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# LANGUAGE POLICY IN MALAYSIA: REVERSING DIRECTION

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ABSTRACT. After Independence in 1957, the government of Malaysia set out on a program to establish Bahasa Melayu as official language, to be used in all government functions and as the medium of instruction at all levels. For 40 years, the government supported a major program for language cultivation and modernization. It did not however attempt to control language use in the private sector, including business and industry, where globalization pressure led to a growing demand for English. The demand for English was further fuelled by the forces of the internationalization of education which were met in part by the opening of English-medium affiliates of international universities. In 2002, the government announced a reversal of policy, calling for a switch to English as a medium of instruction at all levels. This paper sets out to analyze the pressures to which the government was responding.

KEY WORDS: Bahasa Melayu, economics, English, language modernization, language planning, language policy, language reversal, politics and nationalism, science and technology

## INTRODUCTION[1]

In the heyday of post-colonial language planning, Malaysia was one of the countries that enthusiastically accepted the arguments of planners and set about to build up its national language. Once independent of British colonial rule, it chose to reduce the role and status of English and select one[2] autochthonous language, Bahasa

[1] This paper is an adapted version of an earlier paper published in the proceedings of an international conference on "Integrating Content and Language: Meeting the Challenge of a Multilingual Higher Education." 2004. Edited by Robert Wilkinson, Maastricht University, The Netherlands.

[2] The focus on Bahasa Melayu and English does not mean that there are no other languages, for this multiethnic nation also has Mandarin and Tamil and a host of other minority languages, guaranteed equal opportunity under Article 152 of the constitution (Asmah, 1979: 11).

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Melayu,[3] as official medium of government and education. The changes in the role and status of the two languages over the next half century can be explained by politics and nationalism, economics and science and technology (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997: 154; Martel, 2001: 35) which have exerted varying degrees of influence. It culminated in a reversal of language policy, the reinstatement of English as the dominant language of knowledge and intellect in the field of science and technology.

## Approach to Language Policy and Planning

Ho and Wong (2000: 1) suggest that language policy making and language-in-education planning should be dealt with as two interrelated activities.[4] In explaining these terms, they quote Halliday (1990) who defines the terms as, ''formulating policies, getting them adopted and making provision – primarily educational provision – for ensuring that they are carried out.'' This disagrees with Kaplan and Baldauf who try to distinguish the impact of both aspects on varying sectors by stating that ''language planning broadly is a function of the government, since it must penetrate many sectors of society. Language-in-education planning, on the contrary, affects only one sector of the society – the education sector'' (1997: 122). In the Malaysian context, and probably elsewhere, it is not useful to examine the two sectors of government and education separately. The Malaysian government has a strong hold on education: any major change in language policy has always needed approval at the government level.

Some scholars in Malaysia argue that the initiatives in 2002 by the government to change the medium of instruction in the universities and subsequently in schools should not be regarded as a change in language policy because it did not depend on legislative action. This depends on a definition of language policy as laws and regulations pertaining to the use of languages (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997: 3). But Spolsky claims that

[3] At independence, the government of Malaysia, then called Malaya, chose Malay or Bahasa Melayu as its national language. During that period of strong nationalism, the government did not feel the need to change the name of the language. Later, the racial tensions of the sixties spurred the government to rename the national language as Bahasa Malaysia, the language of Malaysians (Asmah, 1992: 157) Presently, these two terms are used interchangeably: Bahasa Melayu to signify that it is the language of the Malays and Bahasa Malaysia to signify that it is the language of Malaysians.

