Title: The bilingual language policy and its effects on minority languages in Singapore: Hard truths on Malay

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The Bilingual Language Policy &
Its Effects On Minority
Languages In Singapore: Hard
Truths On Malay

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Bilingualism

- The ability to converse or communicate in two languages
- “who obtains communicative skills, with various degrees of proficiency, in oral and/or written forms, in order to interact with speakers of one or more languages in a given society” (Butler & Hakuta, 2004:115)
Since 1956 after the All-Party Report recommended the teaching of the vernacular language and English

Adopted when PAP came into power in 1959

Promoted via a bilingual education policy

The learning of English and a state-determined “mother tongue” (page 4)
“deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocations of their language codes” (Cooper, 1989:45)

Generally aimed at changing linguistic behaviour
Language Planning in Singapore

Three models of language policy (Laitin (1992: 10)

- Official multilingualism
- Language rationalization
- Language maintenance policy

Language rationalization policy

- English is the language of administration, commerce and knowledge,
- and MTL as cultural repositories
1. “prima facie parity among the four official languages”
2. “Malay, as the national language, is a political gesture recognizing the geopolitical realities in Singapore’s locale”
3. English is the dominant “language of commerce and government”
4. “English is the surrogate lingua franca of Singaporeans”
5. “economic concerns have played a major role in the Government’s efforts in boosting the proficiency levels of the English and Chinese languages in recent years”
Singapore’s bilingual language policy (English-knowing bilingualism)

- “most restrictive and peculiar” (Pakir, 2004: 254)
- Proficiency in English and one other official language
- Functional polarization gives importance to each language and rationalizes its use and learning in schools (Bokhorst-Heng: 1999)
Malay Language Planning

- Malay Language & Literary Congress (1954/1956)
- Mandarin-inspired
- Focus on English and impact on Mandarin
- Few studies on English-Malay bilingualism (studies on attitudes)
- Studies on standardization of Malay in Singapore (4)
1. Has the bilingual policy in any way affected the growth of Malay in Singapore, or has the policy thwarted its use in an English-speaking environment?

2. How can the language shift and changing attitudes toward Malay be addressed? What pedagogical approaches should be used to support Malay in an English-knowing bilingual context such as Singapore?

3. Can Malay still play its role as “cultural ballast” for the Malay community in the 21st century, when more Malay Primary 1 students join school with less than basic knowledge of the language?
Methodology

- Analysis of selected documents and reports that have been integral to the implementation and development of the Singapore bilingual policy and Malay language planning.
- The analysis of review committee reports are divided into five sections:
  - Background to the Review Committee/Report
  - The Committee’s Scope of Review
  - Finding’s of the Review Committee/Report
  - Implementation of the Review Committee’s/Report’s recommendations
  - Impact on Malay
Selected review committee reports

- Report by the All-Party Committee of the Singapore Legislative Assembly on Chinese Education, 1956
- Improving Primary School Education Report, 1991
- Malay Language Steering Review Committee, 1999
- Mother Tongue Languages Curriculum & Pedagogy Review Committees, 2002-2004
- Primary and Secondary Education Review and Implementation Committees, 2009-2010
- Mother Tongue Language Review Committee, 2011
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5. Mother Tongue Languages Curriculum & Pedagogy Review Committees, 2002-2004  
6. Primary & Secondary Education Review & Implementation Committees, 2009-2010  
7. Mother Tongue Language Review Committee | Reports emphasizing specific Malay language programs, e.g. EMAS & MLEP, BA (Ed.) MLL. Introduction of Vision Arif Budiman |
Cooper (1989) divides the process of language planning into four types:
- Status planning
- Corpus planning
- Acquisition planning

Cooper developed an “accounting scheme” to make it clear that analyzing language planning of the types means tracking eight components, namely:
- What actors attempt to influence what behaviors of which people for what ends, under what conditions, by what means, through what decision-making process, with what effect?
Cooper’s accounting scheme is widely used as it answers the four difficult tasks that language planners face:

- describe,
- predict, and
- explain language planning outcomes,
- derive valid generalizations about these processes and outcomes.
This being the first comprehensive research on the impact of the bilingual policy on Malay, the use of Cooper’s structured model of language planning will give us a clearer picture of the bilingual policy’s impact on the language in terms of its status and corpus as well as its acquisition.
Overall effects of the bilingual policy on the status, corpus and acquisition planning of Malay

