technical expertise and knowledge stands on a higher ground and imparts knowledge to an audience who naturally becomes less expert and appears as lay individuals. As an effort to close this division of power between the government and the people, PM Lee employs two rhetorical strategies which enable him to make a special connection with the audience.

First, to unify the rhetor’s person-self “I” and audience’s separate “you” entity, PM Lee shows a careful choice of words in his speech. His use of first-person plural pronoun in “*We* should all feel a sense of ownership and belonging here and Singapore is *ours*, not only to own, but to build on and be proud of” (emphasis added) gives the listeners a sense of inclusivity as the use of the plural pronoun would compel the audience to think of the government and the people as one entity (“Prime Minister’s Office”). The deliberate use of this stylistic feature can be discerned as an attempt to bridge the gap between the government and its people by building a sense of solidarity between the two and instilling trust in the speech receiver.

In addition, leveraging on this sense of oneness and uniformity (with other Singaporeans) as discussed earlier, PM Lee then appeals to their sense of patriotism or love for the country. He delegates an important role to the people in contributing Singapore’s future success when he asserts that “[e]ven though the government . . . will do more, *individuals* must still give their best [emphasis added]” and must possess a “fighting spirit” (“Prime Minister’s Office”). This implies that Singapore’s success is a function of both the capabilities of the government to carry out effective governance and the diligence of the people to perform their roles; the formula for the success of

the country lies equally in the government and the people. This assertion represents a clever move to imbue the audience with a sense of obligation to reciprocate the government's effort. The onus for ensuring Singapore's economic success is partially transferred to the people by virtue of their being part of the nation. Such a responsibility will ultimately create a sense of mutual co-operation between the government and the people and thereby narrow the distance between them.

In the final analysis, PM Lee rounds off his potent speech and ends it on a high note as he further boosts his ethos as a speaker by triumphantly explaining the abstract, intricate concept of meritocracy. He did this by drawing upon the success stories of two Malay individuals, Dr. Rufaihah Abdul Jalil and Muhammad Riduan Zalani, who have performed exceedingly well in the society. PM Lee explained to the audience that Dr. Abdul Jalil is an accomplished senior research fellow at a prestigious institution, Yong Loo Lin Medical School in National University of Singapore, who contributes and volunteers actively in the Singapore community. Muhammad on the other hand, is a local musician who preserves the Malay culture by bringing, in PM Lee's words, "the rhythm of kompang and other Malay percussions to countries like France, Australia and the US" ("Prime Minister's Office"). The two individuals are the living proof that the members of Malay community can still excel in their career despite the growing competition from foreign workers. In his celebratory tone, he makes it clear and convinces the audience that these can be achieved realistically on the individual level. Thus, by utilizing the ethos of these two figures, PM Lee encourages his audience to imitate and follow these prominent individuals, who were once just like any of them. These anecdotes bring a sense of closure to his speech and leave the audience with a powerful allusion, which would move and inspire them to make the right decision for their own life. Most importantly, the audience would see PM Lee as a modest and humble leader as he shines the spotlight on other people and diverts attention away from himself at the end of his speech; such is the imprint that he leaves on the audience and that becomes a situated ethos in his future speech.

PM Lee's forte in the speech lies in his ability to project a favorable image in the eyes of his Malay audience through an amplification of his pre-established persona in the public arena. Throughout the speech, PM Lee maintains a steady ethos as he makes an intimate connection with the audience and appeals effectively to kairos. These attributes compel the audience to naturally gravitate towards him since the start of the speech. As an afterthought, the credibility or ethos of a speaker, as perceived by the audience, is a prerequisite to successful discourse because without this quality, even the most compelling and skillful appeals to logos and pathos would fall on deaf ears and thereby become fruitless. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that ethos may be the toughest type of appeal to establish. A speaker must maintain the image that he or she intends to establish throughout the whole discourse because a single flaw—a tinge of bad taste, a glimpse of illogicality, and a flash of unkindness—would negate the speaker's earlier persuasive attempt.

Notes

¹ The religion of the majority of Malays in Singapore is Muslim.

² Hari Raya Aidilfitri is a celebration that marks the end of the fasting month, known as Ramadan. This celebration, welcomed with much joy and goodwill, lasts for the entire month.

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