[4] See also Fishman (1977: 36).

language policy exists even where it has not been made explicit or established by authority. Many countries and institutions and social groups do not have formal or written language policies, so that the nature of the language policy must be derived from a study of their language practice or beliefs. (Spolsky, 2004: 8)

In the Malaysian case, the decisions made about language and the nation are "top-down" for they are "policies that come from people of power and authority to make decisions for a certain group, without consulting the end-users of the language" (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997: 196). Even though they ignore opinions from the population affected, it is not the goal of this paper to criticize the decision but rather to understand its background.[5] Rather, given the new policy that has just been initiated, the aim will be to understand the underlying reasons for the government decision, considered as "problem-solving" (Rubin & Jernudd, 1975: xvi). What problems did the government believe would be solved by this decision? For major changes in language policy to take place effectively, "government and bureaucratic structure is important" (Spolsky, 2004: 15). Kaplan and Baldauf note that such a change is

. . .an activity, most visibly undertaken by government (simply because it involves such massive changes in society), intended to promote systematic linguistic change in some community of speakers. . . .The reasons for such change (is) . . .to move the entire society in some direction deemed 'good' or 'useful' by the government. (1997: xi)

The analysis will be based on the premise that "language planning cannot be understood without reference to its social context" (Cooper, 1989: 3), which echoes a statement by Ferguson that, "All language planning activities take place in particular sociolinguistic settings, and the nature and scope of the planning can only be fully understood in relation to the settings" (Ferguson, 1977: 9). "'Sociolinguistic setting' should be interpreted to include anything that affects language practices and beliefs or that leads to efforts at intervention" (Spolsky, 2004: 15).

## Post-Independence Language Policy: The First Drastic Change

In the years after the ending of the Second World War, former colonies took diverse, sometimes contradictory routes in adopting language policies for the establishment of national identity when they

[5] This does not detract from the importance of later moving on to "aggressively investigate how language policies affect the lives of individuals and groups who often have little influence over the policymaking process" (Tollefson, 2002: 4).

achieved independence. Some retained the language of the former colonial powers in an official capacity, others set out to limit its space and minimize its impact on the development of the native language as the official and national language of the nation.

The African nations provide a concrete example of the former process. Bamgbose describes the contradiction in the African context by stressing that:

> Attention has been drawn to the fact that the logic of postcolonial policy is maintenance rather than change. While post-independence governments appear to be making language policy, most of the time they are only perpetuating colonial language policy (Bamgbose, 2003: 422).

There was discussion of the value of adopting indigenous languages as official or national, but strong counter-pressure for maintaining the metropolitan languages.

> This inheritance situation has meant a futile struggle between change and continuity, with the latter usually gaining the upper hand. In almost all African countries colonized by Britain, English remains an official or co-official language (Bamgbose, 2003: 422).

This was even more true of former French (Bokamba 1991) and Portuguese (Vilela 2002) colonies.

In contrast, Malaysia, focused, like a number of other countries, on the essential "educational agendas of nation-building, national identity and unity. . .." (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004: viii) through a drastic change in language policy. In Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu was selected as the national and the official language of the nation (Gill, 2002: 37), and in parallel, the role and status of English were radically reduced. From being the sole medium of instruction in the education system during colonial times, English was relegated to being taught in schools as a second language; in fact in the rural areas where there was almost no environmental exposure to the language, English was virtually a foreign language.

## Selection of Bahasa Melayu as the National and Official Language in a Multiethnic Context

Malaysia was and still is a multi-ethnic nation. At independence in 1957, Malays were the dominant ethnic group (close to half of the total population), the Chinese (just over a third) and the Indians, 10% of the population. Even though in demographic terms the

percentage of Malays was minimally larger than the other ethnic groups, it was their political power and the fact that they considered themselves as *bumiputera* or "sons of the soil" in contrast with the other ethnic groups who were of immigrant ancestry, largely from China and India, that gave them not only the symbolic but also the concrete power to influence decision-making on language and nation.

Shortly before independence, in 1951, the British government set up the Barnes Committee to conduct an in-depth study of education in Malaya. The committee recommended that Chinese and Indians be encouraged to give up their vernacular schools and opt for schools which had Malay as the only oriental language taught. The goal was "that the ethnic minority groups gave up their mother tongue education in favour of the study of the Malay language in the primary school level, but eventually in favour of the English language at the secondary and tertiary levels" (Yang, 1998: 31).

