

# Bangsa Malaysia and Recent Malaysian English Language Policies

**Brian Ridge**

Faculty of Arts, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba Qld 4350, Australia

This paper analyses Malaysia's English language policies, especially since the mid 1990s, in the light of more recent claims for a united Malaysian nation (under the banner of *bangsa Malaysia*) and in the context of English language and its potential for Malaysia to forge more of an externalised identity. It examines the impact of post-independence measures to boost the status of Malay by switching the language medium in schools to Malay (Bahasa Malaysia). This had an immediate effect on English medium schools, but the same measure was not carried through to Chinese or Tamil schools. For the latter, students nonetheless had to demonstrate competence in Bahasa Malaysia and so there evolved an effective bilingualism for non-Malays – a bilingualism that was not generally available for the bulk of Malay students. By the 1990s, Malaysia sought to reintroduce English language competence via its schools and tertiary education. This measure is part of an overall effort to engage with the globalising world.

**Keywords:** English language, Malaysia, globalisation

## Introduction

Malaysia's more recent post-World-War-II history of nation-building is replete with moves to balance the demands for indigenous and Malay rights with those of other groups that make up what now-retired Prime Minister Dr Mahathir increasingly called *Bangsa Malaysia*. Of course, *bangsa* ('race, nation') as a term is not new in Malaysian political rhetoric, but was recreated in the latter years of what Khoo (1995) calls 'Mahathirism' to be highly inclusive and not suggestive of the 1960s–70s era when *bangsa* had to be automatically linked to a single ethnic group that made up Malaysia – e.g. *bangsa cina*, *bangsa melayu*, etc. And even in the early 1957–63 era of nation-building, Cheah (2002: 49–51) argues that while Malay dominance was never stated openly, it was nonetheless assumed and inevitably led to early demands for clearer spin-offs, e.g. pleas that Malay be made the national language – but even this was not formally enshrined until the 1967 National Language Act.

## Brief Overview of Earlier Language Policy in Malaysia

Language policy during the early years of independence (1957–67) was clearly focused on Malay identity and status and therefore placed the competing status of English and Malay on the agenda very quickly, a period that Pennycook (1994: 195) describes as 'the struggle for ascendancy of Malay politics, language and culture'. This was in sharp contrast to the more *laissez-faire* approach to language policy during the early colonial era, in which it was not until 1920 that the British administration sought to exert more control over Chinese schools and required

them to register and have their teachers vetted for political suitability. This was very much a response to events in China. With regard to other schools, over the last years of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, a number of small English-medium schools were opened. Malay-medium schools also opened, and while Gaudart (1992: 73–4) describes British policy towards such schools as more confused than vindictive, it often meant that such schools had what was seen as substandard education, more in tune with emphasising skills such as gardening and cooking. Tamil-medium schools fared little better, since they were seen as supplying labour for rubber plantations. But the critical feature in this era was that there was increasing government support for mission schools and their teaching of English.

One other critical factor in the school scenario during this pre-independence phase was that the English-medium schools, besides being better supported, were usually located in major urban centres – the result of colonial policies not allowing the intrusion of mission or government English-medium schools into what were seen as traditional Muslim areas in rural Malaya. In time these more urban English-medium schools acted as a critical cog in boosting the value of bilingualism, a bilingualism that was ‘English-and’, with the second language being Chinese or Malay for the most part.

In the post-World-War-II era, as pressures increased for Malay nationalism, there was increasing dissatisfaction with Malay education, and there was also increasing suspicion of Chinese-medium schools in the shadow of Mao’s China. Following a series of reports (see Federation of Malaya, 1951a, 1951b, 1956), the 1957 Education Ordinance sought to encourage the use of Malay with a carrot-and-stick approach that included measures such as demanding that all government appointees must have competence in the national language, Malay, and that entrance to government secondary schools also depended on competence in Malay. But such an approach was bound to lead to bilingualism for non-Malays, but more likely monolingualism for Malays – a factor that provoked much comment and demand for change in the 1990s when competence in English was back on the language-policy table. Given the other ethnic pressures that faced early Malaysia, it is no surprise that there was in reality a gradualist policy on language matters, including the national language. Of course, as Tan (2005: 49) notes, it is also worth keeping in mind that often schools, in an individual sense, have been operating largely through one language medium – hence the references to Malay-, Chinese- or Tamil-medium schools. The one real exception to this was the transitional period of the 1970s when English-medium schools were being phased out. This phasing out was one clear measure to improve the status of the national language and to counteract the drift to English-medium schools: over the period 1956–64, the proportion who chose English-medium schools in the government subsidised sector increased from 61% to 84.4% (see Ridge, 1996: 72).

