

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

Malaysia is not an instance of a melting pot of races and creeds. It is rather a pluralism, a multi-ethnic society. The National Education Policy and the New Economic Policy have sought to make this pluralism more balanced, such that the job-race and wealth-race identification can be erased. And the basis for the National Education Policy is, as we have seen, the National Language Policy. In this respect, the National Language Policy seeks to assimilate the people through a main language, such that they will not only communicate with ease with one another but that they will understand one another's values through a common language.

It cannot be denied that values are better understood from the speaker's own language than via another. As such, Chinese values inherent in their own language should be comprehended via the Chinese language, not through the national language. Hence, the other races, and in particular the Malays, should learn to speak the Chinese language. But that is another milestone in the process of bridging the gap between the various races of Malaysia. The *Report of the Cabinet Committee on the Implementation of the National Education Policy (Jawatankuasa Kabinet Mengenai Pelaksanaan Dasar Pelajaran Kebangsaan)* (1980), has recommended that POL classes in the national school be opened to the other races and not confined to the first language speakers only. At the same time it also recommends that the national type school, be it the Chinese or Tamil school, should also open its door to races other than its own.

Although assimilation is its goal, the policy provides for differentiation. Each major group is allowed to be educated in its own language, even if it is only at the primary level. Each group is given a chance to learn its own language in the schoolroom. The fact that there are a lot more languages of Malaysia that have not got their POL classes does not in any way indicate that the law or the system does not allow it. Of the indigenous languages (other than Malay), only Iban, spoken in Sarawak, has had primers for teaching the language at the primary level. The others have not. This is due to the fact that these languages have never been put into writing, and the ones that do have a written tradition, only entered the tradition a few years back. Though Kadazan, spoken in Sabah, has already been put in writing and two newspapers in Sabah have pages specially written in Kadazan (besides English and Malay), there has not appeared any primer yet for teaching the language in the school. In terms of publication, Iban seems to be far better off than Kadazan or any other language in Sabah and Sarawak, although most of the books published are on folklore and the Iban customs.

The other minority languages which are non-indigenous do not appear to seek their right in the POL classes, most probably due to the pragmatism of their speakers. Two languages (Malay and English) to be mastered by the children from the primary level seem to be sufficient for them to cope with. And to children of these groups, both the languages are not their own. Yet, to go up the educational and the social ladder, they have to master these two languages. Even the Chinese and the Tamil POL classes in the school are not that much in demand by the very children who are supposed to request for them. One often reads in the newspapers of the deterioration of these classes - meaning the dwindling of their size and the lack of interest among the pupils. The interpretation that is relevant here is also pragmatism.

However, pragmatism is not the only factor that has caused the unpopularity of the POL classes, especially among the Chinese and the Indians of the urban areas. Although there are no statistics to back up this point, it is a fact that this category of Chinese and Indians are no longer conversant in their

languages. In fact, these languages cannot in the strictest sense of the word be termed their mother tongues because they never learn to speak them. Their first language or mother tongue has been English, or Malaysian English. This goes back to the colonial days when the English language was first acquired by the generations before them as second language, but was passed on to them as first language. Furthermore, as said earlier, both the Chinese and the Indians are not homogeneous groups. For an Indian who is not a Tamil, Tamil is another totally new language. Hence, school life is made easier by concentrating on the national language and English. After all, the principle of equality in later life can only be realised if one has fulfilled the major requirements of the education system which is conducted in the national language.

When the National Language Policy gives every language its rightful place in the society, and everyone will not be prevented from using any language in contexts other than the official one, we can justly say that underlying it is the principle of equality. However, the interpretation of the provision given above depends on attitude and more so on which side of the ethnic coin one is placed. To the Malays and the *bumiputera* people, that the choice fell on Malay was the most natural thing. It is the language of the soil. Of all the *bumiputera* or indigenous languages, Malay is the most advanced in terms of its function as language of administration, high culture, literary knowledge and religion. It has had a written tradition which dates back to the seventh century, although evidence of written Malay of that century is found only on inscriptions of the Srivijaya Kingdom, discovered on Bangka Island and in Southern Sumatra. The tradition must have continued, but as the practice at that time was to write on lontar (a kind of palm) leaves it could have been that these were destroyed with time.

Malay flourished as the language of administration during the Srivijaya rule of the Malay Peninsula and the archipelago (7th-13th century A.D.). It continued in this function in the time of the Malacca empire in the 15th and 16th century. It had always been the language of the courts of the kingdoms of the Malay archipelago.

At the time of the colonisation of the Malay Peninsula by the British, Malay was already a fully vital language which was not confined to the peninsula but was spread far and wide in the whole of the archipelago. It was not just the language of the royal courts or the ruling class, but was also the language of commerce. Barter trading carried out in the ports appeared to have been conducted in this language, whence emerged the various forms of pidgin Malay.

The spread of Hinduism and Buddhism in the early centuries to the Malay archipelago from India, was done via the Malay language. Later, the Muslim missionaries saw fit to use this language and not any other in Islamising the natives of the peninsula and the islands. Even the teaching of Christianity, which came after Islam, to those who had not been converted to Islam was done via the Malay language.

None of the other indigenous languages has come even half way compared to Malay in terms of vitality, not to mention the number of speakers, be they first or second language speakers. As mentioned earlier, none of these languages had had a written tradition before the Second World War. The non-Malay *bumiputera* do speak some form of Malay even if they do not go to school to acquire the standard variation. It has been the only tool by which they can reach one another if they are from different subgroups.

