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## Beyond economy and culture: language-in-education preferences of Malaysian youth

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### ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the tension in sociolinguistics between the linguistic capital associated with languages of socioeconomic mobility, and the cultural and identity value of local languages. With Malaysia as a case study, the paper shows that although this economy-versus-culture tension may be a go-to ideological paradigm in sociolinguistics for exploring and analyzing ideologies and beliefs vis-à-vis- language acquisition and language policy, it may not necessarily feature as saliently in grassroots perspectives. A series of group interviews was held with Malaysian youths who have experienced their government's policy backflips on whether mathematics and science are taught in English (or in Bahasa Malaysia or in another medium-of-instruction) in primary and secondary schools. By asking these youths to reflect on their experiences, policy, and what language they would prefer for mathematics and science, the research reveals perspectives that more often fell outside the critical economy-versus-culture ideological continuum. Instead, the youths were sooner concerned with monolingual education facilitating expedited learning, with cognitive ease, and with fostering consistent a policy approach. The findings caution against assuming that economy-versus-culture is a key interest in the community regarding language policy, and encourage us to apply alternate, non-critical theoretical lenses to understand a broader range of bottom-up concerns.

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## Introduction

Contemporary language ideology scholarship has commonly focused on tensions between the linguistic capital of global languages within the framework of political economy and neoliberalism, and identity and the authenticity of local languages within the framework of cultural preservation. The central idea is that the acquisition of languages that feature as linguistic instruments for advancing an individual's socioeconomic mobility is preferred above investing in languages that are seen to primarily hold cultural or immaterial value. Languages of instrumentality may be the dominant language of a state in which

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opportunities for education and white-collar employment can be pursued, as is the case for example for migrant and Indigenous communities whose culture and language are minorities or otherwise minoritized. However, for much of the world, English is a language of socioeconomic mobility domestically and internationally, and this encourages acquisition of it as a second or foreign language. De Swaan (2001) therefore calls English a hypercentral language ‘at the centre of the linguistic galaxy’ (De Swaan, 2016) on the basis it is ubiquitous in contemporary economic, scientific, cultural and social international connectivity, and that it is therefore acquired for local mobility. This explains, for example, why the acquisition of English is a policy priority – and even compulsory at primary and secondary schools – in many nations such as China, the Netherlands and Argentina. It would also explain why foreign language education tends to hold a less prominent position in school curricula in English-dominant countries, such as in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, whether as a result of language policies or local beliefs that discourage acquiring foreign languages that do not demonstrably promise socioeconomic advantage (cf. Horner & Weber, 2018; Orton, 2016).

The ideological tension for non first-language speakers of English – when it comes to second or foreign language acquisition or to choosing a medium-of-instruction in education – is, as May (2014) would put it, one between the Local and the Global. Or as Duchêne and Heller (2012) would call it, it is one between pride and profit. The tension concerns whether and how the transmission of culture and identity through the local language, and securing the ongoing status of the local language, should be balanced against preparing linguistically for today’s supranational social and economic structures. As Tupas (2018) has discussed, this tension has been tangible in Southeast Asia and has manifested in institutional linguistic reforms either towards English as a language of socioeconomic mobility and global participation, or towards mother tongues with a nationalistic postcolonial perspective that makes use of the European one-country/one-language ideology and build the new nation state in local linguistic terms. In Malaysia, the tension has been tangible in language-in-education policy. Political positions on what language ought to be used as the medium of instruction – especially for mathematics and science where the medium-of-instruction has flipped between Bahasa Malaysia, English and now back to Bahasa Malaysia – attracts both instrumentalist and traditionalist arguments (cf. Ali, Hamid, & Moni, 2011; Gill, 2005). Instrumentalists argue that the medium-of-instruction should be English. Their argument resides within the broader neoliberal experience whereby external linguistic forces are mediating domestic linguistic interests, choices and behaviours (Piller & Cho, 2013). This produces an interest in raising local English language proficiencies with the prospect of expediting and securing Malaysia’s economic development. On the other hand, traditionalists argue that Bahasa Malaysia – the country’s official language and the language of the ethnic Malay majority – must be the medium of instruction. This argument resides within a broader ideological framework of upholding a Malay-centric postcolonial nation-building process since independence from the United Kingdom in 1957, and to safeguarding the language vis-à-vis the ubiquity of English. This tension – as a discourse unto itself – is discussed pervasively in scholarship, the media and in policy discussions that concern multilingualism and language policy in Malaysia (cf. Coluzzi, 2017; Gill, 2013; Othman, 2019).

This paper will show that this ideological tension need not necessarily feature as salient concerns in the grassroots, nor be the primary background to the metalinguistic

concerns of experiencers of language policy. Instead, the paper shows that we ought to be careful in positioning political economy and cultural authenticity as a default theoretical framework, or as assumptions of the types of ideologies or concerns held in the community about language-in-education policy. To show this, the paper analyzes folk linguistic talk among groups of Malaysian youths about what language arrangements they themselves would prefer for the Malaysian education system and why. Specifically, these youths who in recent years had finished their primary and secondary education, and who are now at university, were asked to reflect on and explain what language they think mathematics and science should be taught in. That is to say, rather than analyzing recurrent discourses that have framed ideological debates and scholarship about the relationship between Bahasa Malaysia and English in teaching mathematics and science, the paper analyzes the stated linguistic preferences and associated talk of youths themselves about that as a policy issue. This helps to bring bottom-up perspectives to the fore in the spirit of localizing knowledge about language policy in postmodern terms (Canagarajah, 2005b) and thereby helping to decolonize the debate – as it is sustained by politicians, scholars, the media and community leaders – with the voices, reflections and wishes of policy users themselves (Albury, 2017a). To begin, however, the paper gives background to Malaysian language policy and its associated contestations and discourses about the relationship between Bahasa Malaysia and English.