This more gradualist approach has been a consistent part of language policy in Malaysia and signals something of the delicate fabric with all its ethnic and regional variations that underpinned the base of early Malaysia. The claim to gradualism is based on factors such as the 1967 National Language Act setting a period through to the 1980s for the fuller implementation of Bahasa as the key medium for schools (except Chinese and Tamil ones) and for state-backed

tertiary institutions. But by the 1990s some of the previous ethnic divisions were not so obvious in school-enrolment patterns. In April 1995, 35,000 Malay and Indian students were studying in Chinese-medium schools, a 2000 increase over just one year, and the Education Ministry also reported that, of these, 25,000 were Malays, the rest being Indians. Only a decade earlier, a little fewer than 8000 non-Chinese attended Chinese schools (*Bernama News*, 7 April 1995). By 1999, the numbers of Malays in Chinese-medium schools had jumped to 40,000 (*Star*, 4 September 1999). The reasons behind this shift were a mixture of parents placing children in schools with what they saw as better results, and also because among some urban Malays there was a growing recognition of the value of Chinese as a language of wider communication. With regard to any demand for English-medium, by 2002 there were also reports of some 7000 Chinese Malaysians attending English-medium schools in Singapore (Tan, 2005: 58).

Given the general shifts away from a heavy ethnic divide in Malaysia, coupled with a booming economy at least until the mid-1990s, the overall scene for any shift in Malaysian policy on English was quite different from that faced in the 1960s. By the mid-1990s, the government was gradually urging tertiary institutions to offer technical areas in English, i.e. it gave the legal green light to institutions to seek official approval for this use of English medium. At the same time, senior government ministers and then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir made repeated public statements urging such use of English while assuring hearers that none of this was meant to threaten the status of the national language. By early 2003, the government had also introduced the teaching of science and maths in junior primary and secondary classes via English medium. Besides these clear school-based measures, there are also measures to create technologically-literate and English-competent graduates. And in late June 2003, MCA Vice-President and Minister for Human Resources, Dr Fong Chan Onn, in the process of announcing RM5000 annual loans for local unemployed graduates to upgrade skills, also highlighted how ministry studies had shown that a poor command of English was behind the failure of many local graduates to gain employment in the private sector (*Star*, 29 June 2003). In the final analysis it can be seen that so much of what has happened to language policy in Malaysia has been and is still entwined with the ongoing moves towards newer versions of nationhood, especially in the more fluid environment of the 21st century world – a world often quickly summarised as more globalising and globalised.

### **The Focus of this Analysis**

This paper will therefore reanalyse Malaysia's off-again-on-again affair with the English language from two basic perspectives:

- Malaysian 21st century moves towards *Bangsa Malaysia* and Malaysian nationhood in the context of globalisation; and
- English as the dominant language of science and technology and its role as a world language.

This article, then, will assess Malaysia's English-language policies, especially since the mid 1990s, using these two foci and then argue that in the current climate of a burgeoning externalisation of Malaysia's self-image and its politico-economic future Malaysia is perhaps more in control of its own destiny.

Rather than leaving the globalising world 'out there', Malaysia is attempting to grapple with it and also to assert, mould and craft a role in the ongoing 21st century version of globalisation. It will also attempt to pinpoint some pressure points for Malaysia's English language policy in the medium term.

### **Moves Towards *Bangsa Malaysia* and Malaysian Nationhood**

In this section, the emphasis will be on how far Malaysia's more recently asserted moves towards *Bangsa Malaysia* interact with the newer measures from the mid-1990s to boost English-language competence via the educational systems. This will be argued as reflecting a shift from the immediate post-independence years of a focus on solidifying and enhancing Malay rights and identity to a more recent emphasis on the advancement of a Malaysian identity and well-being via a more externalised economy – something very much at the heart of Vision 2020.<sup>1</sup> In turn, much of this process was for a time still in some flux, especially following the 1999 elections.

### **Post Cold-War context**

Malaysia's version of nationhood, now being recrafted in a very distinct post-Cold-War world, has been epitomised by a relatively long-term process of nation-building. But over the past 20 years this was heavily influenced by former Prime Minister Mahathir's policies. Verma (2002: 42) describes these policies as being meant 'to encourage the perception of the Malaysian state as a modern state – a protective agency that will make all communities equally prosperous – yet also to be cautious that centralisation does not lead to disruption of communal authority structures'. In many ways, the 1999 elections placed quite different pressures on this overall policy framework and Maznah Mohamad (2003: 68–9) has argued that what is seen as a monopoly by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation, the major partner in the governing coalition) over 'Malay consensus' was shaken, especially once what started out as criticism directed at Dr Mahathir over the sacking and jailing of the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim turned into wider criticism of UMNO, all linked with concern over other areas of discontent, e.g. social and political reform. However, despite the tensions that underlay the Anwar factor, and in a manner that also seems to suggest a more unified Malaysian consciousness, Maznah Mohamad (2003: 77–8) also argued that the coalition<sup>2</sup> government was 'guaranteed victory as long as UMNO continues to contest and win in mixed seats'. On top of this, there was a growing awareness that urban Malay voters, while not enamoured with UMNO per se, were also showing signs of an active identity beyond the ethnic one, and one that Mandal (2001: 157) has described as being not so concerned with ethnicism and as a result as not being primarily focused on matters exclusively Malay. Mandal (2001: 160) also noted that, with shifts in the 1990s towards a growing economic liberalisation, there has also been an observable increase in the use of English in public places, all of which feeds into Mandal's perhaps still overly ambitious claim that English is the pre-eminent language of all Malaysians, i.e. it is no longer the case that English language is seen as being the preserve of any one ethnic group – or highly marked *bangsa* – in Malaysia.

