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## **Multilingualism and mobility as collateral results of hegemonic language policy**

### **Abstract**

This paper shows, with Malaysia as a case study, that a national language policy that errs heavily on the side of ethnonationalism can be seen as inadvertently having empowering consequences. Malaysia politicises ethnic difference between Malaysians of Malay, Chinese and Indian descent and government privileges ethnic Malays above the others. They enjoy economic concessions unavailable to others, Malay ethnonationalism constructs Chinese and Indian-Malaysians as perpetual visitors despite their citizenship, and law defines Malaysia as Islamic and speaking Bahasa. With that background, this paper draws on critical language policy and posthumanism to analyse survey data about the multilingual practices of Malay and non-Malays youths, as well as their folk linguistic discourses about their multilingualism. The paper shows that language policy has not rendered Bahasa the common language of these non-Malay youths. Instead, policy is so ethnonationalist that it has seemingly led to their disassociation from the Malay majority and, as a result, their greater multilingualism. This multilingualism was perceived as empowering non-Malay linguistic and socioeconomic mobility, contrary to language policy and affirmative action for ethnic Malays.

### **Keywords**

Multilingualism; Mobility; Language policy; Ethnonationalism; Malaysia

## **Introduction**

Through language policy, governments seek to achieve the grassroots sociolinguistic arrangements they envision for their societies, but chasms between policy objectives and grassroots linguistic practices are to be expected. On the one hand, the language policies of a central authority may include regulating the relative status of different languages (Hornberger 2006) in contexts where cultures come into contact and their attendant languages become indexes of broader power relations. Perhaps most sensitively, this explains why governments seek to safeguard the status and prestige of specific varieties; generally those of ethnic majorities. Certain languages become officialised as valid codes of government, business, courts and classrooms, bar the affordance of less liberal language rights to speakers of minority languages. From a critical perspective, this can harbour what Shohamy (2006) calls hidden hegemonic agendas that pursue unequal linguistic power relationships by calibrating language affairs in favour of central control or the identity of a specific group. However, grassroots perspectives show that close alignments between government language policy and actual language practices are by no means assured (Spolsky 2004). The postmodern language policy theory reminds us that language management is also a decentralised community phenomenon (Pennycook 2006) whereby language dilemmas are routinely resolved by private citizens beyond the purview of government. They determine, for example, what language to raise their children in, to pray in, to use in interethnic friendships, and to use in their workplaces. Actual language norms and practices therefore need not be dialectically informed by top-down policy but also – or instead - by matters of linguistic capital, transnationalism, identity, ethnic relations and religion relevant to local context.

This is the case in multilingual Malaysia. Bahasa Malaysia (Bahasa) has long been the predominant language of the Malay archipelago. However, like in neighbouring Singapore, societal multilingualism resulted from British colonial rule and waves of migration from

China and India from the 14<sup>th</sup> century peaking in the late 1800s sponsored by British administration. Migrants brought with them a plethora of heritage languages, predominately Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, Foochow, Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam. Diversity only increased with the incorporation of Sabah and Sarawak into the Malaysian federation when the state gained independence from Britain in 1957. Today, the *Bumiputra* (sons of the soil referring to ethnic Malays and Indigenous minority groups) constitute around 65% of the population, while ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians form around 25% and 8% respectively (Andaya and Andaya 2016). Despite this diversity, state policy is squarely focused on elevating the *Bumiputra* above the other ethnicities. Policy is ethnonationalist by defining Malaysia in Malay cultural terms, including the view that Bahasa shall be the language of *Tanah Melayu* (Malay land). However, policy is also ethnocentric by way of affirmative action to restructure the economy in favour of ethnic Malays whose socioeconomic performance is outperformed by the ethnic Chinese (David and Govindasamy 2005). Above all, questioning the status of Bahasa may be seditious (Government of Malaysia 1948). However, despite language policy that discourages diversity, Malaysia remains intensely multilingual. Bahasa is the language of politics and administration, but English retains prestige for its international instrumentality and the economic performance of the Chinese community means Mandarin has acquired linguistic capital. Indian-Malaysians give English prestige rather than Bahasa, and the reach of national language policy does not extend to interrupting the use of *Manglish* and *Bahasa Rojak*. These are mixed codes that all ethnicities use, sometimes intently to bridge ethnopolitical divides. It is therefore questionable whether Malaysian language policy can at all be considered a success (Coluzzi 2017).

This paper adds to that discussion with the emic perspectives of Malaysian university students about their multilingualism. Because language policy does not necessarily have

homogenising effects on language practice, and because human experiences of a policy or even hegemony are variable, this paper views language policy through posthumanism. This responds directly to Pennycook's call for a post humanist orientation to applied linguistic research, such that we embrace "alternative ways of thinking about the human predicament" (Pennycook 2016: 2). In this case, the human predicament may not be seen from the bottom-up as oppressed by hegemonic language policy as critical language policy might have us assume. To investigate bottom-up perspectives, a folk linguistic methodology is pursued given its focus on epistemic explanations and reasoning of language users themselves. Specifically, the paper analyses data from a language use survey carried out with Malay, Chinese, and Indian youths, as well as discussions with those youths about their multilingualism. The findings show that non-Malay youths claimed to resist the hegemony of Bahasa, to adopt social networks defined by their own ethnicity, and to retain a pertinent place for their own heritage languages. This has rendered these non-Malays youths more multilingual and linguistically mobile than their Malay peers. Paradoxically, this multilingualism was seen as inadvertently advancing the socioeconomic development of Chinese and Indian-Malaysians rather than of the *Bumiputra*.

### **Ethnicity and Malaysian social policy**

Malaysia fell under European colonial rule like many of its Southeast Asian neighbours. The Portuguese and the Dutch established trading posts in what is now western Malaysia, but ultimately the British subsumed Malaya into its empire under the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824 until Malaysian independence in 1957. To fill labour shortages in the resource and production sector, and because the British considered the local Malay people to be "lazy, unwilling to work for wages and therefore could not be considered a potential pool of labour for the colonial economy" (Andaya and Andaya 2016: 182), the empire welcomed migration

from southern China and India. This, however, racialised Malaya along socioeconomic lines. Ethnic Indians tended to work rubber plantations, ethnic Chinese dominated the business sector, and ethnic Malays remained largely rural and impoverished (ibid.). Contrary to expectations, the Chinese and Indian diasporas did not return home when British rule ended in 1957 but settled in Malaya with their heritage languages.