### **Bahasa Malaysia and English in (post)colonial context**

Like elsewhere in postcolonial Southeast Asia, Malaysia has faced the question of deciding upon its linguistic identity within a ‘political discourse which is sited in the processes, politics and discourses of globalization, nationalism, and multilingualism’ (Tupas, 2018). In the context of ex British colonies, English assumes an especially vexed dual indexicality informed on the one hand by language ideologies vis-à-vis postcolonial nation-building with a nationalistic interest to move away from English hegemony, and on the other hand by the international hypercentral role of English in the globalized economy. For Malaysia, independence in 1957 came after nearly 200 years of British colonial governance in some form, which in itself came after localized colonial enterprises by the Dutch and Portuguese. Historically, Bahasa Melayu – varieties of which originated from the Malay Archipelago including contemporary Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei and parts of the Philippines – was an important regional language. In addition, mixed varieties of it were used in intergroup relations with visitors from afar. This came about in ports such as Melaka and Johor that served as regional hubs of culture and especially of Islam, as well as for trade with foreign peoples (Lowenberg, 1988). The arrival of the British, however, especially reshaped local sociolinguistics by gradually instilling English as the language of prestige within the broader framework of creating the new world (Andaya & Andaya, 2016). English was naturally the language of British colonial administration, but the incorporation of the Malay elite into the social and political spheres of the colonizer also rendered English a language of power and mobility among ethnic Malays themselves. Elite English-medium education was accessible to upper-class Malay boys, with the view its graduates could enter the local British public service or pursue post-secondary education. These socioeconomic prospects were mostly unavailable to ethnic Malays who had not attended a British education or had otherwise attained English

language proficiency. Vernacular schooling was available, but it was therefore limited in the mobility it would provide. Nonetheless, Bahasa Malaysia-medium education began to expand in the early 1900s, also by including rather than excluding girls, but with a continued focus on preparing non-elite ethnic Malays for employment in the agricultural sector. That is to say that the education system in Malaya, as it was known at the time under British rule, was multilingual but stratified along socioeconomic lines which, in broad terms bar affordances for the elite, mirrored ethnic lines.

Another complicating factor for classrooms under British rule was the educational needs of non-Malay children subsequent to the immigration of ethnic Chinese and Indians workers to fill labour shortages. Seeing local Malays in racist terms as too 'lazy and unwilling to work' (Andaya & Andaya, 2016, p. 182), the British especially welcomed the arrival of the Chinese with positive perceptions of their business acumen and entrepreneurship. The British also sponsored the migration of Tamils from southern India, who the British saw as accustomed to British rule and therefore easy to control (Andaya & Andaya, 2016). The education of Chinese and Indian children, however, was delegated to the communities themselves. The British saw little need to invest in Chinese and Indian education, on the one hand because of ethnic segregation that saw the colonial administration and the Malay elite holding the highest societal positions, but also because the stay of these Chinese and Indian migrant communities was at that time regarded as temporary. This 'colonial inactivity' (Andaya & Andaya, 2016) on education therefore gave rise to locally-designed and locally-managed education systems, especially at the primary level. The Chinese modelled their education on the traditions and politics of China as the homeland whereby initially vernacular-medium schools, such as in Cantonese or Hokkien, later gave way to Mandarin as the language-of-instruction. This mirrored the *guoyu* national language movement in China to unite China's pluricentric language groups (Bradley, 1992). Indian education was mostly in Tamil, bar a smattering of Hindi, Telugu, Punjabi or Malayalam schools. The British had not seen either education system as necessarily contributing to any longer-term building of Malaya as a colony. It was only with a skepticism about the incorporation of Chinese political world views into the local Chinese-medium classrooms did the British colonial administrators seek in real terms to gain oversight of the curriculum (Andaya & Andaya, 2016). In any case, these migrant communities remained largely uninterested in enrolling children in Malay-medium education with its Islamic perspectives and ideas of Malay ethnonationalism, and English-medium education remained the domain of the elite. Education through the different vernaculars – whether Chinese or Indian – reflected the supposed socioeconomic roles of that ethnic group, just as Malay education did.

When the contemporary Malaysian state was formed in 1957, it had become an unanticipatedly pluralist society. This pluralism only expanded when Sabah and Sarawak, on Borneo island with their predominantly Indigenous peoples and languages, were incorporated into the federation in 1963. An important policy question would therefore be – within the broader framework of contemporary nation-building – to determine the nature and language of Malaysian education. English had cemented itself as the language – and indeed as the vocabulary – of governance, of administration, of quality education, of international trade, and indeed of globalization in the post second world war era. It would also serve as a linguistic common ground for fostering cohesion between Malaysia's ethnically and linguistically fragmented communities. Its domestic instrumentality was clear. In

neighboring Singapore, where the population also presents with a mix of ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians, the policy response was to recognize the mother tongues of the main ethnic groups, and offer education in them, but to indeed unite the nation through English (Goh, 2008; Tupas, 2018). This, Rappa and Wee (2006) explain, actioned an ideology that sees English as a politically neutral unifier that avoided privileging one Asian ethnolinguistic group over another.