- Effects on the status of Malay
- Effects on the Malay Corpus
- Effects on the Acquisition of Malay
the deliberate effort “to influence the allocation of functions among a community’s languages”. (Cooper, 1989: 99)

These functions are
- official language
- provincial or regional official language
- language of wider communication
- international language
- language of the capital
- group language
- language of education
- language as a school subject
- literary language
- language of religion
The Party believes that not only must Malay education in this country be developed beyond primary level as soon as possible, but it should also enjoy **undisputed priority** over any other language as the compulsory second language to be taught in all schools, be they English, Chinese, or Indian schools... Instead of [offering] a free choice of a second or third language, we wanted to state categorically that **Malay should and must be the predominant language in this country.**  

(Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 2, 1956-58, 1st Series: 71)
I believed in being realistic: Malay would become the most important language once Singapore was part of Malaysia, but the people could not master it overnight. The civil servants who had long used English and the schools which had long used their own respective languages would need time to adapt. (Lee, 2011: 53)
7. (1) Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English shall be the four official languages in Singapore.

(2) The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in the Roman script. (Republic of Singapore Independence Act: Revised Edition 1985)
The best of the East and of the West must be blended to advantage in the Singaporean. Confucian ethics, Malay traditions, and the Hindu ethos must be combined with skeptical Western methods of scientific inquiry, the open discursive method in the search for the truth. (MOE, 1979: iv)
“The principal value of teaching the second language is the importance of moral values and understanding of cultural traditions.” (Lee, 2011: 75)

Thus, the mother tongue plays the role of cultural ballast relative to the ever-widening use of English within the community, given that “language and culture are organic and evolve constantly in accordance with changing times. Their true value lies in helping a person meet changing circumstances.”
Status of Malay – language of religion (link language)

- De facto official language of Islam in the Malay Archipelago besides Arabic
  - Al-Attas (1972) – lingua franca in the region and simplicity
  - Alisjahbana (1977) – language’s simplicity in terms of form and function
  - Asmah (2005) – language of governance and diplomacy as well as the lingua franca of the region
Status of Malay – language of religion (encroachment)

- There has been a marked increase in the number of sermons delivered in English at mosques during Friday prayers
- Rise in the use of English and the repositioning of Malay within the Madrasah education system
- Greater use of English in MUIS religious knowledge programmes at kids, teens and youth level
Islam embraces diversity. And the Singapore Muslim community is indeed a diverse one in its roots. Although mainly Malay, we also have a good number hailing from South Asia and the Hadramaut region in the Arabian Peninsula. Over the many decades, they have contributed much and blended with the locals to become what we locally term as the Malay/Muslim community. The community must now similarly be open to new arrivals who may not speak Malay or be familiar with the local culture. (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, 2009) (www.muis.gov.sg/cmc/news/speeches)
Status of Malay – post-1965

- Malay reached its pinnacle in the early years of independence
- Setting up of National Language & Culture Council to promote the National Language
- Bonuses to civil servants proficient in the Malay language
Malay still plays an important role in official ceremonies as the national anthem, Majulah Singapura, is in Malay, and commands given during National Day parades are also in Malay. However, despite these symbolic gestures involving the National Language, there have long been signs of the diminishing importance of the language. (Subhan, 2012: 135)
Status of Malay – dwindling signs

- Closure of National Language & Culture Council (1969)
- Media took away the air time devoted to the learning of Malay
- Bonuses previously given to civil servants proficient in Malay replaced by pay incentive scheme for non-graduate teachers who obtained distinctions in English, English Literature, and Mathematics in their ‘O’ levels
- Closure of Malay-stream schools/programmes
Thus, even though Malay maintained its status as the National Language and one of the four Official Languages, it lost its status as the language of unity, administration, and wider communication. As was indicated by a language and cultural expert, Ariff Ahmad,

Due to the fact that “national” is a terminology of politics, the role of the language is determined by the political forces. In short, the development of the language is inherent in the development of the politics surrounding it. (Singapore Malay Teachers’ Union 25th Anniversary Book: 1972)
Impact of Bilingualism on Status Planning - positive

- Malay as a language of cultural transmission and enhancement as well as repository of values
- Malay as a literary language and a tool in cultural education
- Malay as official language
Impact of bilingualism on Status Planning - negative