Matters of ethnicity – dialectically connected to language, religion and class - have remained the single most definitive identity of Malaysians. Since independence, government has politicised a difference between the *Bumiputra* as the authentic locals and the *pendatang* (visitors) as perpetual immigrants who, despite Malaysian citizenship, are deemed to live on borrowed Malay land. This distinction would ensure the former held political and cultural pre-eminence. In Gramsci's (1971) terms of hegemony, the ethnic Malays are to be elevated above the ethnic others who, as a subaltern class, ought to be won over to Malay language and culture. True to this view of hegemony, Malay ethnonationalism has come to orient public and private life both explicitly and implicitly. Firstly, being Malay, and therefore Muslim, attracts formal preferential treatment known as *Ketuanan Melayu*. The 1970 New Economic Policy codified special quotas to education and employment for ethnic Malays following fatal race riots with ethnic Chinese, which the government blamed on Chinese socioeconomic dominance. The British had encouraged Chinese economic development with tax incentives to support the production of basic consumables and investment in mining. This, plus the acquisition of the latest technology, liquid assets, and a culture of entrepreneurship, meant the Chinese came to control much of the domestic economy. This had fostered anxieties among ethnic Malays about Malay sovereignty, and the government's policy of Malay affirmative action only reified and divided the ethnicities further (Andaya and Andaya 2016). The risk of further interethnic conflict led to *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian People) as an ideology notionally introduced by Dr Mahatir Mohamad in 1991

during his previous prime ministership. It urged Malaysians to identify primarily as Malaysians, above any ethnicity. In the absence of ethno-political divides dissipating, however, non-Malays retained an understanding that “*Bangsa Malaysia* is nonsensical” (Ooi 2005: 54). Now the *1Malaysia* policy, in place since 2010, encourages Malaysians to retain but peacefully integrate their ethnic identities. This falls under a broader policy of economic development and effective governance for all, encompassing business investments, internet connectivity, and the *1Malaysia* development fund. The notion is that meritocracy will supersede *Ketuanan Melayu*. As illustrated in image 1, *1Malaysia* branding is omnipresent. For non-Malays, *1Malaysia* sounds “like political equality, inclusiveness, and an end to institutional racism” (Chin 2010: 166). In practice, again, affirmative action for ethnic Malays has not ended.

[Image 1: *1Malaysia* branding on the side of government buildings in Kuching (left) and Kota Bharu (right)]

Secondly, building on the discursive and legislated link between Malay ethnicity and Islam (Andaya and Andaya 2016), Malaysia is undergoing a new surge of Islamisation in public and private life. Many ethnic Malays – disenchanted by corruption scandals that plagued the Najib Razak’s prime ministership, such as the handling of the *1Malaysia Development Fund*, have looked to their faith for moral guidance. Politicians now strategically cite Islamic principles when justifying policy directions, albeit their policies envisage multifaith audiences (Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010). Reports also surface of public interruption of non-Islamic religious events, of school textbooks excluding non-Islamic world-views, and even private businesses adopting Sharia principles (cf. Guan 2011; Sloane-White 2011; H. Ting 2009). The concern of many non-Malays is that this new Islamisation is a religiously-masked ethnonationalism “that is much less accommodating of minorities than was traditional Malay nationalism” (Barr and Govindasamy 2010: 293).

Indeed, Malaysians often speak of a time when social networks were more interethnic and harmonious (Free Malaysia Today 2017). This Malay ethnonationalist hegemony, advanced through social policy and social institutions alike, seeks to justify ethnic inequality by upholding an epistemology of *immigrant* as a perpetual identity for non-Malays.

This hegemony is, however, not unchallenged. Ethnic Malays may enjoy political and cultural pre-eminence, but the Chinese communities hold the balance of economic power. Although Chinese-Malaysians might not, from a Malay perspective, “live up to the genuine meaning of being nationals and citizens” (Yow 2017: 278), Chinese wealth shields many from Malay cultural hegemony and even fosters a Chinese economic hegemony. Today Chinese-Malaysians control about 65% of Malaysian economic activity (Jakobsen 2014: 131). Chinese firms are not only more likely to attract a Chinese workforce given Malaysia’s fragmented ethnic relations, but are also commonly seen as attractive employers with a willingness to invest in staff training and career development (Lucas and Verry 1999). Chinese wealth has created demand for private secondary education that circumvents the Malay-oriented public system. Attending a private Chinese secondary school excludes students from Malaysia’s public universities, but this - aided by Chinese wealth - has resulted Chinese-Malaysians travelling offshore or enrolling in the expanding network of private universities, includes local campuses of offshore providers (Hashim 2009). What is more, Chinese socioeconomic performance has fostered a chauvinistic discourse of Chinese education as higher-quality and of ethnic Malays as unproductive and dependent on welfare (Ooi 2003). This in itself produces a Chinese discourse that counters Malay cultural and political hegemony and marginalises ethnic Malays in economic life.

### **Language and policy**



Societal multilingualism continues at large and Malay ethnonationalism has therefore turned to matters of language policy. Language policy is understood, for the purposes of this paper, as an exercise of government encompassing the “body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices, intended to achieve the planned language change” (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997: xi). Applied linguistic theory, however, does not confine language policy to the interventions of government. Power and agency in managing linguistic affairs can manifest across society wherever perceived language problems need solving, such as in bilingual homes, classrooms and other communities of practice (cf. Johnson 2013). Beliefs about language, that are so influential that they shape collective unspoken linguistic norms, might also be considered policy “with the manager left out” (Spolsky 2004: 14). This paper, however, is explicitly concerned with language policy as a Malaysian government enterprise.