In Malaysia, however, English has been seen as unneutral and instead a vestige of colonial oppression. Introducing it as the national language – or indeed as the sole language of Malaysian education – would be contrary to building the Malaysia nation in quintessentially Malay cultural terms. More than just an ideology, this Malay-centric nation building in the face of ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity became, and has remained, a defining feature of Malaysian political discourse (Albury, 2017b; Noor & Leong, 2013). This discourse includes a narrative – albeit somewhat simplified – of a social contract whereby the Chinese and Indian *pendatang* (visitors) would be granted Malaysian citizenship, and therefore unlimited right of abode, in return for accepting political control by ethnic Malays. This political control would include the unfettered recognition of Malaysia as *Tanah Melayu* (Malay land), of ethnic Malays as the true and authentic *Bumiputra* (sons of the soil), and of Islam as the official religion of Malaysia (albeit other religions will be tolerated). In time, subsequent to race riots in 1969 between ethnic Malays and Chinese, this recognition would also include the *Bumiputra* deserving socioeconomic advantages – on the basis of race rather than need – to rectify socioeconomic inequalities, including special quotas to public sector employment and to universities, and special tax advantages (Fenton, 2003).

For language policy, Malaysia's response was to allow English to remain as the language of administration and of classrooms for 10 years while the country comprehensively institutes Bahasa Malaysia as the federation's language (Gill, 2006). This transition would allow for sufficient corpus planning of Bahasa Malaysia to render it fit for its newly acquired status. This also comprised a view that Bahasa Malaysia would become the language of cohesion between Malaysia's different ethnic groups. English, it was decided, would be a second language and indeed compulsory in the school system, but the Language Act of 1963 codified Bahasa Malaysia to be the language of instruction (Heng & Tan, 2006). Questioning the supremacy of Bahasa Malaysia – as an index of *Tanah Melayu* and the special status of the *Bumiputra* – would become prohibited from public debate (Ali, 2013). This has been especially topical in the context of the state of Sarawak. There, where ethnic Malays form a minority above predominantly Christian Chinese and Indigenous groups, the state declared English as a co-official language, much to the discontent of the nation's leaders, in 2015. Publicly, Sarawak's claim is that English is instrumental for Malaysia's and Sarawak's internationalized economic and scientific endeavours, and co-officializing it – also in classrooms – fosters greater socioeconomic mobility (Tawie, 2015). Beyond contradicting the *Bumiputra* and *Tanah Melayu* narratives, this also conflicted with the national government's agenda, at least that of the former prime minister of Najib Razak and the long-time ruling United Malays National Organisation that was only ousted in May 2018. Reminiscent of its heyday as a lingua franca of trade in the region, Najib Razak hoped to see Bahasa Malaysia develop into an international language, not in the least advanced

trough Malay Studies chairs at universities worldwide, whereby the status of English domestically would be limited (Malay Mail Online, 2016).

### Medium-of-instruction in the contemporary curriculum

Despite the above, the government has not been absolute in instilling Bahasa Malaysia in schools. Firstly, *national-type schools* – schools modelled on the national curriculum but with Mandarin or Tamil as a medium of instruction – are now financed by the federal government, albeit only at the primary school level. Secondly, and importantly for the context of this paper, the government has especially sought to balance interests in Bahasa Malaysia for nation-building with the instrumentality of English for the Malaysian economy. Concerned that a lack of English competency would impede Malaysia's participation in global science and complicate Malaysia becoming a fully developed country by 2020, the government instated the *Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris* (PPSMI) policy in 2003. This required English to be the medium-of-instruction for teaching mathematics and science. This was 'simultaneously carried out at Primary One, Form One, and Form Four. The rationale was to create the immediate use of the language at the beginning primary level and also to reach secondary students at the same time' (Heng & Tan, 2006). The change was overseen by the *English Language Teaching Centre* that held responsibility to upskill mathematics and science teachers with 240 hours of language training, and to offer an immersion course for those with extra need. Malaysia is not unique in Southeast Asia in this respect. The Philippines, too, operates policy that in general terms allows for mother tongue-medium education prior to Filipino medium-education at higher levels, but with mathematics and science taught in English. Brunei also teaches mathematics and science in English. (Tupas, 2018). However, such a fundamental curriculum change faced challenges in Malaysia. These included concerns about the fast pace at which the policy change was implemented, problems in accommodating and addressing the unequal language proficiencies of staff, disruptions to the routines of existing teachers, scepticism from senior teachers about the policy change, the inadequacy of the new English-medium textbooks, a widespread tendency among teachers to still revert to Bahasa Malaysia in practice when explaining complex matters, a belief that teacher retraining was more focused on content rather than language, and questions about the actual impact on English competency among students (cf Heng & Tan, 2006; Tan & Saw Lan, 2011; Pandian & Ramiah, 2004).

