



ELS-JISH

ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies on Humanities

Volume 1 Issue 3, 2018

ISSN (print) : 2621-0843

ISSN (online) : 2621-0835

Homepage : <http://journal.unhas.ac.id/index.php/jish>

Using Spolsky' Model in Examining Malaysia's National Language Policy

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Abstract

Malaysia gained its independence on 31 August 1957 after the British Empire have fully relinquished its colonisation on the land. As with any newly independent polity, one of the ways for Malaysia, a multi-ethnic country, tries to establish its national identity is by establishing a language policy. This paper will examine Malaysia's language policy planning using Bernard Spolsky's (2004) model proposed in his book 'Language Policy' published by Cambridge University Press in 2004. In the book, Spolsky (2004) theorised that there are four major motivations that influences the decision of a country's language policy planning. These four major motivations are, the sociolinguistic situation of a country, a country's national identity or ideology, the effects of English as the language of a wider communication, and minority linguistic rights. In the case of Malaysia, each of Spolsky's (2004) four forces does seem to have an impact on Malaysia's language policy planning and the forces are very intertwined with each other. Malay as the dominant ethnic group in a sense has influenced the language chosen as the national language. However, being a diverse country, this decision does pose an issue at creating a national identity among its people. At the same time, English being the past colonial language and at present, the language for wider communication has caused Malaysia's medium of instruction in public education policy to be seen as oscillating back and forth between Malay and English. On the other hand, minority linguistic rights in Malaysia has a long way to go since only certain indigenous languages are taught as elective subjects in schools.

Keywords: Language Policy Theory, Spolsky's Language Policy Model, Language Planning, Language Management, National Language, National Identity.

How to cite: Habuan, D.A.A. (2018). Using Spolsky' Model in Examining Malaysia's National Language Policy. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 1(3), 321-327.

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country located in the Southeast Asia. It is a developing nation which used to be under the British Empire's colonisation. It is only after 1957 that Malaysia has gained its independence as an independent polity. But as with any other newly independent country, Malaysia tried to establish its national identity and one of the ways to do so is by establishing a language policy. In this paper, we will examine Malaysia's language policy using Spolsky's (2004) model as a guide.

According to Spolsky (2004), there are three components that make up a country's national language policy; the language practices of a community, the beliefs and attitudes towards certain language, and language management by the country's policy maker. Spolsky (2004) was able to create a model that identifies four major motivations that influences the

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making of a nation's language policies. These four major forces are, the sociolinguistic situation of a country, a country's national identity or ideology, the effects of English as the language of wider communication, and minority linguistic rights.

In the case of Malaysia, the language practices born from Malaysia's sociolinguistic situation informs the language policy planning. At the same time, Malaysia's national ideology of upholding Malay as the national language, the debate to introduce or abolish English-medium policy in Malaysia's education system, and the efforts made in preserving minority linguistic rights reflects the language beliefs and attitudes Malaysia has towards Malay, English and minority languages in Malaysia. Lastly, language management done by the government in addressing English as a global language and upholding Malay as national identity can also be seen reflected in Malaysia's language policy. Each of Spolsky's (2004) four forces influences Malaysia's national language policy will be discussed in detail in the main section of this essay.

In the following section, we will look at the impact of national ideology in the formation of Malaysia's language policy.

2. Impact of National Identity and Ideology

As mentioned earlier, one of the ways Malaysia establishes its national identity post-independence is naming Malay as the national language of the federation in its Constitution. Under Article 152, Malay is the official language of Malaysia and is to be used in any official purposes. Under Clause 6 of the same Article, "official purposes" is defined as "any purpose of the Government, whether Federal or State, and includes any purpose of a public authority". In 1963 after the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, Malaysian Parliament then passed the National Language Act 1963/67 that outlines the use of the national language for official purposes including in education and the court.

In understanding the decision behind formally naming Malay as the national language in the Constitution, we will have to look back into the context of before the formation of Malaysia.

The Federation of Malaysia was initially formed on the 16th of September 1963 from the unification of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo (contemporary Sabah) and Sarawak; all four states were British Empire's ex-colonies. Two years after the unification, Singapore was ceded out of the federation and it formed its own republic. This left only Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak forming the polity that we know as the current Malaysia.

Among the aforementioned British ex-colonies, Malaya first achieved its independence from the British colonisation on 31st August 1957. But before the British was confident enough to let Malaya become an independent country, the British was concerned about the racial tension between the major ethnics in Malaya namely, between the Malays and the Chinese. The ethnic composition at that time was that the number of non-ethnic Malays almost equal to the Malays who are the pre-dominant ethnic group in Malaya (Milne 1970). Milne (1970:567) also used the term "primordial loyalties" in describing each of the ethnic groups' desires to protect their own ethnics' interest that was high at that time. Therefore, the Malays and Chinese have to come to an agreement with regards to the sharing and balancing of political and economic power between these ethnic groups (Milne 1970; Fernando 2006).