Upon gaining independence, Malaysia sought to regulate the social and economic value of Malaysia’s different languages in the interests of nation-building. Codifying Bahasa in the Malaysian constitution (1957: Article 152) as the single official language particularly affirms that the language of the *Bumiputra* will hold greatest linguistic capital. This dovetails conveniently with economic policy because providing no official status to non-Malay languages would ideally clear away the linguistic challenges ethnic Malays experienced in attaining higher socioeconomic outcomes, and therefore complicate the socioeconomic advancement of *pendatang*. Instead, constitutional silence on Malaysia’s diversity is implicitly hegemonic on Malay superiority. Language rights for non-Malays are limited to the government tolerating and funding Chinese and Tamil-medium education at the primary level, but as already discussed, students are then expected to move onto Malay-medium secondary schooling. Those who remain in the public system can only matriculate if they fulfil Bahasa requirements, regardless of their language background (Ministry of Education 2018).

Language policy is further complicated by what May (2014) describes as a persistent tension between the local and global. The dual indexicality of English as the language of the colonisers, but also of the free-market economy, vexes policy makers. Instrumentalists see English as serving economic development and call to raise the status of English, while ethnonationalists demand that Bahasa flourish as the national language of prestige. Former Prime Minister Najib Razak hoped to restore the former glory of Bahasa as a regional language of trade, and even “internationalise Bahasa Melayu as a world language” (Malay Mail Online 2016), by establishing Malay studies chairs in overseas universities. However, the tension between English and Bahasa especially plays out in classrooms. Concerned by declining English proficiencies, but conscious of Malay ethnonationalism, the government is implementing a bilingual policy for teaching and testing mathematics and science (Rahim 2016). Furthermore, Malaysia’s universities, both public and private, have tended to become English-medium, despite laws to the contrary, in the interests of internationalisation (Gill 2013).

Just as Malay ethnonationalist hegemony is contested within the Malaysian economy, so too is it contested in actual language practices outside the purview of government. Despite ethnocentric policy and that “there are more than 200 million speakers of Malay/Indonesian, making it the ninth most spoken language in the world” (Coluzzi 2017: 17), non-Malays have not typically become first language speakers of Bahasa. Instead, Indian and Chinese minority languages enjoy vitality in homes and communities, especially, Cantonese, Hokkien and Tamil. Coluzzi (2017) notes that endogamy and close-knit social networks facilitate language maintenance, but he also explains that Bahasa is so connected to Malay ethnicity and Islam that it is not commonly perceived by non-Malays as a neutral unifier. What is more, the linguistically heterogeneous Chinese community has mobilised around Mandarin as a second language - rather than Bahasa as the country’s majority language – in part to foster

interethnic cohesion and reassert Chinese ethnolinguistic belonging in the context of broader political marginalisation. The Indian community, on the other hand, is experiencing language shift, but sooner to English as a language of prestige than Bahasa as the language of the hegemonic centre (Gill 2013).

However, just as language policies essentialise languages such that they can be regulated as rights and obligations, Malaysia's pervasive and informal mixed languages used for informal communication are largely beyond government influence. *Manglish* falls under the banner of World Englishes and especially manifests in code-switching between Bahasa and English at the lexical level. It is also characterised by a lack of agreement between subjects and verbs, pluralizing uncountable nouns, and using invariant tags such as 'isn't it?' that do not agree with the main clause (Govindan and Pillai 2017). *Bahasa Rojak*, however, is akin to *metrolingualism* (Pennycook 2014) whereby conversation is pragmatically focussed on meaning-making – especially in interethnic talk – drawing on multilingual resources rather than on prescribed language forms. Instantiations of *Bahasa Rojak* are variable, context and speaker-specific, and oriented in communication rather than grammar. Importantly, *Manglish* and *Bahasa Rojak* hold covert prestige that discourages loyalty to national language policy. *Manglish* is constructed as a salient marker of an international, but non-western, English-language identity in the global South. It permeates Malaysian social media, informal interactions and other domains not regulated by policy that requires standard English or Bahasa (Shafie 2013). *Bahasa Rojak* even serves as an implicit protest against ethnonationalism. By accommodating the linguistic resources of different speakers, interethnic talk becomes dotted with indexes of Malaysia's ethnic diversity. Speakers even claim that *Bahasa Rojak* helps to break-down rather than reproduce ethnic divides, and performs quintessential Malaysianness (Albury 2017b). Whereas state language policy

stratifies Malaysians and their languages, informal language practices challenge this through complex metrolingualism.

## **Theory**

The research takes critical language policy and posthumanist applied linguistics as its starting points. Critical language policy is concerned with the linguistic plight of ethnic minorities when an authority seeks to “control events in order to achieve one’s plans” (Tollefson 2006: 46) through hegemony, domination, and suppression. An assumption at the heart of critical language policy is that authorities have sufficient regulatory muscle to morph hegemonic ideology into practices that achieve its power-laden goals. Another assumption is one of democracy as a political aspiration whereby in arguing for equality, critical applied linguistics ends up carrying “an excessive amount of preliminary ‘complaint’ discourse” (Toolan 1997: 86). This can be problematised. In the case of this paper, the society is less-than-democratic and is intentionally “suppressing criticism through restrictive speech laws and politicized prosecutions of opposition leaders” (Freedom House 2017). Nonetheless, the authority has not succeeded in implementing its language policy and, as will be analysed, oppressive policy can even be seen a source of emancipation. Critical assumptions about the actual impact of oppression can therefore be problematised such that the impacts may not necessarily be causes for complaint. Accordingly, my second inspiration from critical language policy is that power can be interrupted such that chasms exist between policy and practice. Here, posthumanist applied linguistics argues that assumptions about the human linguistic experience can and should be revisited (Pennycook 2016). This is because actual language behaviour - including the exploitation of multilingual repertoires in Malaysia - is informed by more than top-down policy, but also by other variables including culture, economy, social norms and interlocutors. The persistence of societal multilingualism in the

face of hegemon language policy in Malaysia speaks to such theorising. A posthumanist perspective on language policy therefore allows for “a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” (Braidotti 2013: 1-2). For this paper, Malaysia’s ethnonationalist hegemony need not be the common reference for understanding Malaysian language policy, the language practices in the polity, nor how Malaysians relate to each other.

