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Template Artikel ICOLL



The Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Culture, Language, and Literacy

HISTORICAL MONOLINGUAL ASSIMILATION: A novel methodology for the development of a Malaysian unified language

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Abstract:

The implementation of Malay as the national language in Malaysia has not yet resulted in the desired level of unified national identity. The reluctance to use Malay among certain ethnic groups is still driven by the ongoing racial and religious debates. The objective of this article is to present a number of approaches to formulating the language of Malaysia's ideal unity. The research methodology is qualitative, with analytical descriptive reporting. Sources are collected through literature studies on the history and implementation of national languages in multicultural countries. The research was analysed interactively from the outset. The analysis employs cultural theories on communication and language. This research suggest a number of approaches have been put forth to create a unifying language. The first is bilingualism, where two languages are used as intermediaries. However, this undermines the continuity of the mother tongue. An additional approach is monolingual assimilation. Malay assimilation in Malaysia has not succeeded. Democracy and multiculturalism are unlikely to ensure Malaynisation success. An alternative approach was proposed: 'Historical Monolingual Assimilation'. This approach eschews political forces and emphasises history. It is considered a superior method of language assimilation and should be applied in Malaysia. The Malaysian government must map the Malay language family, analyse its history, identify its fundamental language, and develop it through cultural dialogue with other Bumiputera languages, Tamil, and Mandarin. This second form of assimilation shows that assimilation is not static; it is dynamic, with cultural products evolving to meet changing needs.

Keywords: *Malay, Unity, Assimilation, Bilingual.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Language unifies countries. Malay is Malaysia's national language. Malaysia's language policy has been shaped by the legacy of the British colonial period. During the British

colonial period, the three major ethnic groups were allowed to establish their own institutions in their respective mother tongues. During the Japanese colonial period, the Japanese employed an anti-British and anti-Chinese political style in Malaysia. The use of their language was prohibited in educational establishments. The languages of Malay and Tamil posed minimal challenges to the invaders. This state of affairs persisted until the British returned in 1945 (López C., 2014).

Malaysia's diverse population has led to a series of evolving, sometimes conflicting policies. These decisions have shaped Malay and Malaysian identities and national unity. Language policies have significantly shaped education in Malaysia. The period under consideration commences with the linguistic nationalism phase following Malaysia's independence in 1957 and continued until the advent of the era of internationalisation and the knowledge economy in the early 1990s. In the 1990s, Malaysia reintroduced English at school and university. This initiative was part of a strategy to engage with the globalising world. By the 2000s, English had replaced Bahasa Melayu as the language of instruction in science and mathematics. Students who have completed pre-university English courses will enter their first year of university studies. They expect their first-year lectures to be conducted in English (Gill, 2003; 2006).

Nevertheless, it appears that this policy has not been uniformly implemented. In order to enhance the status of Bahasa Melayu, new policies have been implemented which entail switching the language medium in schools to Malay (Bahasa Malaysia). This had a direct impact on English-medium schools, yet comparable measures were not implemented in Mandarin- or Tamil-medium schools (Ridge, 2004). The reappointment of Malay in the educational realm is indicated by the fact that 23% of the total Malaysian population resides in rural areas. In rural areas, there is a dearth of interest and necessity among students to utilise English, coupled with inadequate infrastructure, scarce resources in schools and a paucity of parental support in assisting with schoolwork that is integrated with English (Renganathan, 2021).

Malaysia has implemented a decentralised education strategy since the 1990s to achieve its 2020 vision and mission of educational progress. This strategy empowers teachers and implements school-based management. The private sector should also play a bigger role in higher education (Lee, 1999). Consequently, a considerable number of educational establishments are still permitted to provide instruction in Mandarin or Tamil for students in the primary phase of their education, rather than in Malay. The use and standardisation of Bahasa Melayu has been implemented at all levels of education under the auspices of the government. The National Institute of Language and Literature plays a pivotal role in this endeavour, spearheading the process of lexical and language standardisation. It is particularly robust in the fields of science and technology (López C., 2014).

It can be concluded that, for non-Malay students studying in national schools, difficulties are encountered in the areas of comprehension, speech and writing. However, their overall level of Malay language acquisition is relatively modest (Hoon & Mezah, 2012). Conversely, other non-Malay bumiputera groups attending Sekolah Nasional frequently experience a decline in their proficiency in their mother tongue as a result of a lack of formal instruction.¹

¹ To illustrate, one might consider the case of students in Sarawak. The domain of ethnic languages in Sarawak is diminishing as a consequence of the proliferation of Malay varieties (Standard Malay and Sarawak Malay), particularly among smaller groups. Ethnic languages retain a strong presence in domains such as family,

Mother-tongue classes depend on parents meeting certain requirements and there being at least fifteen students. Only the Tamil and Mandarin communities in Malaysia have taken action in accordance with this stipulation. Some indigenous groups have initiated language development and/or mother tongue education programmes, perceiving a decline in the use of ethnic languages among the younger generation. This is achieved by implementing early education programmes for their children that utilise their native language (Smith, 2003).