Therefore before the Constitution was drafted, UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) a Malay-dominant political group and MCA (Malayan Chinese Association) a Chinese-dominant political group made an agreement that the Chinese would "retain their economic power" (Milne 1970:564) and gained Malayan citizenship by right of birth (*jus soli*). In exchange, the Chinese and other non-ethnic Malays have to acknowledge and accept Malays' "special privileges" (Fernando 2006, p. 579) as the "first peoples" (Albury & Khin 2016, p.79) of the state, the naming of Malay as the national language and that the Malay Rulers from each state as the constitutional monarchs of the federation.

Uniquely, Malay's "special privileges" is constituted under Article 153 of the Constitution. This includes having Malay quotas in terms of "employment in the public services, scholarships for educational purposes, awarding of certain business licences and Malay reservations of land" (Fernando 2006, p. 586). Therefore, naming Malay as the national language is a result of non-ethnic Malays in Malaya recognizing Malay's sovereignty which also includes recognizing the sovereignty of the *Bumiputera* (sons of soils), indigenous ethnic groups from Sabah and Sarawak after these Borneo states joined in to form Malaysia in 1963. This is how national ideology, which is one of the driving force identified by Spolsky (2004) influences Malaysia's national language decision.

However, other languages of the Malaysian community aside are not prevented from being taught, learnt or used in the country as stipulated in Clause 2 of Article 152 of the Constitution.

3. Impact of English as a language of Wider Communication

Among Spolsky's (2004) four forces, English as a language of wider communication has been the biggest force that influences Malaysia's education system's language policy. This force may as well be the cause of the among the greatest challenge for Malaysia education language policy makers.

Malaysia has always had an on-and-off relationship with the English language. As mentioned before, Malaysia's Constitution has stipulated for Malay to be used in government administrations, law and education (Chinese and Tamil are to be used as medium of instruction for their respective national-type primary schools). This has not raised many issues as Malaysia was still in the stage of shaping up its national identity with the use of Malay instead of English in these domains in order to shed off the remnants British Empire colonisation.

However, as the country progresses along with the flow of globalisation, the central government aspires towards what was coined as K-Economy which means an economy that is built on human capital powered by knowledge and skills (Lukman & Mohd. Ridhwan 1999; Albury & Khin 2016). The then government realises that English is the language that is widely used in research and communications. Hence, along this line of thinking, in order to improve Malaysia's human capital and further thrust the country's economy, English has to be incorporated into the education system. This is done via the announcement made by the then Education Minister Musa Mohamad on 11 May 2002 who confirmed that English will be used as the medium to teach science and mathematics in national primary and secondary schools (Tan 2005). This language policy called the 'English as the language of instruction for Mathematics and Science' policy (popularly known as PPSMI policy) was finally implemented in the year 2003 phase by phase starting from Standard 1, Form 1 and Form 6 (Hui 2009).

In addition, the constitution language policy does not apply to private sectors and multinational companies due to privatization policy implemented by the then government (Shankaran 2009). This means that, having to keep up with the flow of globalisation, private companies has already been using English as a means of communication (Azirah 2014). Therefore the move towards English-medium in education was seen as the right move in order to meet the demands of the private sectors for graduates with high English competence.

However, after 10 years of implementation, PPSMI policy was abolished in 2012. The rationale being that during the implementation of PPSMI, the public examination results does not reflect what the government had envisaged when they first introduced the PPSMI policy. The achievement gap between urban and rural students increased when the policy was introduced and students' mastery in English did not really improve with this policy (Rozita et al 2012).

In place of PPSMI policy, the Education Ministry then introduced another language policy called the 'Upholding Malay language, Strengthening the command of English', also popularly known with its Malay acronym as MBMMBI policy. This policy aims to "[uphold] the Malay language and at the same time strengthening the command of the English language [...] to generate Malaysians who are fluent and confident in both Malay and English languages (Rozita et al 20012, p. 685). This basically means that the medium of instruction for the teachings of science and mathematics are reverted back to Malay for national schools and Chinese and Tamil for the each respective national-type schools. In rationalising this decision, the Education Ministry also quoted the findings from UNESCO that students "can easily grasp the lessons in their mother tongue in the early stages of schooling" (Rozita et al 20012, p. 686).

However, this policy received many backlashes especially from parents who disagreed with English not being used to teach science and mathematics. Many has written in their concerns via newspaper editorial column saying that they believe English to be very important language to be used as a medium of instruction and asking for the government to revive the PPSMI policy and either replacing the current MBMMBI or implementing PPSMI alongside the current policy (Noor Azimah 2010; Toh 2012).

In terms of the use of English in affairs relating to public administrations, interestingly, Sarawak, one of Malaysia's states located on the Borneo Island and a semi-autonomous state has announced that English is to be made as the state's co-official language alongside Malay. This policy was made by the late Chief Minister of Sarawak, Adenan Satem in 2015 who mentioned that this policy is "nothing alien to the people of Sarawak" as they have been interacting and communicating in English in correspondences involving the state's public administrations (Adib 2015). Though this policy made by the Sarawak state government received some criticism especially from the Peninsula for appearing as if to not uphold Malay as the national language, the current Chief Minister of Sarawak, Abang Johari Tun Openg announced in 2017 that the state government will continue with this language policy as English is "an important communication tool across the globe" (Geryl 2017).