Public reactions to the policy change were similarly mixed. Representations from the Chinese community especially described the shift to English as an erosion of Chinese language and educational rights that were, in the context of Malaysia's Malay-centric nation-building, already tenuous. Teaching mathematics and science in English would therefore not only remove Mandarin from these critical subjects, but possibly encourage language shift away from Mandarin. What is more, Chinese schools often saw no instrumental need to shift to English for mathematics and sciences given Chinese schools generally performed well in these subjects already (Gill, 2013). Schools and parents alike expressed concern that the new policy may not actually lead to greater English language proficiency, given the specifically technical nature of mathematics and science. Chinese groups argued that in their minority context, raising the status of a third language in the school system – next to Bahasa Malaysia and Chinese – may only impede language

development. Reactions from Indian schools, Tan and Saw Lan (2011) explain, ‘were rather muted’ (p. 313). This no doubt speaks to the already high status and prestige that English occupied within the Malaysian-Indian community (Albury, 2018b). Opposition from ethnic Malay groups was also common, with the argument that the policy in favour of English as an international language eroded the local status of Bahasa Malaysia on *Tanah Melayu* among the *Bumiputra*. Ultimately, traditionalist opinion gained traction and the government agreed in 2009 to reverse the policy. The official narrative, however, was that academic achievement under the policy was decreasing and that mathematics and science are pedagogically best taught in the mother tongue. As such, schools were to revert back to Bahasa Malaysia for these subjects by 2012, except for national-type schools which would revert back to Mandarin or Tamil (Nor, Aziz, & Jusoff, 2011).

This, however, only led to oscillations in discourse and reassertions that the English language proficiencies of Malaysia youth are being jeopardized and should be improved in order to prepare students for Malaysia’s neoliberal economy. The former discourse was thus recycled premised on a belief that English deserves a stronger place in the classroom as a medium-of-instruction, despite the abolition of the PPSMI. In 2016, the government in effect reinstated the PPSMI policy, but now on a voluntary basis. This in effect allows schools to opt into and out of the policy. The government maintains a catalogue of participating schools and in 2018, a total of 1,303 schools were scheduled to participate, including both Malay and national-type schools (Ministry of Education, 2018). To join the scheme, schools are required to demonstrate to have the necessary resources to implement the policy, to have the backing of principals, teachers and parents, and to ensure that ‘their performance in the Malay subject is on a par or better than the national average grade’ (Yunus & Sukri, 2017). However, the opt-in arrangement has led to new concerns about the DLP not being available nation-wide, and about not all Malaysian students having equal access to it. It has also led to concerns about chasms between student readiness to take on mathematics and science in English compared to the enthusiasm of their parents (cf. Augustin, 2016; Soo, 2017).

The preceding discussion shows that implicit within Malaysia’s language-in-education policy, and its policy backflips vis-à-vis the role of English, is a tension between linguistic matters of economy on the one hand (which I see as encompassing eagerness to prepare Malaysians for supranational economic and social structures and the impact of neoliberalism on Malaysia’s linguistic choices), and culture on the other hand (which I see as including local Malay identity, Malay nation-building and Malay tradition). Having mapped this as the ideological framework that has informed policy discourse and decisions, the paper now takes a bottom-up perspective to the topic. Specifically, the paper now turns to an analysis of how a cohort of Malaysian youths themselves feel about language policy for teaching mathematics and science and what linguistic arrangements they feel are ideal.

## Theory and method

The paper takes a fundamentally postmodern perspective to language policy and discourses about it (Pennycook, 2006) whereby a folk linguistic methodology gives life to this postmodernism. As such, theory and method are dealt with in combination in this section. Epistemologically, the postmodern orientation in this paper assumes three

principles. Firstly, the paper decentralizes authority and ownership of narratives about sociolinguistic affairs. This is achieved by shifting the unit analysis away from the policies and discourses of power-holders to the voices, experiences and ideas of policy users themselves. This in turn solicits and elevates their perspectives, such that the sociolinguistic narrative is decentralized by way of discourse among those outside of traditional power structures (Alvesson, 2002). For Malaysia and the purposes of this paper, this means turning to the ideas of Malaysian youth who have recently experienced language-in-education policy, rather than to the discourses that have framed policy development. Secondly, the paper questions grand narratives (Pennycook, 2006). Here, the grand narrative in question is the ideological tension between economy and culture that has structured language-in-education policy and discourse, and the assumption this can be used to plot the ideological concerns, beliefs and desires of the community. Being skeptical of this necessarily applying not just to policy formation processes but also to community beliefs opens up a research space to investigate how, and indeed whether this grand narrative structures bottom-up perspectives about Malaysia's language policy. Thirdly, and adding to the later, the paper seeks to be critical of being critical. The ideological tension between economy and culture is a critical one in the sense that it, and its associated discourses, hosts power relations, power negotiations, as well as potential, actual and perceived inequalities and stratifications between societal groups (Fairclough, 2013). Questioning whether this tension is indeed at the heart of grassroots discourse, and whether it holds clout outside the realms of dominant discourse, is therefore to be critical of it in terms of being skeptical of its ubiquity (Albury, 2017b). In essence, this amounts to enacting a deliberate caution against assuming that matters of power and inequality – such as the economy-versus-culture tension at hand – are pervasive in actual lived experiences and community perspectives.