The notion that participants will frame their self-reports as human experience relevant to posthumanist research motivated a participant-oriented folk linguistic approach (Preston 2011) to understand grassroots perspectives on multilingualism. As a methodology, folk linguistics partners effectively with posthumanism in that it researches how community members discuss language and linguistics through their own epistemic and attitudinal lenses, whereby these lenses are coloured by diversities in linguistic epistemology, relations, experience, ideology and discourse. Claimed knowledge is therefore seen as Foucauldian in nature in that all knowledge is discursively constructed, no truth is predetermined, and each instantiation of knowledge adds to a narrative of what is true or false (Foucault 1980). This is antipositivist by accepting that knowledge – regardless of the accuracy as defined by the academy – is actioned in the community to regulate local realities and explain sociolinguistic lives. Folk linguistic research therefore sets aside empirical truths to instead recognise that truths can be relative, localised and, when actioned, consequential in regulating social relations (Albury 2017a).

## **Method**

Undergraduate students at public and private universities across Malaysia, including Kuala Lumpur, Bangi, Penang, Kuala Terengganu, Kota Bharu, Miri and Kuching, were invited to

participate in the research if they had never studied any form of linguistics. This gave shape to the folk linguistic orientation. Engaging university youths had several motivations. Firstly, these youths are “in line to be the future inheritors of a fully developed and modern Malaysia” (Krauss et al. 2005: 174), scheduled to occur under Malaysia’s *2020 Vision*. They are millennials who are reportedly becoming increasingly western and sceptical of religion and authority (Heryanto and Mandal 2013). This creates a focus on engagement with multilingualism by a cohort whose generation is challenging traditionalism. Secondly, Malaysian universities offer access to proficient English speakers, given they largely operate in English. Thirdly, university students could be easily recruited through local linguistic departments in return for a guest lecture.

The research was limited to youths privileged to a tertiary education, but the students were not a homogenous group. Students at public universities are unlikely to have attended private secondary schools and will instead have experienced language policy in the public school system. Students at private universities, on the other hand, will have attended private English or Chinese-medium secondary schooling. Their experience of language policy has likely been limited to their exclusion from public universities or the de facto operation of Malay quotas to university places, even if official quotas were abolished in 2002 (Mukherjee et al. 2017). This means the private fee-paying university students were largely not Malay and, bar the operation of scholarships, come from a higher socioeconomic bracket.

The youths were divided into Malay, Chinese and Indian groups, with four to six students per group. Recruitment resulted in 119 participants, including 41 Malay students (9 groups), 53 Chinese students (11 groups), and 25 Indian students (5 groups). While ethnic categorisations are problematic from a poststructuralist view, this approach was recommended by local university staff as it conforms to local expectations whereby Malaysian life is structured along ethnic lines. Naturally, “as with all ascribed positions,

these entail degrees of implied uniformity” (Kalra et al. 2005: 88). This uniformity is indeed only implied meaning the results are not deemed representative of the ethnicities generally. However, grouping by ethnicity was above all ethical. As discussed, topics of language and ethnicity are especially sensitive in Malaysia. Grouping students by ethnicity therefore protected non-Malays from their comments being perceived by their Malay peers as seditious. Drawing on Kusow’s (2003) reflections on the insider/outsider dichotomy in qualitative research with ethnic others, my own position as a non-Malaysian interviewing the students in ethnic groups was thought to advantage the research. Ethnic insiders to social research are commonly implicated by their perceived or real “political identities” (ibid: 598). This carries risks of researchers becoming trapped between loyalty to the participants’ ethnopolitical views and maintaining a critical perspective in the research. Secondly, as an outsider who was perceived to know less about Malaysian society, the students were less likely to rely on intersubjectivities in their talk than they might with a Malaysian peer. This aided the folk linguistic orientation to the research by creating situations where the epistemic explanations offered by participants about their multilingual lives would require more detail than with a Malaysian researcher. Added to this, local hosts also urged interviews be held in groups so that the youths could participate with their friends and practice their English skills with me as first-language speaker of Australian English.

Students were each given a form which asked them to identify what languages they use and in which situations. This was an open-ended exercise that allowed the participants to engage the topic through their own lenses. This meant not giving the participants a list of domains and asking participants to specify what languages they use in each. Instead, participants were free to identify languages – or indeed language – and domains and contexts in their own terms without instruction on how to do so. How situations and languages were identified could then become areas of analysis in their own right. This upheld the social

constructionism inherent to folk linguistics. Secondly, an interview was held with each group. Students were asked in qualitative terms to extrapolate on what languages they use, with whom, where, and why. This largely replicated the paper-based exercise, but nuanced those data with the students' metalinguistic reflections contextualised by boarder societal ideologies and policies, norms, dispositions and claimed knowledge. The content of this qualitative data was analysed as folk linguistic discourse (Preston 1994).

This direct approach was favoured in the absence of resources and the multilingual competency to follow a large cohort of Malaysians in their personal lives and document their language choices. It does, however, follow previous Malaysian work, such as Coluzzi's (2012) which undertook a quantitative paper-based language survey in Malaysia and Brunei and found that Bahasa did not enjoy great prestige. However, that study was limited to Kuala Lumpur and Bandar Seri Begawan with a focus on the popularity of English. Supplementing the survey with qualitative interviews about context-based language decisions was inspired by Lanza and Svendsen's (2007) study of Filipino social networks in Oslo. This allowed for discursive descriptions of multilingual behaviour and associated metalinguistic explanations. Soliciting self-reports about language use does, however, carry credibility risks because the data are informed by the participants' own attitudes and motivations. This was not a problem but an advantage, given social psychology, and indeed folk linguistic perspectives on multilingualism, shape how multilingual realities manifest on the ground (Lawson and Sachdev 2000).

