

This is a post-print version of “Nathan John Albury (2019) Between public perception and government intent in national language policy, *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 20:2, 160-178,” DOI: [10.1080/14664208.2018.1468963](https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2018.1468963).

Between public perception and government intent in national language policy

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Introduction

Community knowledge about language policy will be limited to the extent the public does, wants to, and indeed can – within the society’s political culture – engage language policy communications and discourses. Malaysia is a useful case study as its language policy – like Malaysian social policy more broadly – has codified ethnocracy and ethnic inequality. Although historic migrations from southern China and India established Chinese and Indian communities who make up around 23% and 7% of the population (Zhou & Xiaomei, 2017), Malaysia operates contentious laws that intentionally pedestalise the Malays. The Chinese and Indians, despite centuries of residence and citizenship, are constructed as *pendatang* (visitors) on *Tanah Melayu* (Malay soil). Bahasa Malaysia (Bahasa) is the sole national language, and language rights for non-Malays are largely confined to primary-level heritage language-medium education. Criticism of these arrangements can amount to sedition (Sedition Act 1948 Article 3) and is curtailed by ‘restrictive speech laws and politicized prosecutions of opposition leaders’ (Freedom House, 2017). Nonetheless, non-Malays have typically retained their heritage languages or are experiencing language shift to English or Mandarin, rather than to Bahasa (Coluzzi, 2017; David, 2017; Ibrahim, Muslim, & Buang, 2011). This begs the question of what Malaysians themselves claim to know about Malaysia’s language policy and how they explain it. With that in mind, this paper investigates epistemic knowledge and reasoning vis-à-vis national language policy among a cohort of youth from the country’s Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. This serves as a case study to analyse whether and how the content and rationale of a government’s controversial policy might figure in the metalinguistic awareness of the public.

After an overview of Malaysia’s language and policy situation, the paper analyses what these youths constructed, through folk linguistic group discussions, Malaysia’s language policy to in fact be. The discussions especially canvassed why Bahasa is the only national language, given most groups identified this as core policy. By applying a contented-oriented discourse analytical approach to folk linguistic talk (Preston, 2011), aided by van Dijk’s (2003) discourse-knowledge interface, the paper examines divergences between knowledge about language policy on the one hand, and actual policy content and rationale on the other. In Malaysia, social psychological engagement with policy is restricted by a dearth of policy discourse because laws curtail debate and democratic process is not assured. The claimed knowledge of these youths was sooner informed by lived experiences, community discourses, and dominant

ideologies mistaken for public policy, rather than government policy itself. The data suggest that also researching *policy promulgation* – the interest from political science in whether, how, and how effectively governments communicate their policies and rationale with the public (Birkland, 2014; Sabatier, 1991) – may serve language policy scholarship well. In as far as language policy is as a multilayered dialectal process involving policymakers and policy implementers across society (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2015), a more political scientific consideration of how governments promulgate their language policies may help to better understand the reach and reception of policy.

Malaysian language policy

At a crossroads of cultures and ethnicities, language policy in Malaysia has received ample attention. The *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* dedicated a special issue in March 2017 to *Language Planning and Multilingual Malaysia* (Volume 2017, Issue 244 edited by Minglang Zhou & Wang Xiaomei) featuring scholars who explore language policy at micro and macro levels. In Malaysia, as elsewhere, language policy is a manifestation of broader political, cultural, and economic forces (Shohamy & Spolsky, 2000). Since British colonial rule, the backbone of Malaysian social and political life has been ethnic difference, to which language is intrinsic. Malaya fell under British control beginning in 1771 until Malaysian independence in 1957 (Gill, 2013). Bahasa had long been the predominant language of the region – varieties of which are also used in Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei – and had been a language of trade during Dutch-colonial rule in Southeast Asia (Ostler, 2005). However, the British instilled English as the language of prestige, local administration, and of education for elites. In general, however, the British saw the Malays as ‘lazy, unwilling to work for wages bad therefore could not be considered a potential pool of labour for the colonial economy’ (Andaya & Andaya, 2016, p. 182), so welcomed migration from China and India to fill labour gaps. The Chinese typically took on roles in trade in urban areas and flourished, and the Indians generally worked the plantations and were economically marginalised. The Malays remained largely rural and impoverished. Contrary to Malay expectations, the Chinese and Indian diasporas did not return home, but settled with their plethora of languages, including Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, Hainanese, Foochow, Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, Punjabi, and Telugu. *Tanah Melayu* was now culturally and linguistically diverse. Rather than forging an integrated multiculturalism, the British defined and divided Malaya along ethnic lines that had become dialectally synonymous with language and socioeconomics (Ibrahim et al., 2011).

Since independence, these ethnic divides, coupled with Malay ethnonationalism, have structured government policy. Malaysia is a formal ethnocracy whereby being Malay, and therefore Muslim by definition, attracts preferential treatment. This is known as *Ketuanan Melayu* and premises the discursive construction of Malays as indigenous *Bumiputra* (sons of the soil) and deserving greater privileges than the non-Muslim Chinese and Indians. Accordingly, Malays especially enjoy special quotas in public sector employment (David & Govindasamy, 2005). Policy that extended these quotas to tertiary education has been replaced by a policy of meritocracy, but concerns remain that, in practice, Malays are still often afforded preferential access (cf. Ar, 2003). These privileges came about after race riots in 1969, which the government saw as resulting from Malay socioeconomic disadvantage.