To give life to this decentralization, and to a focus on discourse in the grassroots, the research advanced a content-oriented discourse-analytical folk linguistic methodology (Preston, 1994). This meant analyzing the talk of people who have never trained in linguistics, but nonetheless giving credence to what they claim to know, and what they claim to feel, about a linguistic topic. This is because such knowledge and feelings – whether or not they are empirical or well-founded – may manifest in or structure (metalinguistic) discourse (Jaffe, 2009; van Dijk, 2003). This talk then underwent content analysis, through a process of coding, categorizing and thematizing as per qualitative research methodology (Saldaña, 2012), but with a focus on epistemic an evaluative stances that framed that talk. These discourses and stances were then interpreted in respect to the broader sociopolitical context, in this case Malaysia's language policy history and discourses (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Specifically, the talk that underwent this analysis was that of a cohort of Malaysian youths from the Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. A series of semi-structured group discussions, each lasting about one hour, was held in English with non-linguistics undergraduate university students across Malaysia. In these discussions, the youths were asked to explain and extrapolate upon a variety of matters concerning societal and individual multilingualism in Malaysia. For the purposes of this paper, as one part of these broader discussions the youths were asked to extrapolate upon and explain – in their own terms as they saw fit – the government's policy backflips on English as the medium of instructions for mathematics and science, and what linguistic arrangements

they themselves would prefer for teaching mathematics and science. Sometimes the students raised the policy issue independently, in which case the students were encouraged to continue discussing it. Other times the conversation did not naturally lead to the topic specifically. In those cases, I simply mentioned that I had heard of the policy change, and from there solicited metanarratives about it and the feelings of the group about which language or languages should be used for teaching mathematics and science in Malaysia.

In total, I held 10 discussions with Chinese groups, 7 with Malay groups, and 4 with Indian groups, each with four to five students per group. The groups were divided by self-identifying ethnicity for ethical and empirical reasons. Firstly, Malaysian life is so fundamentally structured along ethnic lines (Noor & Leong, 2013) that such divisions – including for exercises such as this research – were anticipated by the students and would also allow them to participate with their friends. Secondly, it can be deemed seditious under Malaysian law for a Chinese or Indian-Malaysian to be perceived as questioning the status and primacy of Bahasa Malaysia, the *Bumiputra*, *Tanah Melayu* and therefore current language policy arrangements as a manifestation of contemporary ethnic relations (C.-B. Tan, 2012). Grouping the students by ethnicity therefore helped to circumvent any situation whereby a student was inadvertently perceived as discussing or criticizing ethnic relations. Lastly, ethnic grouping allowed for the data to be thematized by ethnic perspective, such that similarities and differences between the ethnic groups could be explored and analyzed if this was deemed pertinent. This is not to say that the data set is representative of ethnic groups or is sufficiently robust for conducting intergroup comparisons. This is not possible given the data is restricted to students with proficiency in English who have been admitted to university – and therefore come for a specific educational and socio-economic cohort – and because the number of group discussions is not equal. The data set does, however, offer insights into the perspectives of a cohort of youth who recently completed secondary education, have experienced the policy changes, can reflect on what this has meant for them and can talk about what they think ideal policy – from the perspective of being a university student today – would be. The paper now turns to present, analyze and discuss the data.

### **Language policy consistency and cognitive ease**

Across the three ethnic groups, an overriding theme in the folk linguistic talk was that the students would, as a policy preference, support mathematics and science being taught monolingually in English. This amounted to seven discreet arguments to this effect from Chinese groups, four from Malay groups and also four from Indian groups. The concern here, contextualized by these youths being current university students, was that English is after all the medium-of-instruction in Malaysian universities. In as far as students may then proceed from secondary school onto degrees in the sciences, then teaching mathematics and science at the secondary level in English was seen as simply better preparing Malaysian students for tertiary study. Teaching mathematics and science in English therefore creates consistency with language policy and practices in tertiary education, and in turn was seen as easing the transition from secondary to tertiary classrooms. For example, an Indian group of students explained:

(Excerpt 1)

Researcher: What should it be? What do you think is the best policy?

Student 3: I think especially sciences and maths should be in English because once we graduate high school, we don't encounter science and maths in Malay. The classes will be in English, every degree is in English ... some people who do it in Malay, well, they find it very difficult to then change.

Student 4: To change to English.

Student 3: The transition for them is difficult.

Malay students agreed, arguing that 'most of the time, English will take place in education, especially science, law and engineering, and you can see most of accounting and business and marketing, they use English as the main tool' and 'English is better because if you further your study, you will definitely use English more than Malay'. Chinese comments reflected these same positions, such as 'so it's, like, weird if in secondary school you learned in the Malay language and then go to university and its English. Then what if you are not used to it? Then you get confused and it's just weird'.

These arguments and preferences are salient in two ways. Firstly, they presuppose English to be the medium of instruction in Malaysia's universities across different curricula, despite state language policy to the contrary. While English can be used as the medium of instruction in university degrees in the sciences, technology and mathematics, or at private universities, other disciplines are required by law to be Malay-medium (Too, 2017). This comes as result of ideological challenges that were posed by Malay nationalists who rejected an elevated status of English in Malaysian society. By alluding to courses such as accounting and marketing where English is supposedly important, it is not clear from these excerpts whether the students were aware that, in fact, Malaysian law otherwise requires tertiary education to be Malay-medium. It is nonetheless clear this is their default expectation. This has merit, not only because of their personal experiences as university students, but because English has become so tightly interwoven into neoliberal economics and Malaysia's regionalization and internationalization, including the attraction of international students (Gill, 2006; Too, 2017). To these students' minds, English is undeniably the language of university despite or regardless of policy.