### **Multilingual Malaysians**

Figure 1 shows the language proficiencies the students of the different ethnic groups reported in their survey responses aided visually by word clouds to illustrate the relative frequency of the reported languages. Amongst Malays, only Bahasa and English featured predominantly.



All Indian students reported to use both English and Bahasa, and all but one identified Tamil. However, only 48 of the 53 Chinese students identified Bahasa as a language they use, whereas they all reported to use English, and either Chinese or Mandarin. Chinese is now treated synonymously with Mandarin, as the students presupposed in the interviews that, to them, *Chinese* means *Mandarin*. They explained, for example, “I’m clearly a Chinese but, like, my father, he migrated here, like, 50 years ago from Hong Kong. So, he only speaks Cantonese and English. He has no idea what Chinese is”. This is consistent with a local epistemology of Mandarin as the mother tongue of the linguistically heterogeneous ethnic Chinese, even if it is acquired as a second language for the purposes of collective ethnic identity and ancestry (Albury 2017b). In the interviews, the students in turn described their own heritage languages to be dialects of Mandarin. Doing so, despite issues of mutual intelligibility, does not disrupt the ethnopolitical status afforded to Mandarin in Chinese-Malaysia epistemology. Nonetheless, in the questionnaire they did often list their non-Mandarin varieties and attributed these to various domains (to be discussed), rather than subsuming them under Mandarin. This speaks to a tension between the epistemology of Mandarin as a mother tongue and the practical need to move between codes in daily life.

*[Figure 1: Reported languages in survey responses: Raw data and word clouds]*

Of the three cohorts, the Malay students reported to be the least multilingual, while the Chinese and Indian students report proficiency in three or more languages more frequently. This is based on tabulating the various languages that all the students claimed to use, in one domain or another, in the questionnaire. Table 1 shows the reported rates of multilingualism by ethnicity, also by percentage.

*[Table 1: Reported multilingualism by percent per number of languages per ethnic group]*

Most Malay students reported to be bilingual or trilingual. Their bilingualism, when contextualised by their experiences of education policy, refers to Bahasa and English. Their most common third language (11 of the 41 Malays) was Arabic. Including Arabic in their repertoires sooner speaks to faith than to active language use. The interviews indeed revealed that the students use Arabic only to recite the Quran, without necessarily understanding the text, explaining “we are Muslims, so we often read the Quran”. Only one Malay student indicated that she speaks Arabic outside an Islamic context, saying “even English, they [Arabs] are not using....So I use the Arabic language”.

Indian youths were most likely to report trilingualism. Discussions constructed this as normative, as students narrated that Indians tend to be proficient in “English, Bahasa Malaysia, and Tamil our mother tongue”. Tamil-Indians explained that non-Tamils also tend to use their own heritage language, plus Tamil as a second language. They explained “I have seen many Malayalam and Telugu people who can communicate in Tamil, but then the pure Tamil cannot talk either in Malayalam or Telugu”. A Punjabi student confirmed this, explaining

I am one who didn't speak Punjabi but spoke Hindi first. Even though my whole family spoke Punjabi, I used to watch Hindi movies, I spoke Hindi first, and in time to come, Hindi became Punjabi.... I didn't go to Tamil school, but I mingled with my friends, I learned Tamil.

This, however, should not be interpreted as Tamil hegemony. The Tamil community itself has a vexed relationship with its language, affixing prestige to English which triggers language shift in many homes and a decline in enrolments in Tamil-medium schools (David and McLellan 2014). Students recounted that “Tamil is pretty much left behind” and that other Malaysians “really look down [on us]”. That is to say, a hegemonic pull on non-Tamil Indians from a Tamil centre is unlikely. Some students explained that non-Tamils learn Tamil simply because it is the community’s majority language, such that “they go with the

majority, because the majority would be the Tamil people. It's better to have one standard language which you can speak to all". However, this is can be explained by political context. Some students were inspired by the successes of Singapore's Indian community, where Tamil is indeed an official language. They commented, for example, "it's very obvious in Singapore that Tamil, all the three languages, is a must". They also looked to the Chinese-Malaysian model where a Chinese language – not English nor Bahasa - underpins Chinese assembly and indexes its community. To this end, they particularly reflected on the representation of multilingualism in the Malaysian linguistic landscape and commented "often there is Chinese, but no Tamil!" and "for example, when I see a poster there's no Tamil. I just got used to it...but nowadays, we start to ask the question: why don't we have it?". Including non-Tamil-Indians into the pool of Tamil speakers would therefore foster representation of the community through one Indian language with the view this could advance maximises ethnopolitical demands.

The Chinese students showed less variation in reported multilingualism. None reported in the survey to be monolingual, and 68% claimed to be trilingual or quadrilingual. This was rearticulated in the interviews whereby Chinese students generally all claimed to use Bahasa, English and Mandarin, and many added a heritage language such as Cantonese, Hakka or Hokkien. For example, they explained "our dialect is another thing. But as the universal, we speak Mandarin". Those who claimed to use only three languages may come from families that have shifted entirely to Mandarin. This is indeed a current phenomenon reflecting the local linguistic and cultural capital of Mandarin. Malaysia's open and free-market economy, that engages China in trade and has seen Chinese-Malaysian socioeconomic achievement, means Mandarin even challenges English as a local language of mobility. This, along with the epistemology of Mandarin as the mother tongue of all ethnic Chinese, and Chinese-Malaysian education being Mandarin-medium, inspires language shift.

Despite ideology that “immigrant groups should assimilate to Malay language and culture” (Andaya and Andaya 2016: 309), non-Malays were notably more multilingual because they have retained their heritage languages. Sociology helps us consider why this is. As long as Malaysian authorities uphold Malay ethnonationalism that prescribes non-Malays as *pendatang* rather than authentically *Malaysian*, then policy may be doing itself a disservice. Applying insights from Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk (2005) to the Malaysian context, the term *pendatang* falsely “marks groups who have never migrated but are the offspring of migrants as not belonging to a particular place. The word ‘immigrant’ becomes a euphemism for ‘not from this place’, or for ‘one who belongs somewhere else’” (p. 14). Although oppressive, this gives political fodder to the marginalised. When *pendatang* are constructed as such with implications of not belonging, and when progress in achieving *1Malaysia* remains absent, then the Malay majority is not seen as welcoming non-Malays into the national fabric. Non-Malays in turn become less likely to acculturate, and more likely to disassociate and express their non-Malay identities (Kramer and Ikeda 1998), including through language.