The committee further recommended that priority in funding for elementary education should be given to the National Schools which used Malay as the medium of instruction (Yang, 1998: 30–32) Mother tongue education was considered an "unreasonable public expenditure" (Yang, 1998: 34). The British promoted the use of Malay because it was the mother tongue of the dominant ethnic group in the country.

After independence, the government of Malaya adopted the Education Ordinance of 1957 based on a report by a committee formed in 1955 to make recommendations for an education system best suited for an independent Malaysia (Asmah, 1979: 14). This committee was chaired by the then Minister of Education, Abdul Razak bin Hussain, and subsequently the report became known as the Razak Report. In contrast to the Barnes Report, the Razak report supported development of mother tongue education and vernacular schools. This is clear from the terms of reference for the committee which reads as follows:

> To examine the present Educational policy of the Federation of Malaya and to recommend any alterations that are necessary with a view to establishing a national system of education acceptable to the people of the Federation as a whole which will satisfy their needs to promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, having regard to the intention to make Malay the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country (Report on the Education Committee, 1956: 1)

At the same time, it was considered vital for the nation to work towards a single national language for the multi-ethnic nation. Asmah (1987: 65), one of Malaysia's pre-eminent sociolinguists describes the ethnic and nationalistic reasons for the selection of the national language lucidly. Herself a Malay, she wrote that

> 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 *bumiputeras* or indigenous languages, Malay is the most advanced in terms of its function as language of administration, high culture, literary knowledge and religion.

There was another factor that provided the impetus for the switch in language policy to Bahasa Melayu. This was the strong link perceived between medium of instruction in schools and existing economic and social opportunities. In the former colonial system, English schools were located in urban areas and were mainly attended by non-Malays and a few Malays who came from the elite. In contrast, Malays in the rural areas attended Malay medium schools (at least for the primary levels). English had already become the language of economic opportunity and social mobility and this situation resulted in "an identification of a racial group with a particular type of vocation or industry and hence its identification with wealth or poverty" (Asmah, 1987: 63).

This led to a high degree of frustration amongst the Malay nationalist group. They felt aggrieved by "the fact that political and economic power are concentrated in the hands of those who speak the more favoured language" (Kelman, 1971: 35). Those who spoke the favoured language (English) were non-Malays – largely Chinese and Indians who had professional mobility in the urban areas, as well as a small number of elite Malays who also attended the English-medium schools. To rectify this felt social and economic imbalance, the Malays believed that the institution of Bahasa Melayu as the national language and its establishment by law as official language would provide them the educational and administrative capital which would lead to its development as a language of higher status. Making their language official would provide the Malays with linguistic capital and economic opportunity which would lead to social and professional mobility.

The Chinese and the Indians did not offer much resistance. This was because the Malays used the issue of citizenship as a bargaining tool. Where before citizenship was granted to non-Malays only by right of birth, in the post-independence period, a non-Malay could apply for citizenship "provided he or she met with the three

stipulated requirements: residential, good conduct and language'' (Asmah, 1979: 10). As Asmah frankly elaborates, ''To put it crudely, the institution of Malay as the national and official language ... was a barter for the acquisition and equality of citizenship for the non-Malays'' (Asmah, 1979: 11).

Having won this language battle and passed laws making Bahasa the national and official language in the domains of education and administration, over time, the Malays started to feel frustrated to see their language, which was such a strong symbol of national and ethnic identity, progressing at a very slow pace with regards its implementation in the education sector, particularly in the field of higher education.

This was reflected in the language conversion of the oldest university in Malaysia – the University of Malaya. The conversion began in 1965 and as an interim measure a bilingual system was adopted – Bahasa Melayu for the Arts subjects and English-medium for science and technology. Gradually, the bilingual system became completely monolingual, using only Bahasa Melayu. In 1983, after eighteen years, all subjects including the sciences were taught in Bahasa Melayu in all public universities (Gill, 2004: 142).