- Malay as a group language and language of wider communication has diminished
- Malay as an educational language and a school subject has been impacted
- Receding status of Malay as the link language for the teaching and learning of Islam
- Malay used to be promoted as a National language for all Singaporeans. Now promoted only among Malay-speaking Singaporeans
Corpus Planning

Focuses on change through deliberate planning to the actual corpus, or form, of a language

Form follows function

- Design based on a given function
  - overt
  - covert

- Symbolic purposes
Corpus Planning - categories

- **Graphization**
  - Process of reducing the form of the language to writing

- **Standardization (Codification)**
  - Unplanned evolution
  - Overt planning

- **Modernization (Elaboration)**
  - Language becoming “an appropriate medium of communication for modern topics and forms of discourse” (Cooper, 1989: 149)

- **Renovation**
  - An effort to change an already developed code
Jawi to romanized script has helped sustain the development of Malay.

The romanization of Malay was discussed and promoted since the Malay Language & Literary Congress II (1954) and Congress III (1956).

- Standardizing spelling and speech forms
- Issue of standardization of spoken Malay – johor-riau variety vs baku variety
- Malaysia-based development


**Corpus Planning - issues**

- Rationalization of standardization of spoken Malay

- Is there the need to be Malaysian-centric

- Changes are renovating not modernizing
Renovation is an effort to change an already developed code, whether in the name of efficiency, aesthetics, or national or political ideology.

“Replacement or reform of an existing writing system is not graphization but regraphization. Purification of an already standard language is not standardization but restandardization.” (Cooper, 1989:154)
A language that has been thus renovated fulfills no new communicative functions. A renovated language that carries old communicative functions carries with it the non-linguistic goals that ultimately motivated the linguistic renovation. These non-linguistic goals may include the legitimatization of new elites and effectively discredit old ones, the mobilization of political support, or the raising of consciousness. (Subhan, 2012)
Malay has progressed in tandem with the many changes in the Malay-speaking region.

The bilingual language policy has not in any way curtailed the growth of the language in terms of its corpus.

Nevertheless Singapore has no say in the progression as we have no choice but to accept exonormative standards determined by Indonesia and Malaysia.
“Paradoxically, for a country that invests heavily in bilingualism and language management, Singapore seems linguistically insecure, perhaps in part because the standards for its languages are derived from elsewhere: Malay standards follow those set by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei; English standards implicitly comes from Britain; and Mandarin follows Beijing’s standards”. (Pakir, 2004: 124)
Method for organizing the learning and acquisition of a language

Bases for acquisition planning

- Overt language planning goal
  - Acquisition of the language as a second or foreign language
  - Reacquisition of the language by populations for whom it was once either a vernacular or a language of specialized function
  - Language maintenance

- Method employed to attain the goal
  - Designed primarily to create or improve the opportunity to learn
    - Direct methods
    - Indirect methods
  - Designed primarily to create or improve incentives to learn
  - Form of attainment that is designed to create or improve both opportunities and incentives to learn simultaneously
“There should be an emphasis on communicative competence and not just linguistic competence or competence in a spoken variety only.”

Effects on the Acquisition of Malay

- Received the largest boost in terms of the impact of the bilingual policy
- Due to the equal treatment for all languages, Malay was able to benefit from
  - the reviews and recommendations and
  - from the enhanced teaching and learning of the language thanks to additional resources and teacher support
Effect of Bilingual Policy on Malay (RQ1)

- **Positive Effects**
  - Platform for minority languages
  - Resources for curriculum development and teacher training under Mother Tongue Programme
  - Importance of learning culture in a globalised world

- **Negative Effects**
  - Declining linguistic proficiency
  - Language shift
  - Changing language attitudes
  - Examination-centric learning emphasis
Pedagogical approach to support the teaching and learning of Malay (RQ2)

- Review & rethink the pedagogical approach due to the changing demographics
- Factors to be considered
  - Concept of differentiation
  - Need for communication
  - Authentic content
  - Functionality of tasks
  - Domain of use
Pakir (2004) noted that “the policy of having CL2, ML2 and TL2 serving as counters to westernization and for preserving cultural roots did not work”. It has become more challenging with the shrinking domain of usage for Malay language especially in the religious domain. Issue of linguistic instrumentalism has to be addressed.
Recommendations

- Review of standard spoken language policy
- Body that oversees the development of Malay (BH, 26th Jun 2012)
- Malay language organizations to work together
- New pedagogical approach – HFW & sight words (Subhan, 2009)
- Commodification of Malay