Indeed, the Chinese had come to hold the balance of economic power, and this, from a sociological perspective, meant 'Malays feared their political power was being threatened by Chinese's economic might' (Noor & Leong, 2013, p. 717). Naturally, not all Chinese-Malaysians – nor Indians – were affluent, and non-Malays have intermittently voiced demands for meritocracy over ethnocracy. Dr Mahatir Mohamad, prime minister between 1981 and 2003, vehemently opposed such equality, asserting that 'Malays were the "definitive people" of Malaysia' (Andaya & Andaya, 2016, p. 309). He did, however, market the ideology of *Bangsa Malaysia* whereby Malaysians were encouraged to identify as a nation rather than by ethnicity. However, in the absence of engendering that ideology with revised policies, non-Malays retained a commonsense understanding that '*Bangsa Malaysia* is nonsensical and that Bumiputera hegemony would remain unchanged' (p. 54). Najib Razak's *1Malaysia* policy since 2010 encourages Malaysians to integrate their ethnic identities. This fell under the banner of economic development, supposed meritocracy, and effective governance for all. For non-Malays, *1Malaysia* sounded 'like political equality, inclusiveness, and an end to institutional racism' (Chin, 2010, p. 166). In practice, again, *Ketuanan Melayu* has not ended.

Under this ethnocracy, it is unsurprising that the constitution (Government of Malaysia, 1957) codifies Bahasa as the single official language (Part XII). This would not only serve ethnonationalist purposes, but would also counter the higher English language proficiencies of the Chinese and Indians that especially advantaged their socioeconomic mobility. To this end, education legislation stipulates that Bahasa must be the language of instruction in government schools, beyond heritage-medium education in Mandarin and Tamil at the primary level (The Education Act 1996, Part IV) and some possibilities for studying Mandarin as a second language in the state system. Chinese and Indian students can progress to private heritage language-medium secondary schools. However, doing so disqualifies them from public universities and at present there are no Tamil-medium secondary schools. Hegemonic education laws have resulted in the establishment of private universities and the expansion of foreign universities with campuses in Malaysia that indeed cater to those who opt out of the public system or do not gain access to a public university. However, the government has responded with legislation that bestows power upon the minister to require private universities to teach Bahasa, English, Malaysian studies, or Islamic Studies (The Education Act 1996, Part IV).

Rather than inroads being made to improve the language rights of non-Bumiputra, Islamic overtones to Malay ethnonationalism are increasingly informing social and political life. As corruption scandals plague Najib Razak's ruling *Barisan Nasional* party, moderate Muslims are reported to look to their faith for moral guidance. Political parties have, in turn, strategically exploited Islamic principles to justify their policy visions, albeit these policies affect a multifaith society (Abbott & Gregorios-Pippas, 2010). Malaysia has also seen the rise of Islamic finance and banking (Sloane-White, 2011), and even Chinese and Indian schools are prohibited from teaching unIslamic content (Joseph, 2005). This renewed Islamisation 'is basically a variation of the original Malay ethnonationalism, using the nearly complete symbiosis between Malay and Muslim identity as the point of articulation that allows religious nationalism to serve as a cipher for ethnonationalism' but is an ethnonationalism 'that is much less accommodating of minorities than was traditional Malay nationalism' (Barr & Govindasamy, 2010, p. 293). Ethnic divides are now more than just about ethnicity, but

increasingly about religion.

The impact of policy

Sociology teaches us that it is not surprising Malaysia is still characterised by societal multilingualism. By continuing to construct Chinese and Indian-Malaysians as *pendatang*, hegemonic assimilationist policy relieves non-Malays from the duty of national loyalty. Assimilation theory tells us that non-Malays will therefore be more likely to *adapt* to Bahasa and Malay culture, rather than *adopt* it (Kramer, 2011). This clarifies why non-Malays have both mastered Bahasa and retained their own languages to navigate Malaysian life. Bahasa is used amongst Malays, and often between Malays and others, as well as by all for official purposes (Gill, 2013). However, non-Malays have not typically shifted to Malay monolingualism despite triggers that might encourage shift, such as the Bahasa speakers forming the majority and holding political power. Instead, the Chinese community has retained its plethora of languages, especially in private domains, and communication between Chinese groups is typically in Mandarin. This is despite Mandarin not being a local heritage language but is often acquired as a second language. As Albury (2017) discusses, positioning Mandarin as an intra-ethnic lingua franca is influenced by a local epistemology that positions Mandarin as the mother tongue of all Chinese on the basis of ethnicity rather than proficiency. This also parallels the rising status of Mandarin internationally (Zhou & Xiaomei, 2017) and serves as useful political fodder in forging ethnopolitical cohesion in the face of Malay hegemony. The Indian community is dominated by Tamil, but generally affords greater prestige to English, causing a widespread shift to English rather than Bahasa and a decline in Tamil-medium primary enrolments (David & McLellan, 2014; David, Naji, & Kaur, 2003).

