Conceptualization of Nationalism through Language -
An Analysis of Malaysian Situation

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Abstract

Malaysia is a multiethnic society with people of many religions and languages. Ethnic diversity and polarization among the young has made the creation of a sense of national identity not only
important but also urgent. After independence, the government drew up a National Language Policy to inculcate and nurture national consciousness among the diverse ethnic groups by promoting a common curriculum and a common language across the different types of schools to foster national unity and national identity.

Bahasa Malaysia, the national language is used as the medium of instruction in national schools while in national type primary schools; it is taught as a compulsory subject. However, it is unclear if the use of the national language has had an impact on the formation of a national identity among Malaysians. A research study was conducted to compare the impact on two different groups of Malaysians (aged greater than 45 and less than 30). The reasons for the focus on two different age groups will be explained. This paper will discuss the results and describe what patriotism and a sense of national identity means to these two groups of Malaysians.

**Introduction**

Malaysia is a multiethnic society with diverse race, religion and languages amongst her 27 million people. Such ethnic and linguistic diversity has made the creation of a sense of national identity more complex. After independence, several policies, such as the 'National Education Policy' (NEP) and the 'National Language Policy' (NLPol), were enacted to promote a common curriculum across the different types of schools so as to foster national unity and national identity.

**Bahasa Malaysia**, (literally the Malaysian language) was Malay and became the national language and the medium of instruction in national schools. However in national-type schools vernacular languages like Mandarin and Tamil were the medium of instruction but only at the primary level, i.e. the first six years of schooling. In such schools both Bahasa Malaysia and English were taught as compulsory subjects. The idea of using a standard curriculum and mandating the study of the national language after independence has been recognized as occupying an important role in establishing fundamental attitudes and images of national identity among the younger generation and it is hoped that these will form the core values which they will carry over into adult life.

**National Language and Nation Building**

Nation building is essential to national unity, vital in multiracial and multilingual countries. Cheah (2002) in his book, 'The Making of a Nation,' defined nation building as 'both economic progress and socio-political integration of a nation.' If there is no strong binding nationalism, multiracial nations are inclined to polarization and competition especially along ethno-religious lines (Nazrin, 2007).

Although Malaysia has enjoyed Independence for 50 years, there is still a certain degree of separation and polarization among its multi-racial inhabitants. The policy of preferential treatment for Malays, known as the New Economic Policy, has contributed to this (Burton, 2007).
The main aim of this policy was to narrow the income gap between wealthy Chinese and poor Malays and indigenous people, known as bumiputra or "sons of the soil", by giving the latter preference for university places and state jobs. The policy has to some extent succeeded in eradicating poverty among Malays but has been accused of leading to an informal apartheid (Burton, 2007).

The adoption of the Malay language rather than English as the language of instruction in state schools in the 1970s led Chinese and Indian families to place their children in vernacular or national type schools so as to preserve their native language. The overwhelming majority of students in state primary schools or national schools today are Malays. At one time soon after independence Malaysia's national or government schools were mostly racially integrated, now they are largely segregated (Kissel, 2008).

**Language in a Multiracial Society**

Language is not only an important element in communication in a multiracial society like Malaysia but it is also the main marker determining the membership in an ethnic group and the loss of language identity is tantamount to the lost of ethnicity (Gothom, 2008). Although the learning of a vernacular language by the minority groups in Malaysia is undeniably important (Oo, 1991) it is also essential to have a national language as it has a major role in fostering socialization and creating national unity.

This is clearly seen in Uganda which does not have a national language. When Ugandans travel a few kilometers away from their home district, they find it difficult to communicate. English becomes the only lingua franca and that too if they had gone to school. Ugandans thus become strangers to fellow Ugandans in their own country (Wandega, 2008).

**Civil Unrest and Language Policy Around the World**

Many incidents of civil unrest in different parts of the world have demonstrated the importance of having a sound language policy to achieve national unity. Based on a research conducted by Gothom (2008) on the problem of language in border provinces of Southern Thailand, language is an important issue in any ethnic conflict. Gothom (2008) advocated that language issues, like religious issues, can be the driving forces behind ethnic mobilization against the established order perceived as unjust.

There are many examples addressing the failure of language policies across the globe. For example, when Pakistan achieved its independence, Urdu was spoken by 7% of the population, while Bengali and Sindhi was spoken by 56% and 12% of the population respectively. Clearly, the choice of Urdu as the national language favored some groups and alienated others. Such a language policy became the main driving force behind the secession of East Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh.

**Electoral Advantages and Subsequent Unrest**
Gothom's research also pointed out that if a language policy favors the majority, it can help in winning an election. For example in Sri Lanka, a Sinhalese party proposed Sinhala as the only official language, winning a competitive election but leading ultimately to Tamil grievances and eventually to the fight for an independent Tamil state. Therefore, an unsound language policy directed at delivering a short-term electoral advantage can become a long-term disaster for the country.

**Policy of Accommodation**

In contrast, India and Singapore have handled the national language issue with sensitivity. The creation of states with certain linguistic homogeneity has helped to diffuse some ethnic problems in India. Although more than 75% of the population of Singapore is Chinese, *Bahasa Melayu* (the Malay language) is accepted as the national language and English as the de facto official language. This language policy in Singapore has been successful in creating stability and a sense of fairness.

