

Language Policy Changes in Malaysia: Progressive or Regressive?
Dr. Selvarajah Tharmalingam

International Islamic University Malaysia
selva@iium.edu.my

Introduction

Language policy changes in Malaysia have taken many twists and turns throughout its 55 years of independence. English language was the major language in Malaysia prior to its independence from the British in 1957. Then, in post-independence Malaya (now Malaysia), Bahasa Malaysia (BM), stipulated to be the national language of Malaysia under Article 152 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Article 152 was amended in 1971 where it clearly stated that the status of BM may not be questioned, and any amendment to Article 152 can only be made with the consent of the Conference of Rulers. The amendment also required all government bodies to use BM as their principal official language. When ‘The National Education Policy’ was established in 1971, it brought about the gradual change in the use of the English language in the Malaysian education system. All national schools would have to use BM as the medium of instruction for all subjects, except English. This decision has caused the standard of English language to decline. Asmah (1992) points out that the role of English language diminished, and it was taught only as a subject in its capacity as the second most important language (Asmah, 1992).

The establishment of BM as the national language and the reduction of the role of English in Malaysia had a direct impact on Malaysians. The drastic decrease in the amount of exposure to English for the students was deemed a setback for Malaysia in its ambition to achieve its Vision 2020 objective (David and Govindasamy, 2003). The government realised that in order for Malaysia to move forward towards globalisation, Malaysians must be proficient in the English language. Hence, a reconsideration of the role of the English language in Malaysia

was necessary for the future development of the country and its people. Beginning January 2003, English began to be used as the medium of instruction for the teaching of Mathematics and Science subjects in Standard One, Form One and Lower Six in all government schools in Malaysia. By 2009, the first batch of students had sat for public examinations *vide* English for Science and Mathematics.

The decision to teach these vital subjects in the English language triggered substantial reaction from all levels of the public, and split the nation into several factions, each lying at various points between the totally against and totally for continuum. Many felt that the decision to reintroduce English as a medium of instruction had been hastily taken, and that more studies should have been conducted before implementing the policy. However, the government opined that since most science-based courses at colleges and universities were highly dependent on reference materials that were published in the English language, it was critical for students to be competent in the language. The government also felt that competency in the English language was essential for the economic and technological development of the nation.

Background

Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has constantly been involved in language policy changes. In the early years of the pre-independence era, the changes in the language policies were necessary to chart the future of the young nation. These changes were deemed to be fundamental in establishing Malaysia as a multiethnic and multicultural nation. The Razak Committee Report (1956) recommended the establishment of “a national system of education acceptable to the people of the federation as a whole which will satisfy the need to promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, having regard to the intention of making Bahasa Malaysia the national language of the country while preserving and sustaining

the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country”. This recommendation was incorporated in its entirety into Section 3 of the Education Ordinance 1957, which came into force on June 15, 1957.

The Education Ordinance 1957 was amended based on the Rahman Talib Report (1960). Then, on January 1 1962, the new Education Act 1961 was implemented. The amendment stated: “The education policy of the federation is to establish a national system of education which will satisfy the needs to promote the cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, with the intention of making Bahasa Malaysia the national language of the country.” With this, Chinese and Tamil primary schools were allowed to co-exist with national schools, but all secondary schools were required to use the national language.

As a result, English language was ‘relegated’ to the position of a second language. The use of the English language was so limited that it led to an eventual decline in English language proficiency among Malaysians. Due to the over-dependency on a single language, Malaysians became vulnerable to global changes. Thus, in early 1990s, the government under the leadership of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad realised that Malaysians would be left behind and many are not able to meet the challenges of globalisation if they were not proficient in English. In admitting that the English language was fundamental for the future of Malaysia, the government knew that a drastic change in language policy was inevitable.