The decline in proficiency in the mother tongue reflects the 'tribal' mentality that has been entrenched in Malaysian society since the colonial era. They live with and attend their own people's institutions. As the number of non-Malay professionals in Malaysia grew, so too did the demand for educational institutions and other facilities that reflected the people's culture, especially their language. The influx of Indian professionals into Malaysia has led to an increased demand for Tamil-speaking elite education. This has resulted in the establishment of Tamil private schools across the country. While meeting Malaysian educational requirements, these schools teach the essential components of the Indian curriculum. This phenomenon is also observed among those of Chinese ethnicity (López C., 2014).

Ethno-linguistically diverse societies present governments with a dilemma when choosing an official language for education. While using ethnic languages is seen as a way to preserve culture and a human right, it can also lead to social segregation. Schools that integrate pluralism and have a unified language help students form ethnically diverse social networks. Schools can help prevent gaps in inter-ethnic interactions and in the process of identity formation (Ostwald, Ong, & Gueorguiev, 2017).

These ethnic groups in Malaysia have kept their distinct identities. Each ethnic group can maintain its cultural identity while demonstrating proficiency in English, essential for effective communication. Malaysia lacks an effective unifying language to unite its multicultural population, unlike Indonesia, where the Indonesian language serves this function. Does the designation of Malay as the 'main' language constitute racial discrimination? Has the use of English thus far constituted a "last resort" for Malaysia in terms of unifying language? This article examines the optimal solution for a multicultural society such as Malaysia to establish a unifying language agreement.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is a key aspect of cultural identity. Language facilitates communication. After the colonial era and World War II, many languages emerged as political forces and intermediaries in international communication, with English being a notable example. This shows that language is no longer regarded as a local cultural phenomenon, but can also serve as a political instrument. The extent to which English is used in a country is indicative of its level of economic and social development.

As Landa (2006) elucidates in accordance with education global trends, publishing in English is now a prerequisite. Rajadurai (2010) found that Malaysia students' investment in English is an investment in new identities and future possibilities. John Albury (2019) says Malaysian youth favour monolingual education for its benefits in learning, cognitive ease and policy. The success of English and the standards it has established show that language is a medium of communication that shapes and redefines social roles, relationships, power

co-ethnic, rural, communities with low economic status or at religious activities. The utilisation of ethnic languages in Sarawak is less prevalent in educational and mass media contexts (Ting & Ling, 2012).

relations and identities (Kim, 2003). Malaysia is a multicultural country where identity is complex. This makes the question of a unified language a complex issue.

It is crucial to establish a correlation between ethnicity and the exercise of state power, as well as to examine the role of political processes involving diverse ethnic groups. The formation of ethnic groups is a process that enables people to identify themselves as an imagined community within a nation-state. Indeed, this process of national identity formation is an ongoing and inextricable aspect of the historical process of nation-building. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish a connection between national identity and ethnicity, given that the former is perceived differently by various ethnic groups within a nation-state (Chee-Beng, 2000).

Cultural differences are continuously produced, which implies ongoing fragmentation and recomposition. The challenge is to expand democracy to avoid the tyranny of the majority and the minority (Wieviorka, 1998). A novel cultural paradigm can be achieved through interculturalism and cross-cultural dialogue. Interculturalism has two forms. The European version emphasises cultural encounter and new ideas. It is apolitical, except in favour of local and transnational. The Quebec version emphasises national communities' entitlement to use state power to perpetuate themselves (Modood, 2014).

To achieve a common cultural identity in a multicultural society, we must consider the role of embeddedness, survival, conformity and respect cultures. This suggests inter-ethnic relationships based on shared traits and norms. Achieving common cultural characteristics between ethnicities shows dynamic and interactive exchanges (Abu Bakar, Bahtiar, Halim, Subramaniam, & Choo, 2018). This could be applied to forming a language that unites ethnic groups.

C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is qualitative, with analytical descriptive reporting. Sources are collected through literature studies on the history and implementation of national languages in multicultural countries. The research was analysed interactively from the outset. The analysis employs cultural theories on communication and language. Cultural change is a series of evolutions that require analysis and understanding of the influencing conditions (Pratama & Annisa, 2023). Communication is the process of conveying messages to influence knowledge or behaviour. In communication, key elements include the source, message, medium, receiver, influence, feedback and environment. Culture is the human way of life. Humans learn to think, feel, believe and know what is culturally appropriate. Many aspects of human life are based on cultural patterns. The concepts of communication and culture are linked (Ammaria, 2017).