Secondly, and perhaps more poignantly, these comments reveal that the students preferred English not for reasons overtly associated with globalization or international mobility, but for cognitive ease and policy consistency. Their arguments were notably void, in these examples, of any ideological persuasion to favour English for the socioeconomic or international mobility motivations that often structure discussions in language policy and linguistic anthropological literature (Duchêne & Heller, 2012; May, 2014). Rather than arguing that mathematics and science should be taught in English because this facilitates participation in global economic or scientific markets, they in fact preferred the perceived ease of monolingualism when transitioning between education levels. Given universities are English-medium, this monolingualism is logically English from their perspective. Arguably, if university were Malay-medium, then their preferred language for mathematics and science may have been Bahasa Malaysia. It can be concluded from these comments that language preferences are less motivated by the economy-versus-culture tension and more by decreasing cognitive burdens.

## Monolingualism in either language

The above findings on the students specifically preferring English for policy consistency and cognitive ease were somewhat reiterated in a minority of comments across all the cohorts that monolingualism – in either language – is desirable because consistency is paramount. For example, three comments from Chinese groups, six from Malay groups, and two from Indian groups presented negative personal reflections on the medium-of-instruction policy change. They explained that the shift between English and Bahasa Malaysia at either primary or secondary level was difficult to experience. For example, Malay students noted they felt like ‘lab rats’ and that

(Excerpt 2)

- Student 1: It wasn't helping at all.  
 Student 4: Yeah.  
 Student 2: It was quite annoying, they kept changing!  
 Student 3: Keeping changing caused problems for teachers.  
 Student 2: They kept changing the textbook.  
 Student 1: The syllabus. It really affected us, because we had studied science and maths in English since primary school.  
 Student 4: Secondary school.  
 Student 1: Since secondary school.  
 Student 4: To start to learn the subjects in English when we get to secondary school ... it was quite challenging us at that time.

Other students especially lamented that translations between the languages for technical terms were often unavailable, not known by the teachers, or were difficult to remember. This, they felt, impeded learning by creating difficulties that would not have arisen through consistently monolingual education. For example, a Chinese group explained

(Excerpt 3)

- Student 9: It was shocking. It's like all the while I was using English, then they change to BM [Bahasa Malaysia].  
 Student 7: Yeah, and the terms are a lot different, so we needed to maybe start all over again.

Adding to this, a handful of comments across the groups explained that linguistic authenticity is most important. By this they meant that mathematics and science should be taught in English, simply because the students believed that technical terms used in these fields have English origins. Learning these concepts in English would, to their mind, ensure concepts are learned more easily and authentically. For example, a Chinese student argued ‘the original language used was English. So we may as well just use English and not translate because we might have misinterpretations or something like that’. Similarly, a Malay group argued that:

(Excerpt 4)

- Student 5: Some terms were already in English.  
 Student 4: They cannot be translated to Malay.  
 Student 5: Yeah, because if you translate it to Malay, it would be weird.

Relatedly, comments from across the groups (four from Chinese groups, seven from Malay groups, and three from Indian groups) specifically argued that mathematics and science education should in principle be monolingual, without necessarily biasing English or Bahasa Malaysia. Their point was that monolingualism improved learning opportunities by reducing linguistic demands on content learning. For example, Indian groups explained:

(Excerpt 5)

Student 6: But actually I don't agree with it being only about maths and science. Most people believe that it's not only maths and science. Every subject needs to be in English or Malay.

Student 7: Either one.

(Excerpt 6)

Researcher: So what do you think the government should do then?

Student 10: Just stick to one, don't keep changing.

Student 9: Yeah.

Malay students reflected the same position, arguing for example that 'changing for maths and science is confusing the students. They are the victims. They should stick to one rule' and 'if they want English, then fully English in all of the subjects ... it is difficult for us to learn in two languages at the same time'. The analytical point of comments such as these is that they do not expressly bias English nor Bahasa Malaysia. They are notably void of ideological tensions – vis-à-vis matters of national building, identity, economy or connectivity – about which language should be used in the education system. Instead the students' concerns were again reflective and anxious about removing these ideological debates from classrooms so that actual content learning can be maximized. Indeed, only on two occasions – in both cases Malay students – did youths suggest that science and mathematics should be bilingual. However, in both cases this preference was put forward without further explanation before their peers challenged this position with the debates described above.

### **Economy or culture?**

The above is not to say that all comments were void of the economy-versus-culture ideological tension. Across all the groups, arguments were made that science and mathematics should be taught in English because this offers socioeconomic mobility in the globalized economy, because it better prepares students for Malaysian workplaces, or simply because it is simply a wise linguistic decision in that context. This argument featured in seven comments from Chinese students and five from Indian students but in only one Malay comment. On the one hand, it can be argued that this reflects a broader and globally-researched economic or instrumentalist ideology of language. Indeed, this was apparent in some comments. For example, a Chinese student explained 'it is an international language in the world, if you want to do business. Those who do business, like, communicate with other countries, they'll mostly use English first' and another Chinese group explained:

(Excerpt 7)

Student 17: The transition from Malay to English has got to happen, no matter what.

Student 15: Not only to university, but working life. Now you need to use English since English is the international language. So it seems to me, like, we should use English.

Indian groups made similar arguments explain for example:

(Excerpt 8)

Researcher: So, can you tell me why you could chose English and not BM?