The government’s plan to change the medium of instruction to English in the teaching of Science and Mathematics was first disclosed to the press in 1995. The disclosure triggered massive opposition from all quarters, particularly from the Malays and the Chinese. However, the government stood firm with its decision. Then, on 19th July 2002, the Cabinet announced officially that the teaching of Science and Mathematics *vide* English (PPSMI) would be

implemented in all fully-aided government schools beginning from January 2003. Although this decision did not bode well with many parties, the policy was eventually implemented in 2003 with Mathematics and Science being taught in English in Standard 1, Form 1 and Lower 6. However, PPSMI lasted only for a decade. In 2011, the government decided to discontinue PPSMI and replace it with a new policy called '*Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia dan Memperkukuhkan Penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris*' (MBMMBI) or in English it is known as 'To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and to Strengthen the English Language'. The government opines that the new approach in the teaching of Science and Mathematics can uphold Bahasa Malaysia, strengthen the command of English Language and boost students' capability in mastering Science and Mathematics which are vital for the nation's future.

The decision to revert the policy triggered substantial reaction from all levels of the public, and split the nation into several factions, each lying at various points between the totally against and totally for continuum.

Many felt that the decision to reintroduce Bahasa Malaysia in national schools and Mandarin and Tamil in vernacular schools as a medium of instruction had been hastily taken, and that more studies should have been conducted before implementing the policy. The public also lamented that it was a sheer waste of public funds as billions of ringgit were already spent to implement PPSMI. The parents were also worried that the frequent changes in language policy would affect their children's education. Some even blamed the government that their children were used as a guinea pig. At the same time, the main stream media highlighted the issue and praised the government's move as excellent. Contrastingly, the online news portals lambasted the

government's move as totally absurd. Hence, this study aims to investigate whether the government's decision to revert the policy is a progressive or regressive move. The study also aims to gain an understanding of how public perception, as a social and discursive practice, works within the discursive order of the mainstream and online media. Thus, the study seeks to determine whether there are any vested parties using media discourse as coercion to force the members of the public (specifically, newspaper and online portal subscribers) to accept the new policy. If coercion is detected in the news reports and letters, it may reaffirm and substantiate the claim that media discourse can be used by the ruling elites or others in power to determine the course of the new policy.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design to investigate discursive practices in the mainstream media in Malaysia. Wodak's "discourse-historical" approach is used to examine how social relations, identity, knowledge and power were constructed through media discourse. The corpus for investigation is collected from three different newspapers: *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star* and *The Sun* and three online blogs: *Malaysiakini*, *Malaysian Insider* and *Malaysia Today*. In this study, the media reports and letters to the editor are approached not as the exclusive products of journalists and editors, but as a discourse constituted by certain conditions of possibility. The study concentrates essentially on lexis, and occasionally draws on a few other functional linguistic features when vocabulary fails to address the issues raised. The study uses a corpus of 169 news and 151 letters and comments from the six media sources (three mainstream newspapers, three online news portals) published from July 2009 to January 2012 (refer to Appendix 1). The media sources are chosen based on their circulation and popularity.

Findings

The findings based on the views of the public in the letters to the editors of all six media sources in this study show that 70.9 percent (more than two-thirds) supports PPSMI and appeal to the government to retain it. While 29.1 percent (less than a third) opposes PPSMI and suggest that MBMMBI is the best way to chart the future of Malaysia. This indicates that most Malaysians are in favour of PPSMI. Their main reason for supporting PPSMI appears to be the fact that the English language is a global language; therefore, it is vital for the future generation of Malaysians to be proficient in the language. In contrast, those who oppose PPSMI mainly argue that the position of BM must not be compromised. Most of them point out that it is against the law to use the English language as the medium of instruction in Malaysian schools as it contravenes Article 152 of the Federal Constitution which states that BM is the official language of Malaysia. Although the government had intensified the campaign to support the MBMMBI policy in the mainstream media, it failed to take into account the voices of the public. People of all walks of life wanted a say about the policy, with some agreeing while others disagreed. This study discovered that the majority of Malaysians who had written in the *Letters to the Editor* section of the newspapers and online portals wanted English language to remain as the medium of instruction for both Science and Mathematics.