But not all the lead-up to the 1999 elections was explicitly about English-language policy. In the context of Chinese politics, Ng (2003: 98–9) noted that even during the lead-up to the 1999 elections, when there was some uncertainty over the Chinese vote for the coalition, there were clearer moves to provide some benefits for such voters, particularly in the educational field. Ng detailed how, in some pre-election material, much was made of how the coalition was able to back further expansion of private higher education colleges, many of which are the lifeline for continuing educational opportunities for Chinese Malaysians. Indeed, Ng (2003: 102) remarked that many found the coalition's 'generosity' towards Chinese education quite out of the ordinary. This was because the proposed measures were to cover a range of Chinese education issues including recognition of Chinese independent secondary schools for the first time, establishing Chinese primary schools, etc. However, such political compromise and manoeuvring was all part of the ongoing political ground that still underpins English language policy, and this feature seems best to reflect what Ng (2003: 91–2) argued is a 1990s' tendency for Chinese voters to move to the political centre such that integration is a more marked feature of Chinese Malaysians today. This is a clear shift from the dark days after May 1969 remembered more for a sharp move to the political outer by Chinese Malaysians and it is also a probable indicator of a wider *Bangsa Malaysia* mentality.

### **1999 elections and *Bangsa Malaysia***

Linked to all these pathways along the track to Malaysian nationhood is the issue of language policy (with a special focus on the status of the national language *vis-à-vis* English) and access to educational opportunities, both in quite individual and community terms, and also in national terms, particularly in the era of Vision 2020. Cheah (2002: 240) nonetheless claimed that Dr Mahathir in his announcement of Vision 2020 clearly asserted that this vision was meant to accommodate non-Malays 'as co-partners with Malays in the task of transforming Malaysia into a modern, highly-developed, "just and equal" *Bangsa Malaysia*, or Malaysian nation'. While it may well have been true that more non-Malays than Malays welcomed this, there have also been ongoing pleas from some Malay leaders that the government not take away 'special privileges' for Malays. If this situation persists, then *Bangsa Malaysia* may be delayed or will develop its own unique Malaysian qualities, especially among younger Malaysians.

The results of the 1999 elections were a clear rebuff for UMNO by urban-based Malay voters, but nonetheless, the national coalition did clearly win convincingly. However, events such as 11 September 2001, Bali October 2002 and the Iraq War of early 2003 have also placed great strains on more Islamic-based groupings in Malaysia, and this in turn has in some way affected the ongoing evolution of Malaysia and its coalition government by providing at least a more stable political ground for ongoing English-language policy. In the pre-2004 national election climate, the clear opposition that might have been expected from some of the more Islamic political groupings was necessarily muted: the political ground was not so fertile for such groupings, leaving a policy breathing space for the government in which it could continue to pursue its various policies, especially the gradual reintroduction of English language competence via the educational systems.

One other key indicator of a shift in how younger Malaysians see themselves is evident in the results of a survey of younger Malaysians studying overseas. Heng Pek Koon, a Malaysian academic based in the US, was reported (*Straits Times*, 8 August 2003) as finding in a 1999–2000 survey of 501 college students (this period straddled the 1999 election) that non-Malays were not overly concerned about any pro-Malay bias of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Interestingly, it was Malay students who, if they were more concerned by the NEP (most were not), expressed opposition to what they saw as the NEP's role in widening the gap between the haves and have-nots among the Malay population. And in the wider political domain there looks to be change afoot, with only 34% of these same younger-generation Malays ranking the then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir as the politician they admired most – with the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim coming in with only a 35 % approval rating.