If the *bumiputera* people were content with the choice of the national language, the non-*bumiputera* were not. At the onset of Independence, the latter group demanded a multilingual policy, with all the four languages - Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil - on equal footing. This could have been the real manifestation of the principle of equality. Had this type of multilingualism been granted and implemented, it would not have worked. The principle of equality so desired would have been a mere shadow of the ideal or a figment of the imagination. It would not have been practical for many reasons.

In the first place, there is the question of the implementation of the policy. Was it going along the lines of the Swiss model? Or was it going to be like the one eventually adopted by Singapore? The Swiss model would not have been practical because the racial groups were not divided along geographical lines. The Singapore model, however, is in practice a monolingual one. Administration in the Republic is carried out only in one language, and that is English, though the national language is Malay (as it is the language of the national anthem). No doubt, Singapore has taken steps to encourage her people to acquire Mandarin, but this is in essence not much different from the Malaysian policy of encouraging the various groups to learn languages other than their own.

Moreover, if Mandarin and Tamil had been given official status, it would have meant for most Malaysians learning two entirely different languages using different scripts. And, as mentioned earlier, the Chinese and the Indians themselves are not homogeneous within their separate groups. Unlike Malay, Mandarin and Tamil have not pervaded the Malaysian society. They are confined only to their own subgroups.

English could have brought educational advancement, but it would not have fulfilled the principle of equality. No doubt it cut across ethnic boundaries, but its spread was circumscribed by the urban boundary lines, and thus the language remained only at the higher strata on the social and economic ladder. Although, as said earlier, there are Malaysians, especially those of Indian and Chinese origins, who now speak English as their first language, they never form a community as such. In other words, they are sprinkled all over the place, although this is confined to cities like Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Other than that, English does not have a first-language community.

Superficially it would have been fair to choose a language which is not identifiable with any community - fair and square. However, traditions die hard. The Malays, as a race, would rather die than lose their language to a foreign one. The motto *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* (Language is the soul of the nation) is deeply ingrained in them. This is not to say that they are against learning a foreign language. In fact they are quite open-minded in this matter, having accepted Arabic and English. But making English the national or the sole official language would have made them lose face, especially in the eyes of Indonesia which had taken precedence in elevating the language as her national language and language of integration (*bahasa persatuan*). So why unseat Malay from its natural soil? Why not give it back the status it enjoyed in the period before the coming of the Westerners?

Besides, the national language not only has a utility role; it also has a symbolic function. It exudes emotion - one that gives the feeling of pride in and attachment to one's country. This is true with the Malays and perhaps with the other *bumiputera* groups. It may not be so with the others. But at least there is a community that is emotionally attached to it, and this community happens to be a major one.

It is doubtful whether English could have exuded such an emotion. It is foreign-based. There is no sizable community which can call it their own, and except for the Eurasians who are in the minority, no community can claim a primordial link with the English people. In fact, at the time of Independence it was still considered a colonial language.

English has always played only the utility role. It signals higher studies at home and abroad. It is also a passport to employment in the private sector and in international affairs. It means a wealth of knowledge in an unlimited number of fields. All these have remained in the consciousness of the Malaysians and more so of the progenitors of the National Language Policy. Hence, it has the status given to it of second most important language.

The principle of equality also applies to the implementation of English in its ascribed status. English used to be accessible to certain categories of people only - the aristocrats and the rich. A large majority of the population was denied acquisition of this language. The National Education Policy has rectified this imbalance. Each and every schoolchild in Malaysia now, be he enrolled in the national or national type school, is given the opportunity to learn the language right from the moment he enters school. In theory, English has now reached out to the masses. The principle of equality requires that it be so, even if the child grows up to be one who will not leave his upstream village where knowledge of English is superfluous. He may not have any use for the language but he has been given the same opportunity as that given to the others.

The effort to balance up the situation is also seen in the student intake at university level. The government has ruled that the student population of all the universities should reflect the population of the whole country. This means that if the population of the *bumiputera* constitutes 50% vis-a-vis 50% others, then the percentage has to be applied when recruiting new students entering the university at the undergraduate level. This type of balancing according to population is not required at the graduate level studies.

The balancing up of the student population and the country's is not taken per faculty or department but on the total population of the university. Hence, in practice at the faculty level there is still a racial imbalance because the science-based faculties are largely Chinese-populated while the arts and the humanities (except the Faculty of Economics) represent a concourse of largely *bumiputera* students. However, this type of imbalance is considered a half-way remedy to the situation of the past where only 20% of the total university population were *bumiputera*. This wide differential of *bumiputera* versus non-*bumiputera* attendance in the universities reflected the end result of the education policy prior to the implementation of National Education Policy 1970, in which a pass in English in the School Certificate Examinations was compulsory, and as we have seen English was not as easily accessible to the *bumiputera* as it was to the non-*bumiputera*.

The English language factor was also responsible in the channelling of students into different educational streams. The arts and the humanities by tradition had had literature on them written in the national language, although the sum total of the published materials is still low. On the other hand, the science subjects and mathematics had all the time been taught in English and, as mentioned earlier, the changeover of the medium of education to Malay at the school level for the science subjects was later than that of the arts stream. Hence, until today the compartmentalisation of society is still obvious at the university level.

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