During the early years of the slow implementation of Bahasa Melayu as language of education, the issue became an explosive one. This culminated in a black day in Malaysia's history, May 13, 1969, the one and only time when racial riots took place. After the racial riots in 1969, ''there was a strict and rapid implementation of a national language policy, based on the belief that, if the status of the Malay language was not upgraded, the political and economic status of Malays would never improve and national cohesion would not be achieved'' (Gaudart, Omar and Ozog cited in Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997: 197). One of the main outcomes of this frustration was a memorandum that was sent to the government calling for the establishment of a public university that used only Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the ''National University of Malaysia,'' was established in 1970. After this, all other universities were required to use Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction, in keeping with the National Education Policy.

The mission of the university states that,

> The need and demand for this University is borne out of Malay awareness and sensitivity to ennoble Bahasa Melayu in the country as well as to enhance its economic value/prestige. (translated version of the Strategic Plan, 2003: 17)

An analysis of the semantics of the mission statement reveals the nationalistic strength with which the linguistic aspirations were held by the Malay intellectuals. The verb associated with Bahasa Melayu is *mendaulatkan* 'to ennoble' a verb normally only used in relation to royalty. In Malay culture, and in the nation, the King is held in the highest regard. In the hierarchy, at the pinnacle of the highest order is God, followed by the Prophet and then followed by the King. Therefore the verb *mendaulatkan* has been used to regalise and stress the sacredness with which the language is viewed. This portrays the strength of the feelings that Malay intellectuals had towards the language and the mission of the university.

It was one thing to make Bahasa Melayu official, but this status decision brought with it the need for corpus planning. A crucial element in the implementation of a language policy was the need for original or translated materials in the language. Gonzalez (cited in Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997: 200) argues in the Philippine context that until a language has been intellectualized or cultivated, which is best done at the tertiary level in universities, school based programmes can only reach a limited plateau. For Bahasa Melayu to be taken seriously as an intellectual language and to gain educational capital, it needed to be modernized and scholars had to be encouraged to write or translate specialized knowledge into the language. Modernization was then the first challenge.

## The Modernization of Malay

To appreciate the challenges Bahasa Melayu faced in this process of modernization, it will be appropriate to refer to the history of the language. Like so many other languages in Asia, it had up to the 19th century, a "cognitive system ... associated with a traditional culture, substantially agrarian based, resting on feudal foundations (Tham, 1990: xvi). To fill the major gap, the government established in 1959, two years after independence, a language agency, *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (Institute of Language and Literature, Malaysia) as a statutory body vested with the authority and charged to develop and enrich the national language, to promote literary growth and creative talents, and to publish books in the national language (Hassan Ahmad, 1988: 33).

Two major language management activities were carried out by DBP: corpus planning and promotion of the social status or role of Bahasa Melayu (Hassan Ahmad, 1988: 32 & 33). One of the more

well-known activities was "The General Formula for the Coining of Terminology in Bahasa Malaysia," coining scientific and technological terms in Malay. The government set up a team of Malaysian and Indonesian language[6] planners and academicians, including scientists who held a total of six joint meetings over a period of 16 years from 1972 to 1988 to pursue this activity (Hassan Ahmad, 1988: 38). The development of terminology – about half a million new words had been developed by the mid 1980s – was considered one of the most significant achievements in language planning in the region, showing strong government support in modernizing the language in the post-independence period.

This was a phase, which not only Malaysia experienced, but that many other post-colonial nations went through. It was very much more challenging for nations which did not have a scientific tradition. In Asia, these included countries that have had a colonial history, such as Sri Lanka, which has assigned official functions to Sinhala and Tamil, and the Philippines which has developed Tagalog-based Filipino into a national language. For these countries to attempt to begin with the process of modernization and to maintain it required crucial political support for the high level of funding needed. For example for the years 1991–2000, RM 38 million was spent on *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* to modernize and enhance the role and status of Bahasa Melayu (Gill, 2004b: 15).

In spite of this effort, after 40 years of the legislation and implementation of Bahasa Melayu in the education system, and all the efforts at modernizing it, 2002 brought a drastic shift again in language policy.