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are a number of potential avenues for Malaysia to pursue in order to establish a national unified language:

1. Bilingual

The bilingual option was selected based on studies on Singapore's language policy. Singapore was selected due to its closest historical and demographic similarities to Malaysia. Singapore's family language policy is bilingual, recognising both English and the mother tongue. The country's education policy establishes English as the language of instruction and

public space. English is regarded as having instrumental value, whereas the mother tongue fulfils a cultural function (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016; Tang, 2018).

Such forms of bilingualism can also be observed in some families in the United States, where Spanish is used at home and English is used in an official capacity at school. The first group believes in learning both Spanish and English for economic reasons and family communication. The second group uses Spanish at home but sends their child to an English-speaking school. The third group avoids strict rules and uses a range of strategies to encourage their child to use Spanish at home and seek help at school (Surrain, 2018).

The implementation of bilingualism in Singapore and the United States is driven by disparate political considerations despite analogous multicultural contexts. Singapore's bilingual policy has had a detrimental effect on mother tongues. Bokhorst-Heng & Caleon (2009) and Ng (2014) show that maintaining bilingualism in Singapore is difficult. English has replaced the range and function of mother tongues due to its political, social and linguistic dominance. Speakers of mother tongues use these less and less. There is a concern that mother tongues will be further eroded as more and more young people in Singapore show a lack of interest in learning their mother tongue due to the dominance of English. Children from lower socioeconomic groups display a more favourable attitude towards the three mother tongues in Singapore than children from middle and upper socioeconomic groups. In the United States, English is the official language, but individuals can use their native language in their home/hometown. Same happened in Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia is the official language, but individuals use their regional ethnic language at home/hometown. In official contexts and with diverse groups, Indonesian is used.

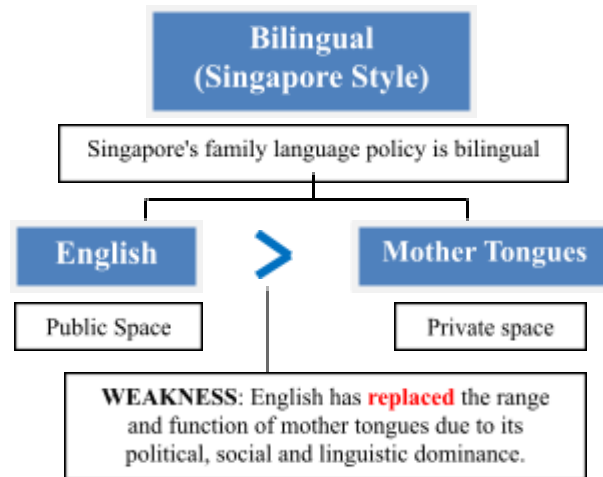


Figure 1.
Bilingual System in Singapore

Malaysia could implement a bilingual policy like Singapore's or Indonesia's or the US'. Malaysia must decide on an official language. Singapore's example shows how an official language can unify a country. The two former British colonies have different political cultures. Malaysia is Malay, Singapore Chinese. Singapore used their former colonial language as the unifying official language. Malaysia faces a potential conflict with its other two major racial groups, the Chinese and Indians, over whether to use English or Malay as

its primary official language. There must first be a certain degree of mental preparedness among the ethnic Malays if they want to use English as their primary official language, whose Malay names are deeply embedded in the identity of their country.

2. Monolingual Assimilation

The language of the ethnic majority/powerful as the official/national language can be interpreted in a number of ways. Thai in Thailand and Mandarin Chinese in China are the examples. China's policy on minority languages is to discourage their use in favour of the official language (Curdt-Christiansen & Gao, 2020). China and Thailand's assimilation policies are seen as ineffective in Malaysia, a multicultural democracy country. The assimilation policies in both countries are driven by the political dominance of the Han and Siamese ethnic groups, which have a historical presence in both countries.

Ibrahim (2007) says ethnicity is key to religious and political allegiance in Malaysia. Ethnicity-based identity labels raise concerns about racial discrimination in Malaysia. Aminnuddin & Wakefield (2020) found that people prefer not to have neighbours of a different race or religion. Malays are more likely to exhibit this than Chinese individuals. Race and religion are often conflated in Malaysia.