These results contrast sharply with the 60% of the younger Chinese respondents rating Dr Mahathir as the top ranked politician, and this was outstripped by a 70% approval rating among the younger Indian respondents. Perhaps more interestingly, these same younger Malaysians pinpointed factors such as any growing Islamisation of Malays, disaffection with what they saw as UMNO's money politics, and perceived corruption as being the key to the general erosion of Malay support for UMNO. But the picture was still not entirely clear-cut as far as *Bangsa Malaysia* was concerned: 62% of surveyed Malay respondents saw Islam and the Malay language as the most important characteristics of a common Malaysian identity. Yet, at the same time, 70% of all respondents claimed that *Bangsa Malaysia* was more important to them than their own particular ethnic identities. It is this still fairly fluid socio-political sea that surrounds ongoing English-language policy and no doubt will also be affected by any future improvement or worsening of the overall economic health of Malaysia and the region generally. Verma (2002: 82) also issues a reminder that, while in the past policies that worked through affirmative action for Malays operated in a context of fixed identities, such rigidity might not be operative for ever, especially as it appears that identity is subject to reinvention and renegotiation. *Bangsa Malaysia* may well have a high salience in the Malaysia of the early 21st century and beyond. Such a shift can be linked with Dr Mahathir's general policy objective of having Malaysia act as a modern state, but one which can interact with globalisation, a globalisation which the Prime Minister also consistently attacked because of what he saw as the negative impact of free flows of finance. Such prime ministerial 'contrariness' of that time could be seen as also working to create the former Prime Minister's modern Malaysian state. And it is worth remembering that it was Dr Mahathir in the post-1999 election era who told his governing coalition partners that their multi-ethnic alliance would become a single party one day (Cheah, 2002: 187). This was a far cry from the Malay Dilemma.<sup>3</sup>

### **Malaysia – Possible dilemma over *Bangsa dan Uagama*?**

Nonetheless, given the newer elements of the evolving external political environment where globalisation following the collapse of the former superpower rivalry between the US and USSR is now also adjusting to an Islamic revival, there is another term in the Malaysian political rhetoric that seems to be taking on

a new significance: *ugama*, 'religion' This term is usually bracketed with *bangsa* in many Bahasa texts as *bangsa dan ugama* and in many ways seems quite capable of projecting something of a dilemma. While *bangsa* may be taking on more of an inclusive connotation in the late 20th century–early 21st century, *ugama*, while still obviously closely linked with religion, is closely associated with not just any religion. In what appears to be an unmarked usage, the linkage is more towards Islam than any other in the distinctly Malaysian context. It seems not to be immediately linked at this stage with a more diffuse reference to religion generally in the Malaysian context as it seems to trigger connections with some key terms in the national constitution where reference is also made to Islam as the religion of at least Malays, particularly given that the Malaysian constitution defines a Malay as 'a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom' (Article 160).<sup>4</sup> In this special contextual field, ethnicity and religion – Islam – are fused. But, if it is the case that this factor swings the whole connotative field more towards Islam, then it is still possible that *bangsa dan ugama* may run the risk of reducing the assumed inclusivity of *bangsa*, especially as *ugama* in the phrase *bangsa dan ugama* has no real distinctive non-Islamic semantic field for non-Malays. This possible deflection may also be more operative in the current explosive international context, so much of which is inclined to centre on Islam in very general, and perhaps forcefully stereotypical, ways. This newer focus in the external, globalising world on Islam in such general ways is itself another facet of globalisation.<sup>5</sup> But in the evolving Malaysian context, the linking of *bangsa* with *ugama* also seems to have the capacity perhaps to shift the perceptual field of *bangsa* away from the more inclusive to a more exclusive reference. Again, the interaction of both internal and external factors is of ongoing interest in any analysis of Malaysia, its more recent English language policies, and globalisation.

## English as a World Language

### Pluricentrism

A critical backdrop to this ever-dynamic Malaysian scenario is the shift in the status and use of English on the world stage. In particular, how does English feed into and feed burgeoning communication technologies? Consequently, of special interest here is how this more insistent factor of English as a language of wider communication is interacting with Malaysia's more recent policy shifts for overtly increasing roles for English language in Malaysia of the 21st century. One natural consequence of the ever-expanding roles for English worldwide is that increasingly it has various 'centres' and therefore no longer can be seen solely as epitomising older versions of an English or even American colonialism or dominance. This aspect runs in tandem with an increasing appreciation of the pluricentric characteristics of languages of wider communication such as English. Pluricentrism (see Clyne, 1992: 1 and 1997) refers to how such languages have different interacting centres, each usually providing a national variety with some of its own distinctive, and often codified, norms. This process has occurred with many Englishes in the world, and more recently there is now an ongoing dictionary project for Singapore English. In the Australian context, much similar work occurred leading up to the 1988 Bicentenary of British settlement.

In such cases of pluricentrism, there is usually a more overt appreciation of a cultural 'weight' for the then accepted and codified form of the language in the community at large. This means that there is less of a looking towards an external norm for acceptable usage. Of course, while English has been on the ground in Malaysia for a longish period, it is not yet true that there is currently an accepted norm with all its associated cultural factors, but it is not beyond the imagination to see this occurring, as it has for the various forms of Malay – see the clear national demarcations, yet still clearly operating associations, between Malaysia's *Bahasa Melayu* / Bahasa Malaysia,<sup>6</sup> Indonesia's *Bahasa Indonesia*, and Brunei's *Bahasa Melayu*. As Asmah Haji Omar (1992: 419) notes, Malay is not a monocentric language and never has been, and these more recent labellings are indicative of a quite active pluricentrism and of varying histories of nation-building.