### **A national language?**

Bahasa was important, but not the most salient language in the domains reported by non-Malay youths. The domains most commonly identified where different languages are actively used were *with friends* (subsuming associated terms the youths offered such as *hanging out*, and *socialising*), *with family* (subsuming *at home*, *with elders*, *with parents*, *with brother/sister*), *social media* (subsuming *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Whatsapp*, *text messaging*, *online chat*) and *daily life* (subsuming *chit-chat*, *at the market*, *buying food*, *day-to-day*, *in town*). As students attending universities with English-medium instruction, the unanimous response that they use English in university lectures is omitted. Only 6 Malay, 8

Chinese and no Indian students identified *work* as a domain, so this is also omitted. *Religion* was identified as a domain only by 8 Malays, and the qualitative data already clarified that this mostly amounts to reciting the Quran. Figures 2, 3 and 4 show reported language use from the questionnaire by language, domain, and ethnic group.

*[Figure 2: Reported language use of Malay participants by language and domain (Total 122 responses)]*

*[Figure 3: Reported language use of Chinese participants by language and domain (Total 187 responses)]*

*[Figure 4: Reported language use of Indian participants by language and domain (Total 97 responses)]*

These data support three observations from existing research. Firstly, it indeed appears that the lives of the Malay students are mostly led in Bahasa, with this being the predominant reported language in all domains except social media (cf. Gill 2013). Secondly, the data speaks to findings (cf. Wang and Chong 2011) that Chinese homes are shifting to Mandarin. Chinese students especially offered narratives about reserving non-Mandarin languages for communication with the elderly and about otherwise using Mandarin at home. For example:

- Researcher:     Yea. So what language do you speak at home?
- Student 1:       Normally Mandarin because my family don't know English that well.
- Researcher:     Ok, so not Hokkien or Cantonese, or....
- Student 1:       Hokkien my parents speak, but they never spoke it with me.

Thirdly, English was the predominant language of social media for all groups. This aligns with the notion that computer-mediated discourse is a local manifestation of a global phenomenon, in large part structured in Anglo-American terms. Postings, such as on Instagram and Facebook, can cater to actual as well as potential international audiences. English therefore becomes instrumental online where communication is purposely, or

potentially, transnational. However, language choices can be political, such as where Cantonese speakers use English online to express a non-Chinese Hong Kong identity (Lee 2014), and it is feasible that non-Malays especially sought to use English for the construction of a non-Malay identity. Alternatively, using English may simply represent linguistic creativity as a result of *linguaging* in networked multilingualism whereby multilingual resources are fluidly applied in social networking (Androutsopoulos 2015). The students did not expand in the interviews on why they use English online, but it is possible all such factors could be at play. In any case, it is striking that English was a preferred social media language even if it was not reported by the groups as the preferred language with friends. This especially suggests their online engagement envisages a wider, interethnic, and transnational audience.

It is likely be that although the students reported to use English online, they may in practice use *Manglish*. This would align with other research that identifies *Manglish* as a preferred code on social media (Shafie 2013) and the view that *Manglish* is not yet afforded the title of a bona fide language in the minds of Malaysian youths. Indeed, despite the salience of *Manglish* and *Bahasa Rojak* in Malaysian life generally, only one student identified a mixed language in the questionnaire. However, when asked about multilingualism during the interviews, the groups almost unanimously referred to using mixed languages. A Malay group explained, for example,

Student 1:        *Manglish, Rojak*. Basically we mix everything together, dialects, in a way is how we can communicate with each other. Like, mainly in the Chinese college, somehow we use *Manglish* a lot. We might not notice it, but in the classroom we use *Manglish* a lot.

Student 2:        *Because Rojak* is basically a dish in Malaysia where you mix like veggies, fried stuffs and everything with sauce, they mixed together becomes something good.

Here Chinese groups explained that *Manglish* is indeed used online “when we want to communicate” such as “on Whatsapp groups, Facebook, all kinds of social media”. They also added that Bahasa Rojak is the norm when communicating between ethnicities because most communication is characterised “by no specific language” but by a focus on “conveying a message” in terms akin to *metrolingualism* discussed by Pennycook (2014), Albury (2017b) and earlier in this paper. Speaking enthusiastically about *Manglish* and *Bahasa Rojak*, but not listing them in the survey responses as reified codes, suggests that the youths did not perceive these mixed languages to be legitimate. An Indian student explained “actually those are not real languages, but languages we made up” and as informal codes they are best used “among friends, among family members...unlike for educational purposes”. It therefore seems that the students understood the survey to be a formal exercise in only identifying the use of what they saw as *legitimate* codes, whereas in the discussions the students reflected more liberally on actual language practice. This is no doubt a result of the essentialist view of language that structures Malaysian politics and metadiscourses about ethnicity, and which is as silent on mixed language varieties as it is on mixed ethnicities.

The data can also be seen through the lens of social network to consider, from a macro perspective, who is speaking what language with whom (Lanza and Svendsen 2007; Li Wei 1994). Reportedly, Bahasa was not the language of private networks outside Chinese homes as language policy would desire, and the linguistic reports of the Chinese and Malay students suggested that their friendship networks do not commonly intersect as *IMalaysia* envisages. The Chinese overwhelmingly reported to use Chinese languages with their friends, whereas Malay students not only reported to use Bahasa with their friends, but also rarely claimed any proficiency in Chinese. This suggests Chinese and Malay social groups are largely separate. Indeed, only one Chinese respondent reported to speak Bahasa with his friends, and only two Malay students reported to use Mandarin with friends. Instead, Chinese

discussions about language choice with friends focussed on choosing between Mandarin other Chinese varieties, rather than referring to Bahasa or accommodating ethnic Malays. They explained, for example, “everyone knows their own dialect, but not everyone knows the others’ dialects, but we all know Mandarin. So it’s easier and faster just to speak Mandarin with friends”.