The complexity does not end there. Despite policy to minimise its role as a hallmark of Malaysia's postcolonial independence from the United Kingdom, English is still commonly used between the ethnicities instead of, or parallel to Bahasa, and remains a preferred language of the press, tertiary education, and business (Coluzzi, 2017; Zhou & Xiaomei, 2017). A tension persists between ethnonationalists who promote Bahasa and instrumentalists who argue that Malaysia should embrace English more holistically. Accordingly, the government continues to institute policy backflips on whether mathematics and science are to be delivered in Bahasa, English, or both (Gill, 2013). Language contact has also produced *mixed languages* that perform social functions. *Manglish* amounts to essentialised code-switching at the lexical, sentential, or discourse level between Bahasa and English in informal dialogue whereby Malaysians seek their 'own brand of English to construct a sense of belonging and identity' (Pillai, 2008). *Bahasa Rojak*, on the other hand, amounts to resourceful communication akin to *linguaging*. It draws fluidly on linguistic repertoires without conforming to rules of any one language, and is perceived by Malaysians as fostering interethnic inclusiveness (Albury, 2017). Additionally, recognition that English has economic value may have inadvertently prompted other non-Malays, especially the Indian community, to deprioritise Bahasa (Coluzzi, 2017). It also appears that Chinese-medium education is gaining popularity even in Malay communities. Malay sources attribute this to the rising regional and international status of Mandarin as a result of economic prosperity in China. However, Chinese sources cite the poor quality of Malay-medium education. In any case, around 11% of Chinese-medium enrolments are now

held by non-Chinese (Yin, 2015). Coluzzi (2017) therefore asks whether Malaysian language planning has perhaps failed.

This, plus the country's tense vexed relationship with freedom of speech and discourses about ethnic affairs, calls into question whether, how, and how effectively Malaysia has communicated its policies so that they can be understood by the public. As primary sources, Malaysia's constitution and laws are publicly available on the Attorney General's Chambers of Malaysia website (2016). However, they are not accompanied by preambles, policy explanations, nor overviews of decisions and processes. The Ministry of Education website (<http://www.moe.gov.my>) provides policy information about language requirements in Malaysian schools, but at the time of this paper the website remained unstable or unavailable. Information about Malaysia's education system was sooner accessible from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and its reports that synthesise Malaysian education policy (UNESCO, 2013; World Education Forum, 2015).

A democratic perspective would consider the channels of communication between the Malaysian government and the public to be narrow. Firstly, Ansori (2013) explains that policy information in Malaysia is indeed mostly confined to government websites, rather than, for example, public consultation processes. Accessing websites, such as those that detail Malaysian legislation, relies on citizens proactively seeking out policy and legal information available in specialised language. This raises questions about the accessibility and user-friendliness of policy information. Ansori (2013) also adds that ministries that do provide online information about policy processes and decisions oftentimes limit this information to infrequent annual reports and information that focuses on service delivery rather than policy. Secondly, critics argue that the Official Secrets Act is misused as reason not to communicate important policy decisions and deliberations with the public, effectively allowing the authorities 'to withhold an expansive range of information from public view' (Ansori, 2013, p. 261). The act was designed to uphold public safety by inhibiting the flow of intelligence, but its broad application, especially in respect to social issues, is seen as unduly disrupting communication between the government and the public. Thirdly, news media and social media – as other key domains for policy promulgation or discussion – are highly censored on ethnic affairs. Most independent news channels are owned by corporations run by *Barisan Nasional*, Malaysia's long-standing ruling coalition, meaning policy discussion is broadly one-sided (Brown, Ali, & Muda, 2004). Above all, however, discussing or debating matters relating to ethnic affairs can be deemed seditious by law (Sedition Act 1948, Article 3). After the 1969 riots, the government cracked down on discourse that could lead to further disharmony (Wade, 2014) with the collateral affect of restructuring freedom of speech such that Malaysia is largely unfree (Freedom House, 2017). Social media discussions and independent blogging are curtailed as Malaysians self-censor vis-à-vis topics about ethnicity in fear of being perceived as seditiously questioning Malay supremacy.

Consequently, the promulgation of social policies in Malaysia is limited compared to the West, and is contextualised by a culture where debate about ethnic affairs is prohibited, online information is sparse, and the media is not free. In that context, and because language policy has had limited success, this paper helps to elucidate whether the Malaysian public has understood language policy as the government intended. It is to be expected that public knowledge about any policy will vary in as far as it is shaped by influ-

ences beyond government discourse alone. However, the Malaysian case is particularly complex in that political transparency, democracy, and debate are not assured, or even prohibited. The question of what Malaysians might know about language policy – including those directly disadvantaged by it – becomes especially thought-provoking.

Theorising language policy and folk linguistic knowledge

In soliciting the folk linguistic perspectives of Malaysian youths about language policy, the first starting point is that folk linguistics encompasses attitudinal work into languages and their speakers, as well as what non-experts claim to know about linguistic phenomena (Preston, 2011). That is to say, in the case of this paper, people in the community will not only have dispositions towards language varieties and language policies, but will also claim knowledge about them. Language policy and planning can therefore fall within the realm of the many linguistic topics people, who are not trained linguists, cast their minds to and claim knowledge about. What they claim to know about language policy and linguistics can inform their language policy discourses and ideas to an equal or even greater degree than language attitudes (Albury, 2016). A bridge between language policy research and folk linguistics is therefore worthwhile where research concerns grassroots engagement with policy as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. Added to this, and in as far as language policy is a matter of critical sociolinguistic research concerned with inequalities and power structures between languages and their speakers, an appropriately designed folk linguistic research methodology can contribute to critical sociolinguistic inquiry. Inherent to critical social theory is the salience, relativity, and power of knowledge as it is held in the community irrespective of its empirical reliability – in influencing discourses and ideologies. That is to say, from a Foucauldian perspective, no truth is predetermined but is constructed to be true (Foucault, 1980). Every time claimed knowledge is expressed or operationalised, that knowledge becomes instantiated and contributes to the (re)construction of truth.

