Changing Language Policies in Malaysia: Ramifications and Implications

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Introduction

Language policies normally determine the language choice of the speakers in a country, however use of other languages or vernaculars within a country may sometimes affect the success of the language policies.

Language policies are often intended "to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes" (Cooper, 1989: 45), that is to say language policies are intended to influence language use. The reasons for changing language policies could be social, educational political, or economic. Education has always been an important variable in language planning initiatives. It is one of the sectors where the implementation of the language policies normally starts. Students in schools, colleges and universities are taught the language and are encouraged to use the language in different domains of communication. Educators and other professionals in different fields are encouraged and motivated to write and publish books, articles and other written materials that will help to promote the language. This is done in order to disseminate the language and to create awareness to the public regarding the importance of the language selected as the national language.

In making the language policies it requires certain process which starts from selection, codification, elaboration, and securing acceptance of the language (Holmes, 2001). It does not just happen overnight because in creating a language policy it needs to be open, overt and to be known to the public and must not be controlled or manipulated by a few groups of people. Introducing the language policies without the awareness of those who are affected by them means that they are not open to criticisms and monitoring, and the public are not seen as legitimate equal partners and participants (Shohamy, 2005).

In Malaysia, the language policies have been changing due to political and economic developments of the country and the entire world in general. As the country continually develops and as the world continues to progress, the use of the language also develops and progresses. The language policies in Malaysia are quite complex due to the existence of three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indians who speak different languages and practice different cultures. It was felt that a national language would help to create a bond and national unity notwithstanding cultural and linguistic diversity. The creation of the national language, Bahasa Melayu has been successful to some extent. Many non-

Malays due to the schooling system and the fact that it is compulsory to get a credit in Malay at the SPM and STPM examinations in order to pass are today fluent in Malay. However, the use of vernacular languages as medium of instruction in primary schools during the students' formative years has created an impact on the actual language use of the speakers. Given that 90% of Chinese children attend Chinese vernacular schools and that 50% of Indian children attend Tamil medium primary schools such a segregation at the formative years has to some extent resulted in polarization among the three ethnic groups and this has become evident particularly in schools, colleges, and universities.

This paper tries to examine the effects of the language policies on the three different ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese and Indians as speakers of their own ethnic language and the national language; Bahasa Melayu. This paper presents a case study of language choices in a school in Ipoh which reveal the actual use of the language. The findings of the study will perhaps predict whether the aims of top down policies synchronise with realities of use.

Language policy in Malaysia: The top-down approach

With independence in 1957 the rise of nationalistic mindsets resulted in the displacement of English as a medium of instruction and with time Bahasa Melayu was made the medium of instruction. The use of Bahasa Melayu as the national language has helped in creating a national identity of Malaysians. There was resistance at first from the non-Malays but later on they learnt to accept the reality as a quid pro quo for other rights including the use of the vernaculars as the medium of instruction in primary schools. At secondary schools all students use Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction from the secondary school to the university level.

Language policy and language planning (LPLP) which include status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning has been conducted. This was the main objective of the traditional LPLP. From the top-down LPLP, it is viewed that it has created much change specifically in the educational sector and in the public domain.

Case Studies: The bottom-up approach

It is believed that despite cultural divergence, having one common language will help in bridging the gap among people of different ethnic groups. It is however important to see what the languages used by the people really are, apart from that in the classroom domain. Code choice has played an important role in inter-ethnic communication especially in multi-cultural societies. Differences in codes selected may sometimes lead to friction.

To find out the actual implication of the top-down language policy in Malaysia, a case study conducted by Lim Chin Chye is discussed .

Language Choice

Having discussed the top down policy I want now to move on to what is really occuring at the grassroots level.

This case study investigates the language choices of Malaysian boys in Form 4 in an urban premier secondary school in Ipoh. It describes and analyses language choices of Malaysian boys in their natural setting. The aim of the present study is to discover which language or languages are more widely used by the students in school outside the classroom setting. It aims to determine whether they use the variety of English that is used in the classroom or choose to use the informal variety with their peers outside the classroom.