## 40 Years Later: Drastic Reversal in Language Policy

In 2002, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, made the startling announcement that science and mathematics subjects will henceforth be taught in English not only at tertiary levels but also during the first year of primary schooling (Mahathir, 2002: 1). The Ministry of Education recommended to the Cabinet that the teaching of science and mathematics in English be restricted, in 2003, to the first primary year one, the first second-

[6] Both Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Indonesia being based on Malay, collaboration in language planning including standardization of spelling was important (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003: 91).

ary year and the lower six (which is equivalent to the first year of the 'O-levels'), and eventually implemented at all other levels.

Many were surprised at this decision, made without discussion with the universities, which provided the strongest resistance when the change in policy was first initiated more than 10 years ago, in 1993 (see Gill, 2004a, for further discussion). To explain it, we need to unravel the influence of globalization on language planning and policy. This is an age where economic considerations and the knowledge economy and science and technology impact strongly on a nation and, in this case, clearly overrode traditional considerations of politics and nationalism on language policy.

## Reasons for the Changed Policy

### *Influence of Globalization and the Knowledge Economy on Selection of English in the Domain of Science and Technology*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s there were emerging changes in the developmental phases of the world brought on by globalization. Alvin Toffler (1980) delineates the changes that civilization faces in the form of waves – the First Wave, the Second Wave and the Third Wave. He says,

> The dawn of the new civilization is the single most explosive fact of our lifetimes. It is the central event – the key to understanding the years immediately ahead. It is an event as profound as the First Wave of change unleashed ten thousand years ago by the invention of agriculture, or the earthshaking Second Wave of change touched off by the industrial revolution. We are the children of the next transformation, the Third Wave. (Toffler, 1980: 25)

The third wave is here and it is the age of information, the knowledge age. In this age of a knowledge economy there are two main challenges that Malaysia faces. The first is the challenge of ensuring that the nation possesses the necessary human resource capability, asking whether the existing quality of language capacity meets the needs of the nation. The second challenge arises out of the knowledge and information explosion and its implications for language policy.

### *Knowledge Economy: Implications for Human Resource Capability*

For the first challenge, it would be relevant to refer to the report by the National Brains Trust on Education (2002). The National Brains Trust is a committee made up of established and experienced members of Malaysian society from the fields of education, politics, economics and non-governmental organizations. In its

report, it refers to Vision 2020, Malaysia's blueprint for the achievement of industrialization status in the year 2020, which states that:

> Malaysia has one of the best education systems in the Third World. But for the journey that we must make over our second generation (to 2020), new standards have to be set and new results achieved.

The report goes on to explain the many reasons why new standards have to be urgently set and new results expeditiously achieved:

> The P-economy[7] demands a brawn-intensive, disciplined workforce. The K-economy demands a brain-intensive, thinking, creative, innovative and disciplined workforce. Malaysia today has a world-class workforce for the P-economy. But we have a poor workforce for the K-economy. Unfortunately, with the rise of the K-economy, a global transformation that cannot but gather pace, there has been a fundamental structural shift whereby economic value will increasingly come from knowledge-intensive work and increasingly less from physical production (although this will remain important). The shift from a poor K-economy workforce to a world-class K-economy workforce has to be rapid and dramatic. There is little time to lose. (A Report on the National Brains Trust on Education, 2002: 1)

### *Knowledge and Information Explosion: Implications for Language Policy*

For the nation to achieve industrialized status and for it to develop knowledge workers who are able to innovate in the field of science and technology, access to knowledge and information in the field of science and technology is crucial. ''It is an established fact that the progress in science depends on the accumulation of a written record of all previous science; that is, science requires great information storage and retrieval systems'' (Kaplan, 2001: 11). It is these storage and information retrieval systems that Malaysians need to access and therein lies one of its major challenges.