### Growth of English worldwide

In a more historical perspective of Malaysia's view on its future, it is worth noting that if the immediate post-colonial measures to build status and wider competence in the national language had *not* been successful, then none of the current moves to revive English language competence could have happened: there would not have been sufficient support on the ground such that the UMNO-led coalition could steadily push for quite marked shifts in required standards of English via the educational system. Another aspect is that, in the wider linguistic sphere, English has become a very widespread and superficially powerful language – that is, more and more speakers use it, often as a key second language rather than as a first language, and it also operates as the information pathway in technology, economics, etc. As Kaplan (2001: 9–10) notes, as the British Empire contracted, the spread of English-language teaching increased. This was very much the result of the new post-World-War-II political engine behind English, namely the US, and other technological factors like the first computer programs (Basic, FORTRAN) being associated with a very English-like language/code and output. A key additional factor in this US connection was the fact that in this post-World-War-II era, the US had an established, viable, operating educational and scientific sector that naturally attracted others to it for education and training. Other possible contenders were generally too busy re-constructing during the post-war years, e.g. Germany. The Cold War also dampened Russia's chances of being the technological communicator – this was as much owing to Soviet reluctance to share technological advances as it was to non-Soviet avoidance of the major foe. In more general regional terms, Baldauf and Djité (2003: 220–21) remark that for South-east Asia the continued interpolation of English in music, advertising and film subtitling tends to provide a wider exposure to English, and this will complement what they see as a strengthening of English-speaker numbers for largely pragmatic reasons. In the Malaysian context, English never disappeared entirely, even after the dark days the race riots of May 1969, and there has been some notable literary output in English too (e.g. K.S. Maniam, Ee Tiang Hong). In other words, there has been a 'core' that could well provide a nurturing centre for a more Malaysian core of another variety of English.

In a wider perspective, Crystal (2000: 12–16) sets out the demise of many languages, often linked with a rapid increase in the use of English as a language of wider communication. In his general discussion, Crystal (2000: 14) reflects on the fact that while there may be around 7000 languages worldwide, in a world population of 6 billion plus, eight languages have over 100 million speakers each (Mandarin, Spanish, English, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese). Indeed, these eight languages have over 2.4 billion speakers between them. This yawning distortion is further captured by the fact that just 4% of the world's languages are spoken by 96% of the world's population – or to put it another way: 96% of the world's languages are spoken by just 4% of the total population, with a quarter of the world's languages being spoken by less than 1000 people; and nearly 500 languages have fewer than 100 speakers. Crystal (2003: 20) summarises the trends in language use (and death) as meaning that at least 50% of the current stock of languages look to disappear within the next century.

Of course, from a longer historical perspective it is perhaps surprising that the language of a small island should move so far so fast, all very much the result of a tight series of almost accidents, plus various outcomes from the ongoing contests among European imperial powers as they pushed beyond the Old World to the New. Graddol (1999: 59) backgrounds the spread of English with the sobering observation that while AD700 might work as a good starting point for English as a language – after a rapid evolution from the language mix of earlier migrants from around the 5th century – at that point, he argues that there were most likely only a few thousand speakers of this early Old English. It was not until the 17th-century expansion to the Americas that we note the possible increase of English speakers to around seven million, followed later by a rapid rise in English speakers, largely in America, to around 100 million by the end of the 19th century.

While this 100 million is a far cry from the current estimates of 300 million L1 English-speakers, plus approximately 350 million L2 speakers of English worldwide (Graddol, 1999: 64–6), there is another useful perspective to consider. Given the possible shifts in global politics as the new China takes up more of an international political and economic role, what might such environmental shifts mean for the future usage patterns of English as a world language? Are there other contenders for being one of the predominant world languages? In time, how might this affect Malaysia and other areas grappling with languages of wider communication? Bruthiaux (2002) presents a detailed analysis of this using a productive array of factors: linguistic typology, including writing systems; learnability of language types; and the critical socio-political aspect buried in what he sees as whether a language is perceived as a vehicle for modernising values. This last factor is itself the source of some major critiques of English as a world language in terms of a latent, perhaps assertive, linguistic imperialism (see Phillipson, 1992, 2002; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999).

### **English language: Modernising and liberating force?**

Bruthiaux's (2002) analysis has a general conclusion that, for the foreseeable future, English has all the key characteristics that make it likely to remain the dominant worldwide language, even if there should be a clear passing of what he calls the American era. But perhaps what is more revealing in his lengthy discussion is his section detailing how English has left behind other competitors like

Dutch, German, Italian, Hindi, Japanese, etc., in this world of intense information flow via information technology, plus the array of other critical features associated with English usage, e.g. the ratio of speakers to per capita GNP, English so far has left behind other competitors like Dutch, German, Italian, Hindi, Japanese, etc. (Bruthiaux, 2002: 130). And, in a longer-term perspective, he also notes that English is growing in its supra-national reach, not only because of its perceived information-richness, but also because as more people choose to learn it, then with a typical knock-on effect its attraction increases in other parts of the world (Bruthiaux, 2002: 134). But it is important to keep a watchful eye on assumptions that mere economic and military power are the key to assessing the relative strength of languages of wider, trans-national communication.