**Name of the National Language in Malaysia**

In Malaysia however, even the term to describe the national language has been contested. Although Bahasa Malaysia has been acknowledged as the national language in the country's constitution, it has undergone three phases of name change and is labouring under a fourth one (Oo, 1991). They are *Bahasa Melayu, Bahasa Kebangsaan, (national language) Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Baku* and more recently, back to *Bahasa Malaysia*.

The shifting terminology provides an insight into the development of Malay nationalism over the years. The spirit of Malay nationalism, as reflected in the use of Bahasa Melayu, (Malay language) was used in the pre-independence and early post independence years. It was consolidated with the promulgation of the term Bahasa Kebangsaan (National Language) in the post independence and the pre-NEP years. However, it seems to have tapered off with Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian Language) during the NEP era, when the concern was with other dominant issues such as the eradication of poverty and socio-economic restructuring. Bahasa Baku (Standard Malay) was the term used in schools in 1992.

According to Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin, the previous Information Minister (2007), Bahasa Malaysia will again be the official term used to refer to the national language. The Cabinet made a unanimous decision in April 2007 to revert to the term Bahasa Malaysia as it was felt that this would help inculcate a sense of belonging for all citizens irrespective of race. Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin in an interview with a local daily newspaper, *The Star* said, 'The Malay language belongs to Malaysians of all races and not just the Malays. The term Bahasa Malaysia would instill a sense of belonging.'

The term Bahasa Malaysia was introduced by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's first prime minister to inculcate the sense of a Malaysian identity. Such a move was generally accepted and no one asked for a change until Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim became the Education Minister in 1986. He dropped the term Bahasa Malaysia for Bahasa Melayu and it has remained that way (Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin, *The Star* 2007).
Datuk Seri Zainuddin added,

'But now, we feel we should go back to the original term. By using the term Bahasa Malaysia, a psychological barrier would be removed, not just for Malays but also other races. The Malays, for example, must not see Bahasa Malaysia as a language used (solely) by themselves. If Malays truly want to promote the language regionally or globally, they should not be worried if others use it for religious reasons such as their books and sermons. Similarly, non-Malays would also not see the language as a Malay language but a language that belongs to them.'

The former Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim (2007) echoed this role of the national language and supported the name change as the move was designed ‘…to show that the language does not belong to just one race. This is for national unity.’ The former Transport Minister Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy (2007) too supported the decision when he said, 'The term Bahasa Malaysia is more appropriate as it will build a greater sense of nationalism for all Malaysians.' Another Prime Minister, the fourth who ruled for over twenty years Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (In-Won Hwang 2003: 249) once explained,

'Bangsa Malaysia means people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia and accept the Constitution. To realize the goal Bangsa Malaysia, the people should start accepting each other as they are regardless of race and religion.'

Impact on the Education System

Malay as the national language has had an impact on the education system in Malaysia. The generations of Malaysians who lived in the urban areas before Independence and during the early days after independence were English educated.

After the implementation of the National Language Policy, a new generation of Bahasa Malaysia-educated Malaysians was born. As a result, there seems to be a consensus today that the standard of English in this country has dropped. At present with the rapid internationalization of the Malaysian economy and the rise of globalization, there is greater emphasis on the English language. There is a clear divide between the English and Malay educated populace in terms of proficiency in these respective languages.

The Role of and Competence in English

The English educated generation is now in their early fifties and sixties. They are the mothers, fathers, grandparents and probably the teachers of the Bahasa Malaysia educated generation today. As these two generations are living side by side, how would the different language education systems influence their sense of patriotism? Does the use of a national language aid in nation building and help build national unity?

Friendship Patterns, Biases and Prejudices

Santhiram (1999) conducted a study on the friendship patterns among students in some Malaysian secondary schools. The results revealed that there was a high level of polarization
among the students and the students were using racial and ethnic distinctions extensively in their relationships. Among the many reasons given, the lack of proficiency in the national language (Bahasa Malaysia) was one of the main factors that influenced their choice of friends in schools.

This issue developed because although Bahasa Malaysia has become the lingua franca between the Malays and the non-Malays in this multiethnic society, non-Malays in the urban areas often prefer English or their mother tongue to the national language (see David, 2008).

In addition, even though Bahasa Malaysia is the official language in the education system and required for entry into the public (government) tertiary institutions, English is the medium of instruction in private universities. Therefore, the non-Malay may learn the national language as the lingua franca but not use it much with non-Malays and even with English educated Malays.

Social Mobility and Economic Integration through Proficiency in the Language of the Majority

Based on the results of a research conducted by Milani (2007) in Sweden, "proficiency in the majority language is an inevitable prerequisite of social mobility and economic integration." The majority language in the case of Malaysia is the national language (Bahasa Malaysia) as more than 60% of the population in Malaysia is Malays. Therefore, given the complexity of the national language ideology in Malaysia, it is unclear if the emphasis on the use of the national language has created exclusionary effects and ideological boundaries between the Malay native speakers and the non-native speakers. More importantly for the purpose of this research, is the question—will Malaysians become more united and more patriotic by using the national language?

This Study

This study is conducted to compare the impact national symbols like language have had on establishing patriotism and national identity between two different groups of Malaysians (aged >45 and <30).

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