The problem arises because of the successful implementation of a nationalistic language policy over a period of two decades. As a result of this nationalistic policy, there is a generation of school and university graduates educated and fluent in the national language. The converse side of this equation is that it is a generation who are not equally competent in the English language. Therefore it was imperative during this period for information to be accessed in Bahasa Melayu, requiring a major program of translation from English into the national language.

[7] P-economy is for a production-oriented economy, with labour-intensive production and low technology; k-economy is the term for a knowledge-based economy.

*Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* and later the National Translation Agency (ITNM) were actively involved in these activities of translation and publication of original works in Bahasa. But unfortunately, the translation process progressed at a slow pace. According to Hj. Hamidah Baba, executive officer of the National Translation Agency (ITNM), a full time translator can only translate 5–8 pages a day, while a part-time translator can manage to translate a maximum of three pages a day (Hjh. Hamidah Baba, 2001: 7). Despite the efforts taken to develop translation methods and to speed up the translation process, there was no way to keep up with the number of books that needed to be translated.

The following figures reflect the slow pace of translation and publications in Bahasa Melayu. From the setting up of the Translation Section of *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* in 1956 up to 1995, a total of 39 years, it has translated and published 374 books. Of this, 191 were books in the pure science, applied science and social science fields As for public universities, up to 1995, the six universities have published a total of 168 translated books amongst them (Mohd. Noor Hj. Salleh, 1995: 3 & 4). Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the university whose aim was to encourage publications in the national language, published a total of 106 books in Bahasa in the field of science and technology from 1971 to 2003 (Katalog Buku Penerbit UKM, 2002).

How do these numbers of translated and written works in Bahasa Melayu compare with the output of scientific publications in English? The iron grip of English is clearly reflected by the following: ''there are over 100,000 scientific journals in the world and this number is increasing at the rate of 5000 articles per day adding to the 30 million existing'' (Bilan cited in Martel, 2001: 51). It is very clear then that the translation activities did help Malaysian society to access a tiny percentage of books in Bahasa Melayu but the proliferation of knowledge in English increases at such an explosive rate that translation cannot possibly keep up.

*The Contrast with Japan*

Malay intellectuals often look to Japan as a nation which has managed the process of industrialization successfully through its own national and dominant ethnic language – Japanese. It is often referred to as an example of success achieved without needing the English language and therefore along parallel lines, they call for the maintenance of the national language, Bahasa Melayu, in Malaysia's

own aspirations towards industrialized status. This is done without realizing that Japan had a massive head start, as far back as the 19th century in developing translation activities and plans for accessing and advancing information in the field of science and technology.

As far back as the Meiji era (1868–1911) Japan was being transformed into the first modern state outside the Western world. This was largely driven by the vision and foresight of the early Meiji leaders who "fully recognized that education was the cornerstone upon which the whole process of national transformation would eventually come to rest" (Horio (1988) cited in Coulmas, 2002: 204). "The sudden contact with the West brought with it the need for lexical innovation on an unprecedented scale. ... A flood of new words entered the Japanese language at this time. There were translations for words from Dutch, English, and other European languages" (Coulmas, 2002: 208). As a result of the strong translation program, Japan is effectively characterized "as a nation where the English language is not used for scientific instruction. Rather scholars have continued to translate technical terms from English to Japanese for more than a century" (Inoue, 2001: 447)

Kaplan (1997: 246) further delineates the various reasons for Japan's success in accessing knowledge and information in Japanese in the 20th century. He begins with Japan's strong advantage as "a strong industrial tradition; after all, Japan had waged successful modern war against the major industrialized nations" (Kaplan, 1997: 246). In addition to its industrial tradition, Kaplan explains the aggressive planning and processes that Japan undertook that gave it the early competitive global edge. In the post-war period, it

> created the Japanese Institute for Science and Technology (JIST). This Institute bought the first computers from the West. It sent bibliographic specialists to the West to learn how to access and use the information systems. It created a remarkable translation facility to make technical information readily available in Japanese. It developed university-industrial links, defining research projects and assuring the emergence of research communities to work on those projects the government deemed vital. This latter exercise culminated ultimately in the building of Tsukuba Science City. (Kaplan, 1997: 246)

The pace and extent of the achievements of the Japanese in accessing knowledge and information in English are incomparable to the efforts of many other Asian countries.