Secondly, normative knowledge claims may be epistemic manifestations of an ideology. This will be the case for systemic claimed knowledge that is shared by a collective. Naturally not all claimed knowledge is systemic, but can be idiosyncratic such as hearsay, misinterpretations, or personal memory (van Dijk, 2003). This knowledge might be ascertained through different quantitative and qualitative methods, but for the purposes of this paper it may manifest in metalinguistic talk such that this knowledge can be proposed, debated, endorsed, or rejected by a collective.

Thirdly, in an age of scholarship that has decentralised who does language policy, the paper maintains that researching macro-level language policies has much to offer. Language policy is rightly theorised as an activity that also happens outside the corridors of political power, meaning policy can be analysed as grassroots processes, such as in homes, businesses, schools, and community groups (cf. Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Kelly-Holmes, 2010). Hornberger and Johnson (2007) explain that language policy is like an onion with interconnected layers comprising government policies at the inner core and local agents in the outer layers. In between are many policy arbiters (Johnson & Johnson, 2015) who make policy decisions in a dialectal relationship to sociopolitical contexts, who implement policies from top-down in respect to their own interpretations, such as school boards, media outlets, and government

officials, and who ultimately become policy subjects. Malaysian youth are therefore actors in the Malaysian language policy cycle. Importantly, this still includes national language policies. Not only do nations seek to regulate language in the grassroots based on intrinsic motivations spanning national ideology, globalisation, and sociolinguistic diversity (Spolsky, 2004), but they establish the political and macro-ideological framework within which multilayered dialectal language policy processes take place.

Method

A series of 25 semi-structured folk linguistic group discussions were held with undergraduate university students at private and public institutions across Malaysia, including in the Kuala Lumpur area, Penang, Kota Bharu, Kuala Terengganu, Kuching, and Miri. Defining who counts as a folk linguist is always vexed given expertise can be acquired in different ways (Paveau, 2011). For the purposes of this paper, participants came from various majors including accounting, English, and forensic science, but never linguistics. Access was obtained by liaising directly with linguistics departments who helped to recruit participants from across their institutions in return for a guest lecture. University youth were the target cohort because these youths are 'in line to be the future inheritors of a fully developed and modern Malaysia' (Krauss, Hamzah, Juhari, & Hamid, 2005, p. 174), scheduled to occur soon under Malaysia's *2020 Vision*. On the one hand, these youth have only ever lived in Malaysia during the current Islamisation process. However, anthropology speaks of youth lifestyles as transitioning from tradition to westernisation, including an emerging culture of challenging authority (Heryanto & Mandal, 2013). Their epistemic constructions and deliberations about language policy therefore provide insights into the language-political leanings of Malaysia's next leaders.

Students were interviewed in groups following the advice of university hosts. This would allow students to participate with their friends and practice their English with a first language speaker in a less intimidating situation than one-to-one interviews. However, a specific advantage of group discussions is that epistemic claims could be negotiated, refined, contested, and endorsed between participants. However, the analysis is by no means limited to only considering knowledge that was necessarily shared by a collective or has an origin in ideology as this would forgo other types of knowledge. Instead, data to be analysed will include discourses of individuals and collectives.

The students were grouped by self-identified ethnicity, whereby 9 discussions were held with Malay students, 11 with Chinese students, and 5 with Indian students. Only one indigenous group was established, and those data are set aside until field work can involve more indigenous voices. Each group accommodated between four and six students recruited by local staff. Grouping the students by ethnicity may seem unnecessarily positivist, but was socially and ethically responsible given Malaysian life is structured along ethnic lines. University staff, participants, and my Malaysian friends unanimously advised that interethnic groups would lead to non-Malays simply agreeing with Malay participants to avoid perceptions that they question Malay supremacy. Accordingly, the students were also never asked how they feel about policy, only what they know about it. Any volunteered opinions were recorded but did not form the basis for further questioning. The ethical responsibility of grouping students by ethnicity does not mean that data from each ethnic group should be

interpreted as necessarily representative of their ethnic groups. Instead, the data must be treated as case study. The students were not required to give their names and were free to leave the conversations at any point (which occurred once). To further protect student identities, this paper will not identify the institutions that participated.

This paper analyses how the students responded to two core questions. Firstly, students were asked whether the government operates policies or laws about language, and if so, to detail them. When the groups identified Bahasa as the national language, the students were then asked to explain why this is policy. This formed part of a broader range of conversation topics about multilingualism in Malaysia. A folk linguistic content-oriented approach (Preston, 2011) was applied to analyse the discussions. This examined the discussions for overtly stated knowledge about (socio)linguistic phenomena, and for presupposed knowledge. Drawing on van Dijk's (2003) discourse-knowledge interface operationalised by stance analysis (Jaffe, 2009), overt statements were those presented as arguments based on epistemic claims, potentially supported by explanatory commentary. Presupposed knowledge concerns underlying logic that structures discourse. This was identified as unstated but socially or culturally embedded assumptions in dialectal relationship to stated knowledge. The paper now turns to discussions offered by each ethnicity to analyse what they constructed and explained Malaysia's national language policy in epistemic terms, plus any evaluative positions they volunteered.