Language is linked to race and religion. Similarly, the Malay language is linked to Islam in Malaysia. This will challenge the Malaysian community and government in establishing a unified language. To do so, affirmative policies must be implemented that are currently biased in favour of the Malay and Bumiputera (indigenous) population. It is imperative to address the issue of interpretations of citizenship that are still overshadowed and restricted by notions of race and primordialism (Koh, 2014). Multiculturalism is an ongoing process. The state must manage diversity to develop it successfully (Nye, 2007).

Political factors influence a country's identity, particularly in relation to language. As Curdt-Christiansen (2016) notes, language ideology is 'influenced by power' and can be a source of tension. Abdul Manan (2014) investigated the impact of Malaysia's Malay monolingual policy on the linguistic landscape of Kuala Lumpur. Those who failed to comply faced severe penalties. Kuala Lumpur used English effectively for advertising, underscoring its symbolic potential. The ethnolinguistic dimension shows how Chinese and Indian communities express their identity in specific locations. Despite official policies unifying multiethnic populations, grassroots resistance can be triggered by pragmatism, religion or identity. The monolingual assimilation policy is seen as risky in Malaysia, where different groups have different views on race and religion. Some groups are reluctant to adopt the language of another group, as it is seen as a threat to their identity.

The researcher's first-hand experience of visiting Malaysia in 2016 supports this assertion. Malaysian Malays have difficulty communicating with Indian and Chinese traders or residents due to the status of Malay as the national language. This presents an intriguing phenomenon for researchers, whereby this 'unity' of inter-ethnic communication in a major Malaysian city still encounters cultural boundaries. Furthermore, social media, particularly Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, features vlogs of Indonesian tourist and Malaysian citizen, which elucidates a comparable phenomenon. Indonesian-Malaysians in Malaysia often struggle to communicate with ethnic Chinese Malaysians who don't speak Malay or Indonesian. Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent are often criticised for the perceived lack of proficiency in the Chinese language among Malaysian Chinese. This viewpoint is not shared by all non-Malay Malaysians. Many Malaysians from non-Malay communities are

proficient in the Malay language. The researcher's preferred Malaysian badminton athletes are Dato' Lee Chong Wei, Goh Liu Ying, Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik.

3. 'Historical Monolingual Assimilation' for Malaysia (a suggestion)

This article does not imply that assimilation is bad. We must adopt a more positive approach to the concept of assimilation. The linguistic assimilation strategy embraced by Thailand and China is '**Political Monolingual Assimilation**'. A unified national language is usually introduced by the ruling power. The '**Historical Monolingual Assimilation**' approach involves the assimilation of a single language from a specific group. It is implemented through an examination of the historical and cultural impact. This approach draws inspiration from the Indonesian case.

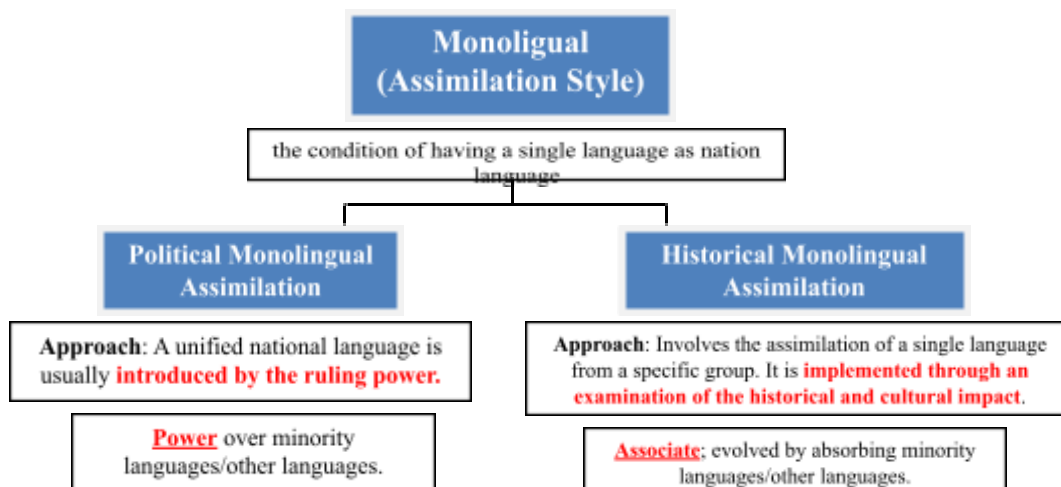


Figure 2.
Monolingual Assimilation System

The countries of Malaysia and Indonesia are regarded as two brothers who were separated as a result of past colonial policies which led to the division of colonial plots. Malaysia and Indonesia have a diverse population with many ethnic and religious groups. In order to facilitate the implementation of national language policies (Indonesian type) in Malaysia, an open-minded and willing to integrate is needed.