The Indian participants reported to use their multilingualism more frequently in their friendships, suggesting that Indian friendships were more interethnic. When interviewed, students did refer to their Chinese and Malay friends but explained that they use English with them “beyond no doubt” because choosing not to speak in English is “degrading”. This suggests that friendships may be interethnic but not necessarily multilingual. However, it is possible that strictly intra-community Indian friendships draw on various codes, given the complex situation of them being the smallest *pendatang* minority that on the one hand underwent Bahasa-medium education, but on the other hand is experiencing shift away from Indian languages and the prestige of English. Some admitted they prefer Bahasa with close Indian friends because “when I grew up, Malay was my first language before I could actually speak Tamil because my background, my family they were all from *kebangsaan* [national schools]”. Others explained that they speak Tamil, including with non-Tamils who have acquired Tamil, if they are close friends. They also reemphasised the role English now plays as a first language for many ethnic Indians. They explained “sometimes the parents might not teach them Tamil. So English might be their first language. So, they start to speak in English, which mean slowly they forget their mother tongue or they don’t actually see the importance”.

Beyond friendships, language choices in daily life showed that Chinese youths claimed to use a Chinese language or English more frequently rather than Bahasa, and Indian youths biased English and Tamil. Chinese and Indian participants explained that they only



routinely use Bahasa in limited circumstances, such as with government, when “making our passports”, and “getting official stuff done”. Chinese students argued that Chinese-Malaysians only generally encounter ethnic Malays in day-to-day business and even then prefer to use English because “English is a language all Malaysians know” and because their own Bahasa “is not that good”. For them, Bahasa was not preferred and instead a language they would use with “rural people”. Some argued that Malay youths prefer to speak English with ethnic Chinese to show that they “belong to a higher class”. Malay responses often reflected this, with arguments that “without English, people are going to question your credibility”. Indian students, however, claimed to use Bahasa in public spaces to avoid embarrassing “uneducated Malays” because “you don’t want to speak English with someone who you think cannot”. These folk linguistic constructions can be seen as dehierarchising Bahasa, firstly given other languages were unmarked choices. Beyond this, however, ethnic Malays were constructed as monolingual and Bahasa as un-cosmopolitan and indexing underachievement. Rather than functioning as a national language of these youths, Bahasa was positioned as a linguistic last resort even for dealing with ethnic Malays. In the context of Malaysian language policy, this hierarchy hints at a grassroots English-language hegemony reproduced by non-Malays youths which, based on these folk linguistic discussions, ethnic Malays may have also internalised. Some Malays students, however, confirmed that non-Malays tend not to use Bahasa by bemoaning that Bahasa as a national language is failing, explaining:

Student 2: It’s not working.

Research? Why not?

Student 4: Because they [Indians and Chinese] prefer to use English because it’s very easy for them to communicate, to understand. Better than Malay.

Student 3: Because of the environment also. Because they grow up in Chinese schools, Chinese culture.

## **Power and mobility**

Without Bahasa functioning as a common language for all, multilingualism was seen among non-Malays to inadvertently advance their own linguistic and socioeconomic mobility. A cornerstone of Malaysian language and social policy, however, is to address Malay socioeconomic disadvantage (David and Govindasamy 2005). Implied within the policy is political pressure on non-Malays to assimilate, and an agenda to decelerate non-Malay development by complicating their linguistic pathways to economic success. As detailed, however, non-Malays have adapted to, rather than adopted Bahasa. Rather than being linguistically suppressed, they reported to feel empowered with greater linguistic mobility in ways that Malaysian policy – and indeed critical language policy research – might not anticipate. Chinese and Indian students argued that their multilingual repertoires afford more flexibility to them than to ethnic Malays in navigating the sociolinguistic complexities of Malaysia. For example, a Chinese group explained:

Student 1:            Learning Malay is actually good, because not like other countries, we are actually trilingual. We know all three languages. It's actually an advantage.

Student 4:            We, like, depend on our audience. Let's say she is a banana [ethnic Chinese who is not proficient in Mandarin], then I will speak English to her. If she can understand Chinese, I will speak Chinese. I will be considerate of which language she is most comfortable with.

Indian groups even described their linguistic mobility as a fortunate result of unfortunate policy. Although they have been forced into multilingualism because Indian languages “are not really given any importance”, Indian youths reported they are advantaged by policy because they “can just adapt” to local contexts and “won't feel lost”. Non-Malay students also specifically argued that this linguistic mobility increases their socioeconomic mobility. They positioned their multilingualism in neoliberal terms as source of potential profit for

domestic business, international relationships, and transnationalism. Some Chinese saw profit in their heritage languages, whereby a group of Cantonese speakers claimed “actually it makes out life easier, like when we go to Hong Kong, we know how to speak Cantonese”. More commonly, the students reflected on the linguistic capital they inherently hold as Mandarin speakers, arguing “Mandarin is important because the companies that are hiring us want Chinese speaking people. Because Chinese, like China, is becoming a global superpower” and for this reason ethnic Malays “actually need to learn Chinese” rather than suppress it. Malay- and Indian-Malaysians, they felt, acknowledge that Mandarin holds capital and therefore often prefer Mandarin-medium education over the public school system. Indian students saw socioeconomic opportunity within their own multilingual repertoires too, explaining “we pick up three languages from the start and then you learn extra along the way. So basically we are well-equipped from the moment you go to the outside world”.

With frustration, Malay youths also narrated that ethnic Chinese and Indians are inadvertently empowered by language policy having inadvertently fostered their relatively greater multilingualism. They expressed critical awareness that Bahasa has not become as a common language of Malaysians despite language policy, and that this has disadvantaged ethnic Malays. They explained “there are disadvantages to being Malay because we only speak two languages, Malay and English. But Indians and Chinese, most of them know three”, and “they have chances to get a better life”. They also reported that affirmative action has had limited success because, in practical terms, “you are more marketable in Malaysia if you know Mandarin” and because the Indian community still favours English. Some were chagrined by the lack of linguistic capital associated with Bahasa and by non-Malays rejecting the national language. Others urged their community to rise above their ethnonationalist commitment to *Tanah Melayu*, to accept the economic predominance of the Chinese business community, and to therefore embrace the instrumentality of Mandarin.