Malay discussions

This section shows that despite ethnonationalist policy designed to advantage them, Malay students were often unaware of language policy, its rationale, and its impacts. Instead, they defined national language policy based on their assumptions and personal observations. Only five of the nine groups noted that Bahasa is the national language, albeit this is a hallmark of policy and discourse about national cohesion. Of these groups, two defined policy as explicitly about transforming Bahasa into an international lingua franca. They commented that 'we have tried to bring Bahasa in as a world language, we try to bring Bahasa worldwide,' and 'I think Malaysia's government introduced a program that campaigns for others to speak Malay. For example, Germany's *Speak Malay* competition.' These perspectives were no doubt informed by the current Prime Minister's announcements about making Bahasa a world language and establishing Malay Studies chairs abroad (*Malay Mail Online*, 2016).

The Malay groups that did not identify Bahasa as the official language seemed unaware of the government's policy and rationale. Three of these discussions were held at English-medium institutes in Penang where the Malay form a minority and English, Mandarin, Hokkien, and Tamil are widely spoken. It appeared that this context, where national language policy is less tangible in their daily lives, shaped their epistemic constructions. For example, two groups did not believe any policy exists. When asked if the government operates policies about language, one group replied 'no, not really,' whereas the second group described Malaysia as enjoying linguistic equality, explaining:

- 1) Student 3: All languages are equal right?
- Student 1: Yeah, all equal.

In the third case, students explained that there is no formal policy, but that regulations require advertisements not to mix Bahasa and English. It seems these students' meta-linguistic knowledge inflated a recurring ideology of language – one that shuns using *Manglish* or *Bahasa Rojak* in formal contexts – into a government-endorsed regulation. They explained that 'if you speak in Malay, you write in Malay, you have to stick to that.' The fourth case, in contrast, involved students at a public Malay-medium university in a conservative Islamic state where ethnic diversity is minimal. These students did not produce any knowledge about Bahasa's hegemonic status. Unless they intentionally circumvented this discussion, it seems these students were less aware of Bahasa's status and its impacts because they do not routinely experience diversity. They even presupposed that language policy is something only within parliament and that effective communication outweighs adherence to Malay monolingual dialogue, as shown in the following:

2) Researcher: So today I am talking about language policy. Does Malaysia have one?

Student 6: Yeah.

Student 3: Yeah. I think English, right?

Student 6: No, Malay. For government, they use Malay, even in the letters, in the system, everything is in Malay.

Student 1: If a politician, they went for a meeting or they went for a cabinet meeting, even Chinese and Indian politicians, they must use English.

Student 4: Malay.

Student 2: Malay. They must use Malay. But if they want to use English words, they must ask for permission. So you see the high-rankers, so the politicians will ask, 'diizinkan yang berhormat (please allow me)', so you can continue to use the English words.

Student 1: Yeah, you have to ask permission to use English words. But most of the cabinet meeting, we will use Malay in politics.

Student 2: But if the political leader is speaking with a target audience that prefers English, they will use English.

Others more explicitly deliberated the legal status of English. Two groups argued that English and Bahasa are both official languages but that Malay is comparatively *more official*, explaining 'yes, [English is] an official language. But the main one will be Bahasa.' This increased status of English, and the negotiation described above about language in parliament, can be contextualised by the omnipresence of English in education, media, and business. English is indeed so pervasive that it often operates as a de facto national language (Coluzzi, 2017), in this case to the point that a myth exists about an elevated status, informed by community ideology rather than policy. Even some Malays who did not position English as an official language volunteered opinions that would support this, including 'I think English should be the main language' and that speaking English 'is a measure of intelligence.' Two groups described language policy as failing because 'even the government uses English when they speak.' Rather than reproducing Malay ethnonationalism, these students reported their meta-knowledge of the pervasive ideology in Malaysian society that affords prestige to English.

The students were also asked why Bahasa is the national language and not also other languages. Outlying responses included that it is the national language ‘because it is an easy language to remember, to know, to learn.’ However, the vast majority uncritically reiterated the government’s position that Malays are indigenous to *Tanah Melayu*, such as:

3) Student 2: Because the origin of Malaysia is Malay. That’s why.

Student 4: Like Indian and Chinese, they are not Bumiputra.

One group argued that the non-Bumiputra agree their languages should be excluded from law because ‘Bahasa Melayu united us altogether’ and claiming ‘they say to me “it is not a problem at all, because we feel Malaysia deserved it, because we are from India and we are from China.”’ These explanations of policy, based on Malay indigeneity, remained cursory. Citizens arguably feel less need to become acutely familiar with policies they are not disadvantaged by. This would explain why these particular students did not discuss in greater detail the matters of national unity, ethnonationalism, and affirmative action that drive Malaysian language policy, and why one group claimed they had ‘never thought about it’. Conversely, the recurring government discourse that describes non-Malays as visitors on *Tanah Melayu*, and which appeals to Malay ethnonationalism, was readily available to these youths and could be produced as the policy rationale without further thought. Woven within their exchanges, however, were two key presuppositions. Firstly, they relied upon the normative government-endorsed epistemology of ethnicising society vis-à-vis indigeneity, and advantaging the Bumiputra. However, this was contradicted by a second ideological presupposition that Bahasa holds more value than other Bumiputra languages, despite all Bumiputra being equally indigenous and Malaysia’s law affording socioeconomic advantages based on being Bumiputra, not Malay. No reference was made to non-Malay Bumiputra rights, nor to their languages at least being hierarchised above *pendatang* languages which the first epistemology would support. Instead, the dominance of Bahasa for all Bumiputra was unmarked. While this does reflect current language arrangements, it also calls for inquiry into how Malaysia’s constitutional provisions for all Bumiputra have been reinterpreted by government and community discourses specifically for Malay ethnonationalist purposes.