Malaysian youth, being multilingual, have a wide range of languages in their verbal repertoire. Besides having English and Malay which they learn in school and their respective ethnic languages which they acquire at home at their disposal, they also have the choice of using a mixed code of various forms. The ability to borrow from other languages like Malay, the Chinese dialects and Tamil enables Malaysian youth to have an extra means of terminology creation and the ability of using code-switching as an innovative communicative strategy. In such a setting, code-switching has many functions. At times code-switching is used as an accommodating strategy in encounters with members from other ethnicities, at others it is used as a distancing strategy.

In formal situations such as interacting with their teachers or principals or giving announcements during assembly, Malaysian youth generally use standard Malay. However, when they interact with their peers outside the classroom in the absence of adults or teachers, the Malaysian variety is often used

This paper will present recorded evidence of the use of the Malaysian variety of English by Malaysian youth. This includes code-switching and mixing which Morais (2000) calls 'the educated sub-variety' and the 'colloquial sub-variety' of Malaysian English and Malay which they could utilize effortlessly for expediency and speech economy for reasons of solidarity and identity. The findings will demonstrate the creativity of young Malaysians (as a result of living in a multilingual society) in the deployment of language choices and the use of code-switching.

Based on the assumptions that data of language choices can provide both social and linguistic information, I hope to provide insightful understanding of the language choices of Malaysian youth in a multilingual and multiracial nature of Malaysian society and to view the deployment of language choices and code-switching as communicative strategies rather than mother-tongue interference or failure to master the English language.

Lim in his study of language choices in an ex-missionary school in Ipoh used a miniature MP3 recorder to record a total of more than 14 hours of data (see David and Lim, 2006). Permission was given by the school authority to allow students to wear the MP3 recorder and to leave the recorder on while they went about their daily routine. Four students from different ethnic groups were chosen to wear the MP3 microphone recorder before the

assembly till after recess where they were required to meet the co-researcher in the school library to review the recording and provide feedback and information on who they talked to, what they talked about, where they were etc.

Findings and analysis

The data (observation) shows that there is a great tendency for the Malay students to use Malay with their Malay friends. This concurs with the answers given by the 4 Malay students who participated in the study. When they were asked what language they use when they speak to their Malay friends all of them said they use their ethnic language, Malay, because many of their friends are not proficient in English. Code-switching is minimal and is confined to single word switches, for example:

Example 1

A:	Fazril handsome *tak hari ini* (or not today)?
B:	Handsome *sangat* (very).
C:	*Siapa* (who)? Fazril?

Code-switching here is used as a strategy for emphasis. Good looks are often associated by adolescents with the Hollywood movie stars. By using the English word in place of the Malay word, the utterance carries the weight and quality of international stardom. Although the students in this study are from a mission school, where English is widely used, the Malay students choose to use Malay. Thus, the English Language taught in the classroom is not being used much outside the classroom by this speech community. From the data recorded it is clear that the dominant language of the Malay subjects/participants is Malay.

Another observation made during this study is the tendency of the members of the other races, namely the Chinese and the Indians, to use Malay with Malay students.. The data shows that Malay is the lingua franca in in-group as well as inter-ethnic interaction within the Malay youth speech community. English is hardly used in both kinds of encounter.

The findings show that there is a tendency for the Chinese students to use Cantonese with their Chinese friends. This observation is supported by the data recorded by a Chinese informant whose main language is English. Unlike the Malay youth speech community, the use of Cantonese, the ethnic language of the Chinese in Ipoh, is minimal. The predominant language is English. Cantonese is used sparingly in short phrases. For example:

Example 2

A:	You cry or not? That part?
B:	You got cry or not?
A:	You cry ah?
B:	Sure or not.... I *lau hau suai* (I salivate) eh I couldn't get......
A:	Me, Natalie, Kai Juen all never
B:	They cry ah

Code-switching here is used for effect to describe the state the speaker was in at that point of time. Using Chinese helps to intensify the emotion the speaker experienced. It is

an example of a metaphorical code-switch for the benefit of the Cantonese speaking interlocutor.