There are other factors, such as an appreciation of current operating critical mass of speakers, plus the impact of how a language is perceived as being associated with new ideas, or what Bruthiaux (2002: 145) calls its appeal 'as a modernising and liberating force'. This power is reliant not so much on whether a language is linked to a values system per se, as on whether the language, and any associated values, are best seen as being part and parcel of a process that could create beneficial change. And the most obvious change in today's world is that of access to a more generalised wealth creation that is seen to benefit a wider domain in a society. This has so far been very much at the core of Malaysian leaders' public urgings for greater English-language competence among *Bangsa Malaysia*. Indeed, it is perhaps best seen as another important arm in creating *Bangsa Malaysia*.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, given the evolving tensions from Islamic quarters on the world scene, and from more Islamic-centred groupings in Malaysia itself, e.g. PAS (*Parti Islam seMalaysia* – Islamic Party of Malaysia), then there must be an expected clash of mindsets over preferred values systems and hence preferred languages of wider communication and ultimately over the perceived access to innovation and possible avenues of wealth and lifestyle that surround languages like English. The real long-term impact of this tension is perhaps not yet crystallised for the new Malaysia, much less for *Bangsa Malaysia*. The 1991 espousal of *Bangsa Malaysia* now has to contextualise itself in a whole new set of political, cultural and economic realities, both inside Malaysia and beyond.

### **Some Issues Facing Malaysia's English-Language Policy**

Despite this current love affair with English – which is not meant to displace Bahasa – there are some possible reasons for caution. One immediate issue is whether there will be sufficient teachers with the requisite English-language skills to back the recent policy shift in the classroom, especially when the process is extended to upper-level classes. Another pressure factor is that it seems possible for students in the science/maths streams to be exposed to English medium more than other discipline streams and hence there is something of a risk that varying competencies in both the national language and English will result – perhaps another diglossic pattern?

### **English language and Malaysia's tertiary education sector**

In the tertiary sector, similar questions arise, including in the private tertiary sector. In this private sector there are now indications that, in accordance with

government encouragement of these private colleges having a more ethnically mixed student body, Malay students, for example, are going to such colleges in slowly increasing numbers. But in such cases the colleges may face initial difficulties over the English-language competence of such students, and this could well place added pressures on resources.<sup>8</sup> Another more intriguing issue is whether the emphasis on English-language skills, particularly to support access to science and technology, the major engines that are seen to be crucial for the new *Bangsa Malaysia*, could in time create new pressures on Bahasa and its relative status. This in so many ways harks back to early days of independence when English-medium schools had a markedly higher status, but in the newer, more globalised, world, languages like English have an added status factor, namely, languages of wider communication, particularly in the realms of technology and economic contact. But for now, as noted by Gill (2003), 'English in Malaysia has come full circle in its journey and has been instituted as the medium of instruction for science and technology subjects for designated levels of the school system this year (2003) and the university system in 2005'. The policy is now in full swing, with the Malaysian government signing multi-million-dollar, six-year contracts with overseas universities to train teachers for teaching English as a foreign language throughout Malaysia. Reports indicate that approximately \$100 million have been earmarked for this training project, with the government set to cover tuition and other costs for the hundreds of students who are to be trained (*Campus Review*, 2 March 2005, p. 4).

### **More immediate access to science and technology**

In the science and technology sphere, Malaysian spokespersons have repeatedly asserted that without instant contact and communication – via English – Malaysia's future development is in jeopardy. Dr Mahathir also added his typical discourse when he called on Malaysians to do their bit for nationalism by improving their English-language competence: he saw this as one way of doing something for the country (*Star*, 10 September 1999). In May 2003, Gill from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was quoted as urging the same more widespread English-language competence:

The national language policy had been adopted in the past because it was a natural process of the post-independence era, and if not done, would have had major negative repercussions for the political stability of the nation . . . However, in the present global economic climate, Malaysia's about turn with regard to English has become a necessity in order to compete and survive . . . We may be left out of the international loop of science and technology . . . (*Star*, 20 May 2003)

According to the same report, she went on to point out that over the 39-year period 1956–95, the Translation Section of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Literary and Language Agency) had only translated and published 374 books, while public universities had published 168 books within the same period. And to emphasise this desperate pressure of trying to keep up with ever-exploding knowledge, she pointed out that there are 100,000 scientific journals worldwide, with around 5000 new articles appearing every day – and this is on top of the 30 million existing journal articles. Of course, not all of these are in English, but, as

Ammon (2001) demonstrates, there is increasing pressure on researchers to publish in languages of wider communication, particularly English: indeed, contributions to this Ammon volume cite cases of researchers making conscious decisions to publish in English rather than their first language.<sup>9</sup>