Indian discussions

Compared to the Malay groups, the Indian groups produced more critical claims about what policy is and its rationale, loaded these with ethnopolitical tensions, and volunteered negative dispositions to current arrangements. All the groups identified Bahasa as the sole national language. Especially striking was that in identifying this, two groups nonetheless argued that Malaysia operates no language policy, with the comments such as ‘no such policy, I’m not sure. But our national language is Malay, of course.’ For them, the status of Bahasa was so normative that it does not count as policy but as a *fait accompli*. This normativity was reaffirmed in six other exchanges that explained that the status of Bahasa is not open for negotiation and that non-Malays have resigned themselves to systematic oppression. This especially manifested in epistemic claims that Malay ethnonationalism dictates interethnic

policy. For example, five exchanges defined language policy as giving 'no support' to Indians:

4) Student 5: We can't change it. Because they are like that.

Researcher: They don't want change?

Student 5: They won't change.

Student 4: There is change. For a few years you can see it maybe education wise, but in other things, not really.

Student 5: In other things, they won't change.

Student 1: They will not give in.

This resignation results from the experience of being the smallest non-Bumiputra minority and discourses within the Indian community about this status. Accordingly, and without much prompting, the groups offered dynamic explanations about why Bahasa is the only national language. These especially revealed critical awareness about language policy as hegemony entrenched in power relations vis-à-vis race, religion, and demography, amounting to 14 distinct exchanges across the groups. As a student succinctly explained:

This is something which is not based on language. This is based more towards race. Malaysia currently, I think, has the biggest race issue in the world because we are the ones who have a very high number of ethnicities in one country. But unfortunately, we are unable to maintain a very good reputation in it. So ... this is something which slightly diverges from language but is still within the circle.

Some referred to Malaysia's historical development to explain that race and power relations, as they are experienced today, were actually formalised when Malaysian independence was negotiated, such as:

5) Student 1: We have to follow ...

Student 3: That Bahasa Melayu is the official language ...

Student 2: That law was made upon agreement from all the other races. It happened before independence. Like in [19]50 something, like all the races, they came to an agreement.

Others assumed that size matters, whereby Malaysia gives 'priority to the majority. The majority is the Malay.' For these students, the Malays are afforded privileges because of demographics and not because of indigeneity. This implicitly identifies the inherent contradiction in Malay discourses about rights based on indigeneity versus the hierarchisation of Malays above non-Malay Bumiputra. Indeed, another three exchanges added that Bahasa is the national language because Malays are Muslim, thereby correlating policy with religion. They explained, for example:

6) Student 1: They said Malaysia is an Islamic country, so they need to have ... priority will be given to this because Malays are Muslim.

Student 4: That's the law. Researcher: So, it's Islamic ...

Student 4: So, the national language is Malay.

Islam as Malay moral authority was seen to hold disproportionate power in interethnic affairs whereby Islam – rather than Bumiputra status or socioeconomic development – dictates policy. Perceiving this correlation is understandable. Although Malaysia has codified religious freedom, the question remains whether Malaysia is a de facto Islamic state (Hoffstaedter, 2013). This question is increasingly complex as Malaysian society undergoes increasing ethnonationalist Islamisation whereby Malays look to the Arab states as ideal examples of Muslim life. Students may therefore be forgiven for perceiving Islam as dictating policy in practice if not in law.

Whereas some Malays justified their rights based on being Bumiputra, Indian students rejected this justification but explained that it is indeed the rationale. In part, these groups offered metaknowledge of government-sanctioned discourses about *Tanah Melayu*. However, they reiterated that the Bumiputra status was negotiated and is not a fait accompli. Two groups instead explained that the policy of Bahasa as the national language because of Malay indigeneity is flawed or at least dubious. They commented, for example, 'even the Malays they are not the origin of the country. The Orang Asli are the origin,' and

- 7) Student 2: They claimed that they are the Bumiputra. What we call that? Student 3: Citizens.

Student 2: Citizens, the first, the natives. But there is a lot of conflicts lah.

[Lah has meaning depending on context, such as creating emphasis or showing ill-temperedness (Goddard, 1994)].

Student 1: Yeah, actually there are a lot of conflicts about that. Yeah, about who is Bumiputra.

This challenge is no doubt driven by ethnic tensions and may even constitute Indian retaliation for being suppressed. In any case, two important presuppositions contextualised such exchanges. Firstly, these students conflated the terms *citizen* and *Bumiputra*. As an epistemological presupposition, this has critical complications. It seems these students, while sceptical of Malay privileges, have nonetheless internalised Malay discourses that Indians are. This rationalises why their languages are not recognised, and implicitly perpetuates the community's immigrant status contrary to *1Malaysia*. Secondly, a group claimed that 'in Bahasa Melayu in Malaysia, there are a lot of Sanskrit words in it.' This statement was unique, but it adds to an Indian scepticism of Malays claiming indigeneity. In this case, the student used a metalinguistic observation of traces of Sanskrit in modern Bahasa to delegitimise claims that Malays are indigenous. This speaks to a broader historical narrative of migrations of Malay ancestors some 2000 years ago from India to the Malay archipelago (Andaya & Andaya, 2016).

The students also volunteered opinions about the language policy, all of which were negative. They felt that the policy is hegemonic and 'unfair, of course!', and commented that they want recognition as a minority. They explained 'what we are trying to say here is that, we don't mind having Bahasa Melayu as our *bahasa rasmi* [national language], but we also want

our languages in the constitution.’ They even scoffed at *1Malaysia* as an empty ideology, claiming ‘, for me, it’s overrated,’ and lamented that society values Mandarin above Tamil, even though both are *pendatang* languages, simply because the Chinese are generally wealthier:

8) Student 5: Like for example, you see a sign, you see the bank’s ATM machine ...