Student 4: Malay, we only speak in Malaysia. But English you can go out anywhere and you can survive with that language. So, it's like, if you don't know English – ok in Malaysia you can survive – but imagine if you go, if you are transferred to the US or some country that actually speaks English, you couldn't survive there ... everything would be screwed up and your job affected as well ... I think everybody should be learning from a very young age because it is becoming ... um ... how to say ... the standard language.

On the other hand, these comments can also be interpreted not just as a response to the linguistic capital associated with English, but can also be considered within the broader Malaysia context of race relations. Specifically, these comments can be interpreted less as a preference for English per se but an attempt to construct the identity of contemporary Malaysia as multicultural rather than culturally and linguistically only Malay. This suggestion holds much clout from a Malaysian sociopolitical perspective. Malaysia nation-building, as discussed earlier in this paper, has been squarely premised in ethnic Malay nationalism and the elevation of Malay ethnicity, culture and language above those of the Chinese and Indian *pendatang*. In doing this, non-Malays have been discursively and politically branded as perpetually foreign to Malaysia, as migrants with a diasporic view of India or China as a perceived if not impractical homeland, and therefore as not contributing to the essential fiber of contemporary Malaysian identity (Albury, 2018a). Malay ethnonationalism has only resurged in recent years and has increasingly acquired Islamic overtones, as Barr discusses (2010), which serves to only widen the social chasms between Malays and non-Malays. In as far as sociological theory tells us that disassociation from majority peoples and their culture – whether as a result of imposed hegemonies or ethnonationalism – discourages the integration and assimilation of minority peoples (Kalra, Kaur, & Hutnyk, 2005; Kramer, 2011). Indeed, Coluzzi (2017) notes specifically in the case of Malaysia that Bahasa Malaysia has now become so indexical of Islam that it is not necessarily considered by Indian-and Chinese-Malaysia to be a linguistic unifier. This means that a preference for English may be at least in part be an implicit protest against Bahasa Malaysia, not simply the endorsement of English for socioeconomic purposes.

To this end, it is noteworthy that no Chinese or Indian groups argued that they would want mathematics and science to be taught in Malay for any reasons related to Malaysian identity or culture. Instead, only two comments from Malay groups made such a claim (whereas, noted above, Malay groups produced only one comment in favour of English for socioeconomic reasons). In these comments, the youths lamented that the use of English in the education system erodes Malaysian identity, questioned the claim that

the Malay corpus has not been sufficient expanded in order to offer quality education, and looked to international cases where a local language has not been displaced by English. These two comments were ‘we have to have our own identity in Malaysia. Why do we have to use English and English words? We can make new words in Bahasa Malaysia. Well, it’s difficult, but it’s not impossible’ and ‘like, Japanese, you know, they must know their own language. So, if they want do it like that, they should keep it [in Malay]’. The non-Malay students, in contrast, made three comments (two from Chinese students and one from Indian students) that English – not Bahasa Malaysia – would bring equality to Malaysian classrooms and is therefore a more logical medium-of-instruction. This handful of comments was no doubt informed by discourses and attitudes of disassociation from the Malay ethnic majority – and ideas of Malay ethnonationalism – and again amounted to a linguistic protest against the status of Bahasa Malaysia in Malaysia’s contemporary pluralist society. An Indian student argued that education should be in English ‘so we can understand it as well’ while Chinese groups explained

(Excerpt 8)

Student 19: For me, I would like it to be in English, because I am English [medium] – educated. It would be easier for me.

Student 18: Yeah, we use English more than Malay.

(Excerpt 9)

Student 8: It should be English. There is no choice. They choose Malay as it is an advantage for the Malay students, because they better understand in Malay, so they teach in Malay for maths and science.

Notably, the latter excerpt only describes current policy and its rationale, and it stops short of offering a negative evaluation of language policy itself, beyond stating a preference for English. This is understandable, given critical discussion about the codified supremacy of Malay linguistic and cultural values remains highly sensitive and potentially legally fraught. It might be argued, however, that vocalizing and drawing attention to this policy rationale where one race is favoured over another – as this student chose to directly after stating a preference for English – nonetheless harbours an implicit critique of that policy.

## Conclusion

Critical inquiry in sociolinguistics, with its broad concerns for power relations, cultural hegemonies, and matters of mobility and linguistic capital, is important fodder in language policy research. There is no escaping the fact that for the vast majority of people around the world, their societies and governments have subscribed to supranational economic and social structures. In as far as these supranational structures are given a linguistic form by way of a common language, there is also no escaping the fact that English – or any other language that might have filled this hypercentral role – has appropriated perceived and real indexes of socioeconomic opportunity, access to knowledge, and mobility. As long as this remains so, then counter concerns for local languages, for their vitality and status, and for their associated cultures and identities in the face of the ubiquity of

English, will no doubt remain. The point of this paper was not, however, to prove the validity and ubiquity of this tension either in real-life in sociolinguistic arrangements or in scholarly perspectives about them.

