

THE LANGUAGE POLICY OF MALAYSIA: A FORMULA FOR BALANCED PLURALISM

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Malaysia is a real multi-ethnic country. In terms of territory, it is divided by the South China Sea with Peninsular Malaysia on the west, and Sabah and Sarawak on the east on Borneo Island. In both Peninsular and Borneo Malaysia, with a population of about 13 million people, there are altogether no less than 70 languages spoken. In terms of their geographical origin, these languages can be categorised into indigenous (*bumiputera*) and non-indigenous (non-*bumiputera*). In terms of language family membership, they are multifarious.

The indigenous languages belong to two different stocks: the Austroasiatic and the Austronesian. The former comprises the aboriginal languages (except for that of the Jakun and the Temuan which is really Malay) and there are about 20 of them altogether. These languages can be considered as moribund as the number of their speakers is very small. The 1969 Census shows that the one with the largest number of speakers is Semai (15,506), while the one with the least number is Mintil (40).

While the Austroasiatic languages are found only in Peninsular Malaysia, the Austronesian ones are located in Peninsular Malaysia as well as in Sabah and Sarawak. In the former, the languages are Malay, Javanese, Kerinci and Acehnese. Of these, it is only Malay that is really native and has an overall spread, while Javanese, Kerinci and Acehnese are recent immigrants, the first mentioned coming from Java and the latter two from Sumatra. Besides, their geographical distributions are confined to certain areas only - Javanese in one or two districts in Selangor and Johor, Kerinci in the district of Hulu Langat in Selangor, and Acehnese in the district of Yan in Kedah.

In Sabah and Sarawak the languages are more numerous. No definite figure is available. Census reports cannot be fully relied on because they reflect a tendency to lump together groups which speak heterogeneous languages while at the same time considering a single language as a group consisting of several languages. This situation is brought about by the fact that no census of a linguistic nature has been conducted on these two states.

The census has been made complicated by the nomenclatures given to the various groups. A single language group may by popular usage be referred to by three nomenclatures. An example is the Malay-speaking group which is always referred to by three names: Malay, Brunei, and Kedayan. In actual fact all the three are Malay as the language the people speak is Malay in its various dialectal forms. The reverse procedure is illustrated by Bajau which really is a subfamily of languages rather than a single language.

The examples given above are taken from Sabah. Similar processes occur in Sarawak. Hence, as at the moment one cannot say how many languages there are in

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Sabah and Sarawak. My own estimate is that the total number for both these states is about 50.¹

The non-indigenous population is just as diverse. They belong to stocks as divergent from one another as they are from the Austronesian and the Austro-asiatic. What is generally referred to as the Chinese language in Malaysia is in fact not a single language but rather a family of languages. There are at least ten members of this family in Malaysia. The same applies to the groups that have their origin in India and Sri Lanka.

In addition to the above there are also Thai-speaking people on the Malaysia-Thai border. These people are either Thais in terms of ethnic origin or Malays whose first language is Thai rather than Malay, due to the process of assimilating the ethnic Malays (who are Thai citizens) to the Thai culture and way of life.

The languages mentioned above are all defined by language community and area of spread. Over and above these languages are Arabic and English which do not have specific communities but which are acquired in the school. Arabic is a medium in the Islamic religious schools whose attendance is almost entirely Malay, while English is defined in the National Education Policy as the second most important language - second only to Malay - and should be taught in schools as a second language.

Malay has always been the lingua franca in intergroup communication. In the colonial days this lingua franca was applied only to situations where communication did not necessitate sociolinguistic sophistication or finesse such as in the vendor-buyer relationship in the market places, or between the employer and his servant who is of different ethnic group than himself.

The language of the government in the colonial days was English. Malay was used to a limited extent in certain states. However, public notices and important documents were rendered in four languages - Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil - and in four different scripts.

This quadrilingual situation was not only a reflection of the composition of the three main ethnic groups in the society which formed the substructures (Malay, Chinese and Indian), each different from the other, plus a superstructure represented by a superimposed culture of the colonial rulers, but also that of the education system. At that time there was no single uniform education system as such. In fact there were four types of schools using four different languages and four different sets of curricula, viz. the English school, the Chinese school, the Malay school and the Tamil school.

The first two mentioned provided education at the primary and secondary level, while the latter two were confined to the primary level only. Hence, children of the Malay and Tamil schools who were desirous of getting a secondary education had to enrol in the English school after at least four years of primary education in their vernacular school. They were placed for another two years in the English primary school before they could proceed to the secondary level.

The English school was the school mainly for those of high-class birth and those with money. The former category comprised the children of the Malay elites, while the second comprised those of the Chinese tin miners and businessmen and the Indian merchants. On the surface of it this type of school appeared to cut across ethnic boundaries but in reality about three-quarters of its population were Chinese. This disparity had gradually produced a new type of structure in the society, with the Chinese not only dominating the business but also the

professions, and this had had far-reaching consequences in the form of racial disputes and upheavals, especially in the decade after Independence.