But even Japan is not spared the challenges in the face of the internationalization of education and the economic need to attract foreign students to tertiary institutions.

> The government plan to increase the number of foreign students in Japan... has also had ramifications for the teaching and use of English in Japanese higher education institutions. ... The 1997 advisory committee report identified as one cause of the slowdown in numbers that foreign students preferred studying in English-speaking countries and found Japanese difficult to learn. ... Graduate schools at 18 national universities now have programs enabling students to earn degrees in English.'' (Kanisawa, 1999 cited in Gottlieb, 2001: 45).

In the Malaysian context, the demand for scientific and technological knowledge then was not being met even by what seemed major translation efforts: if the material could not be made available to students in Bahasa Melayu, they would need to learn English.

*Lack of Language Legislation in the Domain of Business and Industry*

A second reason was the spread of English into the domains of business and industry. English has been, since the post-independence era, predominantly the language of communication in the domain of business and industry. Summarizing the situation of English in Malaysia in the 1990s, Asmah (1996) points out official policy was effective in replacing it with Bahasa Melayu in education, government, and even the law courts, but ''business in the corporate sector is conducted more in English than in Malay, in both local and international concerns (Asmah 1996: 523). Writing a little later, Nair-Venugopal (2001: 21) notes that ''nowhere is the use of English more entrenched in Malaysia than in the private sector domains of corporate business and industry, banking and finance,'' starting even to infiltrate areas previously using Chinese.

The importance of this domain was stressed by Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, when he said

> The main concern for everyone now is economic development and the well-being of our people. For this we need stability and a legal framework as well as practices which are conducive to business and trade. (Mahathir, 2003: 5)

Practices conducive to business and trade were enhanced by the Central Bank when it announced ''liberalization and simplification of several major foreign exchange administration rules from April 1 to enhance the environment and competitiveness of business operations in Malaysia.'' (cited in Mustapha, March 27, 2004: B1) In

contrast with clear stipulation of reforms for foreign exchange activities, there is no mention of legislation for language use. The exclusion of mention of language policy in the domain of business and industry contrasts starkly with that of the firm legislation on language use for the fields of education and administration.

This clearly depicts a scenario where economic considerations override nationalistic factors and play a predominant role in providing flexibility of choice with regard to language use in the private sector. There was no legislation on language use instituted in this sector because it was considered necessary to provide and encourage investment through a flexible and free system of market enterprise. Any restriction in the crucial language of communication in the field of business which needs to be quick and easily understood by colleagues, employers and clients around the world, would have discouraged foreign investors. Malaysia, like many other countries around the globe, competes aggressively for foreign investments needed for the economic growth and development of the nation. The implementation of this integral task for the nation, which used to be largely undertaken by the government, now rests on the shoulders of the private sector, which, ''assumes the lead role as the engine of growth'' as stated in the Central Bank's annual report for 2003 (cited in Moses, March 27, 2004: 1). Therefore there was a crucial need to grant this domain independence and flexibility with regard to choice of language.

One result of not fully developing the national language across all domains was that the situation hindered ''the development of indigenous language programmes, ... leaving the high status domains for exogamous languages'' (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997: 201) In this case, it was English which continued to possess linguistic power and capital through its dominance of the domain of business and industry.

*Weakened Employment Base for Graduates from Public Universities*

This had an obvious effect on employment. In the years from 1960 to 1990, the civil service, with its emphasis on Bahasa Melayu, was the largest employer of graduates. This in fact resulted in Malaysia having one of the largest civil service workforces in Asia. But this was a situation that could not go on forever and was resulting in economic hemorrhage. In the 1990s, the private sector became the main employment choice for graduates, but here the most important linguistic proficiency was in English.