### **Bahasa and English: New ecology?**

But this may in time present a new linguistic ecology with competing status markers for English and Bahasa. This was very much at the heart of the immediate post-independence moves to put a hold on English while promoting largely educational measures to enhance Bahasa. The question now is whether a new set of status features will develop for the new *Bangsa Malaysia* such that Bahasa is not readily challenged; or will there be some version of diglossia with Bahasa being of prime concern in the community socio-political discourse environment and English being more a marker of external, scientific-technological discourse? In a recent study of the Philippines situation, Gonzalez (2002) makes special note of how the national language, Tagalog, has moved through phases of basic standardisation, to what he calls a phase of cultivation where it is used increasingly in literature, education, the media, etc. and to a phase of intellectualisation where it is used as the medium of academic discourse. This last phase usually has high costs associated with it and, in the Malaysian context, some of these are alluded to by the reference to Gill above. Sometimes such costs are seen as being too high, but these inevitably are balanced by the cost of loss of symbolic status for a local language. Medgyes and Kaplan (1992) have argued very forcefully that academic communication in an indigenous language may lead to effective isolation of the discipline and its practitioners – a fate not often favoured by academics!

This very phase of intellectualisation has been at the root of some of the Malaysian dissent over more recent English-language policy initiatives to teach lower-primary and secondary maths and sciences via English medium – recall how UMNO youth initially opposed them (*Star*, 9 May 2002) – and it is also sometimes mixed with religious undertones. Some of this flared during the 1999 elections, although, as Case (2001: 50) notes, while some of the opposition groups did not do as well they had hoped in the 1999 elections, the more Islamicist party, PAS, did increase its seats from 8 to 27. As a result of what appeared to be a relatively fluid situation in the post-1999 elections, for Malaysia, it was also still a very open question as to what will eventually pan out sociolinguistically for the newer Malaysia.

However, the March 2004 national elections did solidify the long-term Malaysian government strategies for English language as the PAS opposition effectively collapsed and the UMNO-led coalition, with the new prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was returned with a solid majority. Dr Mahathir had retired as prime minister in October 2004 and the new prime minister wasted little time in cementing his own political mandate. The national government was returned with 90% of the seats in the national parliament – up from the 77% it held after the 1999 elections. The PAS opposition hold in parliament dropped to seven seats – down from the 27 seats it held post-1999 (*The Economist*, 27 March 2004, p. 30). Thus, while there may well be a keener focus on Islamist matters in the world more generally, the Malaysian focus via PAS is now a quite different

entity. Just how all this interacts with globalisation generally is still a live issue in Malaysia.

The same is true for many other national bodies politic in the 21st century's version of globalisation. Globalisation itself may not be new, but its guise is, and this in turn may have an impact in quite different ways on the relative status and use of languages in the future. Part of the new guise is the extra layer of focus on what Scholte (2000: Ch. 1) argues is supra-territoriality rather than on sovereignty and territoriality alone. According to Scholte (2000: 19), globalisation may have had a long history, but it is still far from an entirely clear concept. It is also clear that so much of the new version of globalisation has been generated by a combination of ever-growing communication technologies that have fed into newer developments in technology transfers, into financial markets' ability to operate beyond physical space, plus interconnectivity that has created greater operating capacities for trans-national operations in the political sphere. All of this is also working to create greater awareness of world events, and of a wider ability to participate in world events. Scholte (2000: 95) summarises much of this by reminding us that rationalist thinking 'has encouraged the growth of a global imagination and the various material supra-territorial activities (communications, markets, etc.) that global thinking promotes'. Malaysia, with its clearer intent towards external engagement in all these spheres, including as they do the political, strategic, educational, technological and financial, will remain a very important exemplar of what the various futures may hold more generally around the world. It will also provide a lucrative testing ground for competing theoretical frames of what globalisation might ideally mean – and this is of special importance in terms of its ongoing English-language policy.

## Conclusion

Overall, Malaysia in the early 21st century now has a more complex array of factors feeding into its own creation of *Bangsa Malaysia*. These range from the newer version of globalisation, which is largely based on information, information technology and rapid transfer of information, to an almost parallel series of pressures that are shaping languages of wider communication, of which English is one, but which has so far had the added feature of being the critical language of the newer technologies and information transfer. It is a moot point whether this will remain, but, as Bruthiaux (2002) argues, there is also the factor of 'cultural import' that seems to link English with a different kind of status. Nonetheless, it is also apparent that such languages of wider communication, while being seen as 'worldly', are also subject to social forces that mean that, rather than being monolithic wholes, they are developing a diverse range of centres or more localised standards or preferred forms – this refers to the core of a pluricentrism when applied to language use. All of these factors allow us to see the people factors at work. Languages are not mere vehicles of communication. They are also often closely linked to how people create and project themselves and their identity. In this scenario it makes little sense to view languages as 'killers' of people and their identity. In the Malaysian case, there is once more an inevitable sorting-out of the roles and relationship between English and Bahasa, all in the oft-quoted frame of

progress, a frame that Dr Mahathir claimed demanded a change in Malaysia's English policy when he said:

. . . we need to do it. It is the government's opinion that once we have become a successful race, our language by itself will gain the respect of others. On the other hand, a race, which is not successful, will not be able to gain the respect for its language even though they hold it strongly. (*New Straits Times*, 28 December 1993)

However, since the early days of independence, Malaysia has moved along a long political path, dominated by the National Front government, but now the nature of that coalition is changing once more as Malaysia tackles the 21st century. There is evidence of a greater appreciation of a Malaysian identity, particularly among younger Malaysians, and so it can be argued that this evolving *Bangsa Malaysia* is well beyond the conceptual frames of the early post-colonial political environment, an environment that Scholte (2000) would see as being centred on territoriality. In fact, this newer frame is making the term *post-colonial* largely irrelevant, or at best, an historical term with little relevance for today's Malaysia. From a linguistic perspective, the choices currently faced by Malaysian language-policy-makers are not usefully linked to the older ethnic divides that bedevilled Malaysian politics in its early days of independence: it looks far more likely that this 21st-century linguistic evolution of a newer language ecology will be an inextricable part of and run hand in hand with future steps towards *Bangsa Malaysia* – a *bangsa* that is more centred on Scholte's (2000) supra-territoriality. Nonetheless, given the external global factors in the post-11 September 2001 world, and the possible religio-ethnic links forged by the many concurrent references to *ugama*, even the *bangsa* of *Bangsa Malaysia* may no longer be quite what was envisaged a little over a decade ago when Vision 2020 was initially crafted, although that too has no doubt been recrafted in the light of the 2004 elections.

## Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Dr Brian Ridge, University of Southern Queensland Department of Humanities and International Studies, Toowoomba, Queensland 4350, Australia (ridge@usq.edu.ac).

## Notes

1. Vision 2020 was a paper delivered by Dr Mahathir in February 1991 to the Malaysian Business Council, outlining his thoughts on the future course of the nation and how it should go about to attaining the objective of developing Malaysia into an industrialised country. In its early promotion it was interacting with a quite different external environment and hence it is not difficult to sense its inherent optimism. Witness Dr Mahathir's remarks when he outlined his Vision 2020:

There can be no fully developed Malaysia until we have finally overcome the nine central strategic challenges that have confronted us from the moment of our birth as an independent nation. *The first of these is the challenge of establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny . . .* (my italics) (Cheah, 2002: 185).

2. The governing coalition comprises UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), and other partners such as the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC).
3. In June 2002 at the UMNO Annual Assembly Dr Mahathir expressed his sorrow at not having really raised the status of Malays. He also went on record as bemoaning the fact that Malay students did not want to work or study: 'They are not willing to do anything hard'. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 22–23 June 2002.) He has also criticised Malay students for not taking up more technical areas of study at tertiary level.
4. This phrasing reflects so much of the terminology outlined in the 1947 Federation of Malaya *Report of the Working Committee Appointed by a Conference of His Excellency the Governor of the Malayan Union, Their Highnesses the Rulers of the Malay States, and the Representatives of the United Malays National Organisation*, cited in Ganguly (2003: 243).
5. But even this more externalising link with globalisation also has its internal echoes with the major opposition party, PAS. PAS has a clear Islamic agenda which it has to manage *vis-à-vis* the external issues. And internally, in mid-November 2003, PAS finally took up the challenge of spelling out in its *Islamic State Document* what it saw as its role to institute a truly Islamic state if it ever came to power. This same climate will most likely have associative links with *ugama* too. This followed repeated calls by now-retired Prime Minister Dr Mahathir for PAS to set out how it proposed to establish its Islamic state. Naturally, not all Malaysians are positive, although UMNO still recognised that it had much catch-up work to do to win back some of its voters who opted for PAS during the 1999 elections. By the same token, this PAS proposal also forced non-Malays to rethink voting against the UMNO coalition government in elections due in 2004. One senior UMNO official, Azim Zabadi, also noted that some people may have lost enthusiasm for some of the older leaders, 'but Malays haven't completely deserted us, and to get them back UMNO must be rejuvenated . . .' (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 November 2003, p. 24).
6. There have been shifts in the term used for the national language in Malaysia. Early on, there were references to Bahasa Melayu, then to Bahasa Nasional in the heady days of early independence in the 1960s, then to Bahasa Malaysia during the 1970s–1990s, and more recently, the term Bahasa Melayu is increasingly used.
7. Interestingly, in press publicity for workshops for Malaysia's English teachers in April 2003 (*Star*, 13 April 2003) there were numerous references to how English could work with the national language in nation building.
8. Of course, it is also worth noting that some of these private colleges now have university status and this adds a more diverse shape to Malaysia's ongoing development of its educational base.
9. Gunnarsson (2001: 287–316), for example, notes that while English is increasingly preferred in higher degree programmes in Swedish universities and is reported as the preferred language of scientific publication by increasing numbers of Swedish researchers, she also queries whether in time there will be a functional diglossia within the Swedish-speaking community.

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