Student 4: There is Chinese, but no Tamil.

Student 2: Chinese in this country contribute a lot to the economy. Therefore, maybe to make them happy, to keep them in the comfortable zone, they do publish information in public areas in Chinese language.

Finally, each group drew on their own personal observations and experiences to explain that the government’s relationship with multilingualism in the classroom is vexed and at times hegemonic. They discussed policy backflips on the language for teaching mathematics and science whereby two exchanges added that education policy undervalues proficiency in English when studying the sciences. For example:

9) Student 1: They tried to make subjects like maths and science in BM [Bahasa Malaysia], whereas it’s more relevant for these subjects to be in English.

Others identified that language policy includes a special requirement that all Malaysians – regardless of their linguistic background – pass a Bahasa examination in order to matriculate. They reflected on the critical implications of this policy, arguing that it stigmatises the linguistic backgrounds of non-Malays:

10) Student 4: If you fail Malay, you fail the whole examination, all the papers.

Student 1: You can’t graduate from high school.

Student 4: It’s unfair, but for me I’m fine. It’s ok because I studied in national school.

Student 3: Yeah, if you are exposed to the language then of course you’ll be fine with it, for those who are not exposed, that will be unfair.

In summary, Indian discussion was notably critical of language policy based on personal experiences of it. They constructed language policy to be Islam-oriented hegemony and sought to delegitimise the government’s policy rationales.

Chinese discussions

Compared to their Indian counterparts, the Chinese were less critically aware of language policy and its impacts. As this section discusses, this may be traced to the Chinese continuing to hold greatest economic power in Malaysian society (Andaya & Andaya, 2016), which in turn renders many Chinese-Malaysians less affected by state language policy. To begin, for

example, 3 of the 11 Chinese groups did not identify Bahasa as the national language at all, or explicitly said the government does not operate a language policy. They commented:

11) Researcher: Is there a language policy for all Malaysia?

Student 1: No.

Student 4: No.

Student 3: There is no policy, is our freedom of speech.

Others argued that policy includes the government encouraging greater proficiency in English to build the Malaysian economy and, conversely, that the government hopes to build the economy solely through Bahasa 'since Korea can survive, they became a developed country with their own language, why not Malaysia?' All the exchanges that identified no policy, or did not identify Bahasa as the national language, occurred at private universities. For many Chinese, their relative wealth allows them to simply circumvent the linguistic hegemony that manifests in de facto sanctions on *pendatang* who apply to public universities and in language tests on those who attend public schools. Instead, many can afford to attend private institutions at all levels. Malaysian-Chinese are indeed known to invest in international degrees, either offshore or at international institutions onshore (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007), meaning they may not have attended public schools. Their financial advantage therefore obscures the workings of national language policy. The remaining groups did identify Bahasa as the national language and were indeed mostly attending government-funded universities.

Only 6 of the 17 exchanges about why Bahasa is the national language raised power relations. Like the Indian students, three groups were sceptical of Malay indigeneity. They explained:

12) Student 1: We also don't know who came first, but ...

Student 2: It's in the textbooks ...

Student 1: According to the textbooks. Researcher: Yeah?

Student 3: Because some of the Malays, those who came from Indonesia, Arabs, all those places.

Student 1: So, we don't really know who is Bumiputra. Maybe they claimed they are but we won't know.

Student 4: Yeah, because they are the first to 'claim', so that's the way.

Others noted the systematic oppression of non-Bumiputra. Three exchanges attributed this to Malays forming the demographic majority, which in turn marginalises Mandarin in political domains. However, another exchange explained that Bumiputra privilege is rooted in an ideology not of Malay superiority, but of non-Bumiputra inferiority. Here they explained 'they don't really accept Chinese and Indians as the same standard.' The remainder rationalised the national language as a matter of religion. For example:

- 13) Student 1: Government has always started with the Sultans, the Muslims ... it's been ruled by Muslims ever since Malaysia was formed. It was called Tanah Melayu back then. But our country has become a diversified, multicultural country so, they needed to ... um ... at least set a main national language for the country. So they set it as Bahasa because it has been spoken by Muslims.

Beyond the presupposition here that *Tanah Melayu* is historical rather than contemporary, the Chinese made epistemic assumptions about Islam structuring ethnic relations similar to those assumed in Indian discussions. Rather than referring to Bumiputra status which theoretically should also privilege Christian non-Malay Bumiputra – these students also presupposed the ongoing hegemony and de facto authority of Islam in political affairs. As analysed in the case of Indian discussions, this presupposition is probably contextualised by the students observing Islamisation. Indeed, two groups added that retaining Bahasa as the sole national language, rather than codifying multilingualism, is a political strategy to appease Muslims. They explained that with the *Barisan Nasional* being plagued by corruption scandals, upholding the supremacy of Bahasa appeals to Malays who endorse the Islamisation of Malaysian society and the cleaning up of political institutions, claiming '*Barisan Nasional* needs Malay votes.'