Instead, the paper has shown from the bottom-up that language policy preferences need not explicitly concern a tension between economy and culture, even if this is an ideological paradigm assumed to commonly preoccupy language policy makers, users, and indeed scholars. The paper showed that Malaysian classrooms are a primary site of language policy intervention between raising English-language proficiencies in the interests of Malaysia's internationalization, and advancing Malaysia's postcolonial nation-building along ethnically, culturally and linguistically Malay lines. This tension has manifested in policy changes on whether mathematics and science are to be taught in English in Malaysian schools. However, when asked for their views on Malaysia's inconsistent policy on English and Malay for mathematics and science, recent experiencers of the policy tended not respond with discourses that originated from the economy-versus-culture ideological paradigm. Some language policy preferences, such as ethnic Malays biasing all education through Malay or non-Malays biasing English, could be traced to discourses and experiences of Malay ethnonationalism to build contemporary Malaysia in ethnic Malay terms or socioeconomic anxieties about attaining adequate linguistic skills to participate in the globalized economy. The majority of participants, however, expressed view about language policy based on other factors. These included what they saw as a need to ensure consistency in language policy between universities and schools so that there is no need to change language when progressing through the education system. Relatedly, this also included the need to commit to monolingualism – in either language – to facilitate and expedite content learning. To this end, the students reflected with regret that their education in mathematics and science had been interrupted by the government's language policy backflips that had been motivated by the government seeking to (re)balance the economy-versus-culture tension. What is apparent, at least in the case of this small cohort of youths, is that their commentary vis-a-vis language-in-education was more unrelated to the economy-versus-culture question than related to it.

This puts a spotlight on – and in turn problematizes – some pertinent and widespread views about the nature of language policy as it has been theorized in contemporary, especially postmodern, scholarship. A popular conceptualization of language policy as it is applied, even if by another name, is that it is like an onion (García & Menken, 2010; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007) with many interconnected layers. Putting this specific terminology aside, contemporary theoretical perspectives tend to agree that language policy takes shape through interconnections between, or governmentality at, different levels of society, and through the back and forth appropriation, interpretation, negotiation, ideologization and production of language policy between those layers (Johnson & Johnson, 2015; Nekvapil, 2016; Pennycook, 2006). In as far as the economy-versus-culture tension is the driving force between language-in-education policy in Malaysia but is not necessarily experienced as such on the ground, this further evidences the need to research how national language policies are communicated to and understood by the public. It is one thing to research how language policies are created and why, and to analyze their impacts, but it is another thing to investigate whether the public has access to the details and motivations of the language policy decisions that affect them, when and where they learn about language policies, and indeed through which formal or informal

communicative channels (or not). This means we ought to study *language policy promulgation* – ie whether and how national language policies moves off the desks of politicians and become communicated to those to be affected by those policies – as part of the intricate multilayered interconnectedness of the language policy onion. In less-than-democratic states such as Malaysia, which has curtailed freedom of speech on perceivably sensitive topics such as the pedestalized status of ethnic Malays and the pedestalized status of their language, we should not make assumptions about open, robust and transparent policy consultation and communication processes. This means that how individuals and communities learn, or not, about the language policies that affect them warrants a place in the language policy onion to understand how the onion unfolds.

Secondly, and at the crux of this paper, the findings speak to why the epistemological shift towards postmodern and posthumanist interpretations of language policy as a lived experience are warranted. In as far as the economy-versus-culture tension is one that has shaped policy – in Malaysia and more broadly – and is subsequently analyzed as such, then it exists within the framework of language policy as a top-down intervention. Such analysis is needed if we are to decipher why governments pursue and implement the language policies they do (Spolsky, 2004). In decentering authority on knowledge in social research away from traditional centres of political and academic power, and in that way decolonizing sociolinguistics with a diversity of views about sociolinguistic topics, our field has placed the diverse interpretations, knowledge and narratives of language users themselves firmly in the sociolinguistic agenda in the name of postmodernism (Stroud, 2003). Canagarajah (2005b) sees this as necessary because ‘social practices, communicative conventions, linguistic realities and knowledge paradigms’ (Canagarajah, 2005a) can usefully inform academic work seeking to understand local sociolinguistic realities and experiences, including of policy. The data from this paper speaks to and advances that endeavour.

Ultimately, seeing the data from this paper in these postmodern terms not only helps to decentre authority over knowledge and experience, but also reminds us that these bottom-up perspectives and ambitions can be at odds with top-down motivations and politics. If bottom-up perspectives and lived experiences of language policy do not necessarily mirror top-down political intentions, then this begs the question of what factors – political or otherwise – inform those perspectives and experiences. In the case of this paper, matters such as cognitive demand and linguistic efficiency – rather than economy or culture – informed these perspectives and experiences. Epistemologically, and as discussed in this paper – the economy-versus-culture paradigm is a critical one laden with matters of power, especially the cultural or socioeconomic inequalities that are perceived to arise by favouring one language over another in the classroom. Cognitive demand and linguistic efficiency, as the main interests of the cohort of students in this research, however, fall outside that critical paradigm. This dataset therefore encourages us to look to alternate, non-critical theoretical models to interpret grassroots experiences of language policy because these experiences may not in themselves be best interpreted through critical approaches. As I (Albury, 2018b) have argued elsewhere relying on Pennycook (2018a, 2018b) a posthumanist approach to language policy may fit the bill by canvassing a greater scope of material and immaterial affordances that shape experiences of language policy than power structures that orient critical social theory. In any case, this paper calls on us not to rely too uncritically on the critical economy-versus-culture paradigm as a grand narrative in contemporary language policy research as this, if we are interested

in the narratives of language policy audiences, may overlook how policy is in fact experienced.

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