Therefore, it can be said the force of English as a global language can pose a great challenge to the Malaysian government especially in planning for language policy in its education system which we can see has caused this oscillation from Malay to English and back to Malay.

4. Impact of Sociolinguistic Situation

Statistically, Malay is the predominant ethnic group in the country. In a way, it may seem practical to adopt the language of the majority as the national language. The percentage of Malay ethnic group that makes up the country population accounts for approximately 50%, according to the 2012 Population Quick Info Statistics released by the Department of Statistics Malaysia. Unfortunately, in the following years, there are no clear indication as to the number of ethnic Malays in the latest 2017 statistics as the number of Malay was grouped together with other non-Malay *Bumiputeras*. Interestingly in the 2017 Population Quick Info Statistics, the number of *Bumiputeras* (Malay included) accounts for approximately 61.7% of the total Malaysian population, just more than half of the number of Malaysian' population.

In the Peninsula, the Chinese and Indians form the second and third largest ethnic groups with 20.8% and 6% respectively. The government funds national vernacular schools for these two ethnic groups which are called the national-type schools. The medium of instruction in both Chinese national-type schools and Tamil national-type schools are Mandarin and Tamil respectively.

The *Bumiputeras* includes the Peninsula's Orang Asli (Aboriginal Peoples), and the different indigenous ethnic groups of the Borneo States; Sabah and Sarawak. There are 32 different ethnic groups in Sabah alone and 28 ethnic groups in Sarawak (Jeniri 2015).

However, only Kadazan-Dusun language and Iban language are being taught as optional language subjects in Sabah and Sarawak schools respectively. This may be because both Kadazan-Dusun and Iban are the largest ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak respectively. This is also the case with the Orang Asli. There are 18 different tribes of Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Development 2018) but only Semai language, is taught at selective national primary school as an elective language subject (Ministry of Education 2018).

In addition, because Malaysia is an Islamic country as stipulated in Article 3 in the Constitution, Arabic Language known as the language of the Quran, is offered as a language subject as early as in primary school level.

5. Minority Language Rights

In the case of Malaysia, the language policy for minority languages seems to be a mixture of promotion-oriented, accommodation-oriented policy and tolerance-oriented policy. Promotion-oriented as defined by Wiley (2010, p. 263-264) is where the government puts in “resources to further the use of a language or languages [...] or for “strategic” purposes”. Meanwhile accommodation-oriented policy is where the government puts in resources i.e financial, but it is not meant to “advance the use of the minority language” (Wiley 2010, p. 264). As for tolerance-oriented policy, Wiley (2010, p. 264) defined this type of policy as no interference at all from the government but there are no restriction either. Therefore it is up to the member of the language community to ensure the survival of their language.

In Malaysia’s context, the force of Minority Linguistic Rights and the force of Sociolinguistic Situation play a huge part in influencing Malaysia’s language policy makers decisions in language planning. As discussed in the previous section before, Malaysia’s government funded national-type schools for two of its Peninsula minorities, Chinese and Indians, where the students of these aforementioned ethnicities are able to have access to education taught in their native language, Mandarin and Tamil. This can be viewed using Wiley’s (2010) term as a promotion-oriented policy but for strategic purposes. I concluded that this is the case because the government has established in its National Education Act 1963 that these vernacular medium of instruction are provided at the primary school level only. Government-funded secondary school education is only available in the national language medium.

As for the indigenous language subjects offered as electives in the school curriculum like Iban, Kadazan-Dusun and Semai, these policy feels like a superficial effort of preserving the indigenous people’s languages and therefore can be seen as an accommodation-oriented policy.

As for the linguistic rights of other ethnic minorities in Malaysia, there seems to be a tolerance-oriented policy as the survival of these minority languages depend on the efforts of its community members.

To conclude, the linguistic rights of the minorities can be seen as a drive that influences Malaysia’s language policy only in the context of education. However, there are still so much more that can be done in terms of policy making by the Malaysian government in order to help preserve and promote the languages of its other minorities.

6. Conclusion

The four forces in Spolsky’s (2004) model is very helpful in understanding the drive behind Malaysia’s language policy. However, it is very hard to pry apart these factors in the context of Malaysia, as all of these four forces are very intertwined with each other. The sociolinguistic situation in Malaysia where Malay is the dominant ethnic group in a sense influenced the language chosen as the national language in Malaysia. In addition the diverse sociolinguistic situation also influenced the drafting of Malaysia’s school curriculum especially the teaching of indigenous language as elective subjects in selected schools which in turn is

also a language policy with linguistic minority rights in mind. Lastly, English as a global language has become the biggest influence in the planning of Malaysia's medium of instruction in education policy what which might clash with Malaysia's national ideology.

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