At the same time as these changes were taking place in employment patterns, Malaysia had liberalized its educational policies in its aspirations to become a regional center of education. The goal was to provide for a transnational mode of education and to allow established universities from foreign countries to set up branch campuses in Malaysia. There are now branch campuses of Nottingham University (UK) and Monash University (Australia) as well as Curtin University of Technology (Australia). Through a reform of the education act, higher education in the private sector was permitted to be conducted in English. This resulted in a bifurcation of higher education, with public universities based on a Bahasa Melayu medium of instruction and private universities using English.

Graduates from the private universities were more sought after by the companies in the private sector, largely because of their competency in English. This situation would have led to serious social and economic problems for the nation (See Gill, 2004a for further discussion). The problem peaked in the year 2002 when 40,000 graduates from public universities were unemployed, most of them members of the dominant ethnic group, the Malays (Mustapha, 2002, March 14: 1 & 2).

Therefore, it can be seen that the changes in language policy were largely influenced by the two domains which are important in the growth and status of any language – the domain of business and the domain of science and technology. A distinct parallel can be drawn in the rationale for the change in language policy during the post-independence years and at present, both driven by the economic inequity factor. Economic advantage was a dominant reason for the change of medium in the post-independence period from English to Bahasa Melayu. In 2003, the same factor of economic inequity reappears to have stimulated a reversal of the language policy. Resistance from the Malays has been muted because they realize that they themselves are suffering from their inability to access information and knowledge in English, to communicate in the language, and so to find jobs in business and industry.

> Globalization was to pose a dilemma for policy planners. The success in having a national language resulted in the Malays – the race it was designed to help – being disadvantaged. The current policy, therefore, had to be substituted with one which, in fact, was directly opposed to the earlier policy. English now has to be propagated amongst a population schooled only in Malay and with a vested interest in its continued dominance. (Lowe and Khattab, 2003: 219)

The crucial issue that now arises as a result of all these turbulent changes is the challenge to maintain the balance between the role and the status of Bahasa Melayu for the nation and that of the international dominant role of English. The government is firm with directives on language policy underpinned by the science and technology and economics ideology. At the same time there is a pull in the opposite direction of ensuring a place for Bahasa Melayu in the linguistic ecology of higher education.

## University Reactions

The new policy sets a challenge to all universities to change their language policy and start teaching science and technology subjects in English. This they are starting to do.[8] Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the university set up to promote the role of Bahasa as an intellectual and educational language, has an extra challenge. Its answer has been a strategic plan, drawn up by the Centre for Academic Advancement for the period 2000 to 2020, aiming to develop "knowledge in the context of a global economy as well as the nurturing of Bahasa Melayu as an intellectual language at the national and international level" (Executive Summary of the Strategic Plan: 13). In terms of policy rhetoric in the area of language choice and selection there is no change from the concerns of the 1960s and 1970s. It is still Bahasa Melayu which is promoted and the aim now is to further nurture it to be an intellectual language at both the national and international levels. But a pragmatic approach is adopted in the implementation plans which aim for a ten year change over, with retraining of staff and a gradual move to English as medium for science and technology.

## Conclusion

As Malaysia works through these potentially contentious issues, it is important to stress the critical need to frame the concerns within a symbiotic context – to examine how these issues could co-exist and enrich each other so that there is strengthening of space for

[8] This paper is part of an on-going two-year project on "Language Planning and Policy in Higher Education in Malaysia: Responding to the Needs of the Knowledge Economy." The research team comprises Saran Kaur Gill (head), Hazita Azman, Norizan Razak and Fadhil Mansor.

concerns of both national identity as well as global competitiveness in the context of education, community and the nation. This echoes what Atal says in the context of the radical transformation of societies when he says, "what is needed is effective management of such a transformation, rather than futile attempts to halt it." (Atal, 2003: 188).

In this context, it would be beneficial to work to develop and implement a model that encapsulates opportunities and methods for language empowerment at varying levels – the international, national and sub-national community levels. This will be a model that can function as a reference point for various nations confronting similar challenges of globalisation and indigenization.

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