The existence of the English school implied the meeting together of the various races in Malaysia. If that was so, then it only brought a small fraction of the various races together. Even in the decade after Independence when the four heterogeneous types of education were still in implementation, and in the process of being phased out, the statistics in the English school according to race was still ominously disproportionate.

The statistics for 1967-68 show that only 8.6% of the Malays were in the English school, while 89.2% were in the Malay school. Among the Chinese 14.3% were in the English school and 84.9% in the Chinese school. As for the Indians, in terms of population, they were better represented, as 28.3% of them chose to go to the English school and 66.8% to the Tamil school. But then the Indians comprised only 10% of the population, while the Malays and the Chinese were almost about equal in number.²

The English school was a passport to social mobility and it opened a wide avenue to an unlimited number of professions. It has thus increased the degree of differentiation that had already characterised the components of the Malaysian society. A state of imbalance had emerged in terms of educational opportunities, economic power, professional expertise, employment and ownership. Such was the state of affairs when Malaysia achieved her independence in 1957, and the situation continued long after that.

The drafters of the Malayan Constitution took the greatest consideration of the situation in drawing up the various policies which all aimed at evolving Malaya, now Malaysia, into an integrated nation. One of these is the National Language Policy which is provided in Article 152 of the Constitution.

The Policy established Malay or Bahasa Malaysia as the sole national language of the country from the time of Independence. But for official purposes it provided for the use of English side by side with Malay for ten years after Independence. It was not spelt out how this bilingual policy was to be implemented, but in actual practice English was still very much in use in government administration (not to mention private bodies) for the ten-year period given. It was only in 1967, with the Revised National Language Act, that Malay was made the sole language for official purposes in Peninsular Malaysia, except in the law courts where English until today is still the operational language. It was only at the end of 1981 that Malay began to enter the courts, but only in trials in the lower courts. In the Higher Court, English is still used today.

In Sabah and Sarawak which gained their independence within Malaysia in 1963, the same principle of familiarisation over ten years was granted before Malay could be made the sole official language. Sabah managed to keep to the target date, but Sarawak has overshot it. Today, the state is officially still bilingual. In 1980, the Sarawak State Legislative Assembly passed a Bill which had sought to go fully monolingual with Malay at the official level, starting from September 1, 1985.

At the education front, the four heterogeneous types of school already mentioned continued to exist until 1970. Beginning from that year the schools using Malay (the national language) as medium of instruction were re-named 'national schools'. The process of making this language the main medium of instruction at the secondary and tertiary level had already begun in the late 1950s. The English, Chinese and Tamil schools all became 'national type schools', hence National Type (English) School, National Type (Chinese) School, and National

Type (Tamil) School. The 'national type' concept gave the schools the right to teach in the language of their choice, while at the same time making the national language a compulsory school subject. Hence, in the National Type (Chinese) School, for example, the medium of instruction was Mandarin, but Malay and English were compulsory subjects.

The concept of 'national type' was to be a stop-gap measure as far as the National Type (English) School was concerned, because at the same time, starting from 1970, the process of phasing out English as the language of teaching school subjects began. It was all a step-by-step process beginning with the Primary One level, which meant that children entering school in January 1970 were taught entirely in the national language. Those immediately senior to them went through a bilingual program, in which certain subjects were taught in English and others in Malay. The subjects were placed in a vertical scale according to facility and convenience of implementing the national language policy in them. This meant that those subjects with the least problems with technical terms and which had books already available in the national language were the first to be taught in the national language. Hence, Civics, History and Geography were among the first to be taught in Malay while Mathematics and the science subjects like Physics, Chemistry and Biology were among the last. However, the schoolchildren who were already in the English secondary school at that time went through their entire school education in the English language.

This phasing out was only completed at the end of 1982. Hence, the Higher School Certificate examinations taken by students at the end of 1982 were entirely in Malay.

However, the students of the Arts stream who did not have to do any of the science subjects were ahead of their Science stream counterparts by three years. All the papers for the Arts subjects taken at the Higher School Certificate Examinations at the end of 1979 were set in the medium of the national language.

The whole process of changing over the medium of instruction from English to Malay in the former English schools took 12 years. It has appeared to be a very long time indeed if one takes into account the date of Independence and commencement of the National Language Policy. It could not have been faster due to the historical background given. The principle of familiarisation, though slow, has proved to be successful in bringing about the desired goal. And when the people were given this system of education there was no alternative but to accept. Hence from 1983, there is no longer in existence the National Type (English) School. All the prestigious schools in the past which were English schools are now national schools.

At the university level, universities established after 1970 teach their courses mainly in the medium of Malay. With the older ones, the University of Malaya for instance, the situation is still bilingual. The phasing out in such universities is in line with that of the English school, although it cannot be denied that there had been courses in such universities, particularly the University of Malaya, that were conducted in Malay, even from the 1950s.

As for the other national type schools, there is no provision in the Language Act or National Education Policy for evolving them into national schools. The government has assured the Chinese and the Indian public from time to time that there is no intention on its part to do so. As the Tamil school has never gone beyond the primary level, there only exists the National Type (Tamil) School at the primary level. For their secondary education, pupils from this category of school have to go to the national school. Because of the different