Compared to the Indian and Malay groups, the remaining Chinese discussions about why Bahasa is the national language did not presuppose that any ideology or policy exists that pedestalises Malays. Two comments suggested that language policy is a minor trade-off to keep peace and has worked to 'unite the three nations. The three races.' Two other exchanges, however, explained that because the Malays do not hold significant wealth and their language is not an international lingua franca, the national language policy was instituted explicitly to protect Bahasa from endangerment. Presupposed here is that Mandarin speakers enjoy greater linguistic capital within Malaysia. They explained 'it's a way to not let the language [go] extinct.' Two more added that Mandarin is not the national language only because it 'is quite tough to read and write' and because 'our staff from government is Malay. They can't speak Mandarin.' This indexes a second presupposition that Bahasa is not a logical national language because many Chinese-Malaysians do not routinely use it. If Malays had proficiency in Mandarin, and if Bahasa did not need protection, Bahasa would not be the national language.

Again, these rationales, and the seven instances when students volunteered opinions about policy, can be traced back to the relative wealth of the Chinese and the experiences this creates. In addition to their power to purchase out of language policy, it appears that Mandarin offers sufficient socioeconomic mobility that it overshadows the critical dimensions of national language policy. Only in one case a student lamented that they 'have to obey' policy and another exchange criticised policy for marginalising not the *pendatang* languages, but the many non-Malay Bumiputra languages. The remaining students felt ambivalent or even positive about policy. Three exchanges claimed that the Chinese 'do not notice' language policy, are 'not affected by it' and 'are still free to learn other languages.' The primary social and business networks of wealthy Chinese no doubt comprise other Mandarin speakers, and this reaffirms the capital associated with speaking Mandarin. Others described language policy as advantaging the Chinese. They explained that 'learning Malay is actually good ... we are actually trilingual. It's actually an advantage.' From this perspective, the students have seen

that language policy produces multilingual Chinese and enhances rather than suppresses their socioeconomic mobility, while Malays are usually bilingual at best. This is despite the government's specific intention to socioeconomically benefit the Malays. This will no doubt continue as the global economic status of Mandarin grows, meaning the Chinese are unlikely to shift to Bahasa. In any case, in constructing language policy, these Chinese-Malaysians drew upon their lived experiences where the hegemony of Bahasa was not obvious.

Conclusions

This paper has shown that gaps can exist between how the public perceives and constructs a national language policy in epistemic terms on the one hand, and actual policy content on the other. What Malay, Chinese and Indian youths claimed to be Malaysia's national language policy often did not reflect formal policy arrangements and rationales. Instead, the different cohorts constructed policy in different ways. For Indians, as the smallest non-Bumiputra minority, this translated into definitions and rationales of language policy that were loaded with ethnopolitical tensions. This rendered them the most critically conscious of the nature and impacts of policy. Chinese and Malay discussions tended to construct and rationalise policy in terms much less critical. For the Chinese, this likely results from their socioeconomic standing affecting their sociolinguistic experiences. The relative financial position of many Chinese allows them to simply pay to circumvent the government education system where policy is most pronounced, meaning policy is rendered largely invisible. This is also no doubt aided by the socioeconomic capital attached to Mandarin regardless of Malaysian language policy. Like the Chinese, many Malays drew on their own lived experiences but, as the majority group advantaged by policy, these experiences were not conducive to the critical implications of policy. They commonly restated the government-sanctioned justification, already omnipresent in community discourse, that it is a fait accompli that Bumiputra deserve special rights. They did not offer reflective discussion about *pendatang* languages and speakers. To this end, the case study has shown that folk linguistic knowledge about policy across the groups was often informed by individual or collective experiences, observations, and community-level discourses whereby knowledge often did not mirror actual policy. This is unsurprising, given Malaysia's restrictions on ethnic policy discourse and debate.

Beyond the case of Malaysia, and beyond investigating the ways citizens construct the policies that affect them, this opens a line of inquiry into how – and indeed whether – governments communicate their language policies such that the public can become knowledgeable about them. This paper has not comprehensively analysed how Malaysian language policy is promulgated. It has, however, noted that communication between the government and its public is not necessarily transparent, that public engagement in language policy discussion is curtailed by laws on sedition and that what a cohort of youth claimed language policy to be in fact diverged from actual policy content. As such, the findings of this paper suggest that *language policy promulgation* be more comprehensively examined as an activity of authorities, in Malaysia and beyond. We accept that language policies become subject to community-level negotiation, interpretation, construction, knowledge, and discourse. Missing from this multilayered view, however, is *language policy promulgation* – if

we borrow from political science – whereby governments communicate, at least to some degree, their policy decisions to the public (Birkland, 2014; Sabatier, 1991). As such, we also ought to analyse whether and how language policies are marketed and communicated to the public in the first place. It is, after all, only through government communications that policies move beyond the desks of politicians and become accessed, examined, and understood by the public.

Researching policy promulgation promises to be a dynamic field of inquiry. The case of Malaysia – where the political culture does not guarantee transparency and where public debate about ethnic affairs is absent or punishable – shows that different governments, with different notions of governance and political process, may or may not embark upon language policy promulgation. Researching the many ways that governments may or may not communicate their language plans will add to the multilayered view of language policy as a dynamic process of interpretation involving actors across society who are tasked to understand and apply top-down directives. In doing this, Malaysia shows us, we must be careful to avoid assumptions about democratic process.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Professor Jacob Mey for his encouragement for this paper and for his valuable guidance. I also wish to express my thanks to Professor Tony Liddicoat and to the anonymous reviewers for their enthusiasm for this paper, to Maria Obojska at the University of Oslo for her valuable comments about the paper's concept, and to the Malaysian youths who so keenly participated in this research.

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