They argued “it’s about language and power. We want that Malay people will want to learn Mandarin. So at least we won’t have trouble when we work with a Chinese company and that way the Chinese boss will treat us equally”.

In response to this sense of linguistic disempowerment, some Malay students - especially those in Kuala Lumpur and Penang who had migrated from elsewhere in Malaysia – sought linguistic mobility in dialect proficiencies that non-Malays do not enjoy. They explained that “every county has a dialect, such as Johor [it] has a Johor dialect...Malays have mastered variety of languages”, “Kelantanese is when we speak to Kelantanese people and when we speak to some women”

Student 2: I’m from Sarawak, so I also speak Sarawak Malay.

Researcher: Is that different?

Student 2: Very huge difference actually.

This can be seen as Malay youths tenuously remedying their linguistic disempowerment, but this discourse has some merit. As Ting and Ling (2013) note, Sarawak Malay shows “variations which may cause incomprehensibility to speakers of other Malay varieties” (p. 79) including lexical, phonological, and some morphosyntactic differences. Kelantanese is also unique for its phonological features and vocabulary. It is therefore reasonable to assert that within Bahasa-speaking Malaysia, ethnic Malays enjoy greater mobility. However, it is especially intriguing that Malay students did not claim any linguistic capital as speakers of the same language as Indonesia, their neighbour and the world’s largest Muslim population. This may be because “people-to-people ties have deteriorated and the sense of ‘alterity’ (otherness) appears to be more heightened” (Md. Khalid and Yacob 2012: 357) between Malaysia and Indonesia, arguably because of mass labour migration from Indonesia to Malaysia and differing sociopolitical perspectives. Instead, the students’ discourses about their own linguistic mobility only referred to dialects, and only subsequent to discussing the multilingualism and mobility of non-Malays.

## **Conclusion**

Empirically, this paper has added to evidence that Malaysian language policy – with its imposition of Bahasa as the national language for all Malaysians steeped in Malay ethnonationalism – has not necessarily been successful. The folk linguistic reports of non-Malay youth about their language choices suggest that they have only adapted (Kramer 2011) to Bahasa, parallel to their own plethora of heritage languages, rather than adopted it. Chinese and Indian-Malaysian youths reported to have acquired Bahasa, but not to routinely use across or within their ethnic groups it despite its status as the national language. Only three Chinese-Malaysian youths, for example, claimed to use Bahasa in friendship groups and online domains. Indian-Malaysians appeared to make greater use of their linguistic resources across different domains, but were adamant that English – not Bahasa - is their preferred code with ethnic Malays. A chasm therefore exists between Malaysia's hegemonic policy to elevate Bahasa into an interethnic language and ongoing multilingual language practices that policy seems not to have thwarted.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the paper has shown how a hegemonic language policy can be seen from a posthumanist perspective (Pennycook 2016) as backfiring with unanticipated emancipatory results. Rather than accepting as a fait accompli that oppressive policy oppresses, a posthumanist lens shows that human linguistic experience in Malaysia, as it is reported on the ground, is more complex. Naturally, linguistic practices need not at all be compelled by compliance with state language policy. Instead, the reach of government policy in altering language practices is limited by a broader gamut of interests that shape daily life, including economy and culture. In the case of Chinese-Malaysians, for example, the political economy of Mandarin discourages a shift to Bahasa, aided in turn by Chinese wealth that allows Chinese-Malaysians to opt out of public education where state

language policy is most pronounced. However, it also seems to be the case that Malay ethnonationalism, as it is expressed through hegemonic language policy, is not inspiring linguistic loyalty among non-Malay youths. Instead, it may be so potent that its attempts at acculturation are destined to fail. As Barr and Govindasamy (2010) explain, Malay ethnonationalism is “reinforcing the self-confidence and sense of entitlement of the Malay-Muslim community, and exaggerating the message to non-Malays (and especially to the Chinese and Indians) that they are not core participants in the Malaysian nation” (p. 307). The impact is that the non-Malay youths from this research seemed to resist linguistic suppression by largely disassociating from the Malay majority, dominant Malay discourses, and therefore from Bahasa. By combining analysis of survey and interview data, it was revealed for example that the friendship groups of the Chinese-Malaysian youths were almost exclusively Chinese and Chinese-medium. This in essence means these youths have side-stepped the imposition of Bahasa as a language for all Malaysians. This is undoubtedly also aided by matters of socioeconomic class and not disassociation alone, but it does embody their human experience of language policy. From a sociological perspective, this is not surprising. Empowered critical consciousness (Trieu and Lee 2018) reminds us that marginalised ethnic communities who become disassociated from the dominant group, such as through a discursive insistence they are inauthentic citizens, can also resourcefully reframe their marginalisation into avenues of empowerment.

Secondly, the folk linguistic discourses of Malay and non-Malay youths alike even revealed a critical perception that non-Malays can experience hegemonic language policy as delivering collateral benefits. Beyond their disassociation from the Malay majority, language policy has reportedly bestowed greater multilingualism upon Chinese- and Indian-Malaysian individuals than upon ethnic Malays. This was seen by Malay and non-Malay youths alike as rendering non-Malay youths more linguistically mobile in navigating Malaysia’s local and

regional society and economy. This was also reportedly experienced as offering greater socioeconomic mobility to Chinese- and Indian-Malaysians, rather than advancing *Ketuanan Melayu* as government's policy – and indeed Malay ethnonationalist ideology - to specifically increase the socioeconomic mobility of ethnic Malays above that of the others. The case of youth in Malaysia tells us we should not assume that the human experience of oppressive language policy, such as one that errs heavily on the side of ethnonationalism, is inevitably experienced as altogether oppressive by those it targets.

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