It is indubitable that Malay constituted the genesis of Indonesian. The Malay language is no longer the same as it once was, as it is now associated with the ancient language documented during the Srivijaya empire. The distribution of Indonesian Malay is extensive, encompassing Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Betawi (in Java). As the language of communication for past Indonesian societies, Malay is still evolving and not constrained by the rules of the past. Interaction with other tribes and foreign nations has contributed to the evolution of this lingua franca.² The Indonesian language is Bahasa Indonesia. The Indonesian language was born at the 'Kongres Sumpah Pemuda' (Youth Pledge Congress)

² The interaction with other tribes in the archipelago, as well as the arrival of foreign nations such as the Chinese, Indian, Arabic, Persian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English and Japanese, have contributed to the evolution of the Malay language, which ultimately led to the birth of Bahasa Indonesia.

on 28 October 1928. The UUD 1945 (Constitution) reinforced Bahasa Indonesia as the national language. Its root is Malay, despite Javanese being the majority language.

The Malay language assimilation policy in Indonesia respects the historical significance of Malay as a lingua franca in the Indonesian archipelago. Malay has historically served as a mediating language for social, economic and religious activities, particularly during the Srivijaya empire on Sumatra. To ensure that the assimilation policy in Indonesia is not based on majority rule, it is necessary to create an image of unity in a multicultural society. Creating a new language is like making a dish: combining existing elements to form something new. Indonesia has the fundamental elements of its linguistic heritage and has integrated these with other influences to create Bahasa Indonesia. The language in question does indeed originate from Malay, but is not a direct continuation.

Malay is one of the regional language spoken in several Indonesian provinces. How can this be compared with Malaysia? The Malay language, which gave rise to Indonesian, was previously used by the Riau-Johor Lingga Sultanate. Malaysia is made up of 13 states and 3 federal territories. To implement the assimilation that has been occurring since 1928, Malaysia must first determine a standard Malay language. Malaysian Malay must evolve through interaction with other languages. This is necessary in Malaysia, where language is sensitive and associated with race and religion. The goal is a unifying language that does not privilege any one group, but represents the collective identity. Muchtar (2016) suggests allowing extra time to clarify understanding at each stage of dialogue or negotiation.

Subsequently, a name change was implemented following the absorption and development of the aforementioned concept. Indonesia provides an illustrative example, having replaced the Malay language with a new name: Bahasa Indonesia. This new name served to represent the state and unify the country, without singling out any particular group. The government and people of Malaysia must develop the Malay language into a Malaysian language that unites the people, both constitutionally and inter-ethnically. Karmilah (2019) shows in Indonesia, how an accommodative culture and language of communication can help address the nation's disintegration challenges.

By establishing a unified language that is perceived to encapsulate the country's multifaceted linguistic diversity, Malaysia can embark upon the subsequent phase of adopting Indonesian as an international language, as Indonesia has already done, with the recognition of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).³ Language policy is a matter of national interest in the context of public diplomacy, with the objective of preserving, maintaining, developing and civilising language. The success of educational and language development institutions in promoting a language as an international language is contingent upon their ability to disseminate the use of that language on an international scale (Susanto, Pickus, Espree-Conaway, Suparmi, Rusiandi, & Noviyya, 2024).

E. CONCLUSION

Malaysia's decision to make Malay the national language has not created a unified society. The reluctance to use Malay as a medium of communication is driven by unresolved issues about race and religion. A number of approaches have been put forth to create a unifying

³ The 42nd General Conference of UNESCO is scheduled to convene in plenary session on 20 November 2023 at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France. On 20 November 2023, in Paris, France, the Indonesian language was successfully designated as the official language of the UNESCO General Conference. This is evidenced by the richness of the Indonesian vocabulary itself and the considerable number of speakers.

language. The first is bilingualism, where two languages are used as intermediaries. However, this undermines the continuity of the mother tongue. An additional approach is monolingual assimilation. Malay assimilation in Malaysia has not succeeded as much as Thai and Mandarin in China. Democracy and multiculturalism are unlikely to ensure Malaynisation success. An alternative approach was proposed: ‘Historical Monolingual Assimilation’. This approach eschews political forces and emphasises history. It is considered a superior method of language assimilation and should be applied in Malaysia. The Malaysian government must map the Malay language family, analyse its history, identify its fundamental language, and develop it through cultural dialogue with other Bumiputera languages, Tamil, and Mandarin. This second form of assimilation shows that assimilation is not static; it is dynamic, with cultural products evolving to meet changing needs. Language is used to unify and represent a country, serving as a powerful tool for national identity.

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