This data also shows that the English Language used by the interlocutors is not the same as the English Language taught in the classroom. It shows that the students are not using the standard variety taught in Malaysian schools. They are using the local non-standard variety of English, also known as Malaysian English. This form of non-formal Malaysian English does not follow the standard grammatical rules.

Besides the use of Malaysian variety of English, the Chinese youth also use Malay words in their speech. For example:

Example 3

A:	What kind of question, it's because I'm injured la. Why I'm wearing slippers?
B:	Where injured?
A:	You see here *bengkak*.(swollen)

The code-switch used here is mainly for emphasis, to indicate the severity of the injury and to justify the infringement of school rules of not wearing school shoes. Malaysians being bilingual have more choices. Code-switching to Malay is also used by the informant, a class monitor, to instruct other students and to show distancing. For example:

Example 4

| A: | You, *duduk belakang, duduk belakang*. |

Using Malay words is also a strategy to make the narration more realistic or to quote something spoken by a character in the narration. For example:

Example 5

| A: | Then, then the guard saw him climbing out, you know, the other side. "Yeah, *Apa lu buat* (what are you doing)?" Know what Kai Juen said, "shhhhhhhhhhhh. *Main* (playing) game, *main* (playing) game. |

The recorded data shows that code-switching is used by the informant for other functions. While with the teacher, the informant uses the standard variety taught in the classroom (Example 6) and then he turns to talk to his peers, he uses the local variety (Example 7).

Example 6

| A: | Teacher, my desk got some brown coloured watery stuff. |

Example 7

| A: | Eh, I went super camp ah I learn one new game call 'Bingo'. Wow! Wah! I super *shok* (great) already I play for seven hours wow. Never sleep. I play, play, play only woh |

The findings show that the respondent is capable of using both varieties of English. For formal situation like talking to a teacher concerning class matters, the standard variety is used. He is able to accommodate to the variety used in the classroom domain. The

informant then switches footing by using the local variety. This choice also indicates a creative convergent strategy to signal group membership and solidarity with his peers who are listening to him. It is used to draw the attention of his listeners to what he has to say. The use of the hybrid word '*shok*', which has the meaning of 'wonderful' or 'fantastic', shows the creativity of young Malaysian in coining new words (see David, 2000).

One feature in this recorded data is the use of the 'la' and 'ah' particles. In Example 3 above, the use of '*la*' in 'What kind of question, it's because I'm injured *la*' accentuate the seriousness of the injury that the speaker sustained. It is used for emphasis and to draw the attention to the reason for not following school regulations. In another recording another Chinese speaker was heard using '*meh*' for a similar purpose. For instance:

Example 8

A:	What competition?
B:	Science.
A:	Huh?
B:	Science Competition *lah*.
A:	Got *meh*?

These particles are commonly used by Malaysians in informal settings to signify emphasis or to soften a speech act like requests. It is one of their communicative strategies. From the data, we can say that the predominant language of the Chinese youth in this school is English although they do use their ethnic language at times. They use code-switching for a number of purposes such as for emphasis, to quote someone else, for distancing or making a formal complaint and to signal solidarity or camaraderie with members of the in-group.

The findings on the Indian youth speech community in this school show that English is also a predominant language for this group, especially in their interactions with the Chinese. Observations reveal that they tend to use Malay with their Malay friends and mostly English with their Chinese friends. Where the topic is about school work however, Malay is used. For example:

Example 9

A:	Hey where's your lab science
B:	You *punya sains sudah bagi ah* (Have you handed in your science?)

The use of Malay words is hardly surprising as Malay is the National Language and medium of instruction.

This group also uses coined words. For example:

Example 10

A:	Not give lah. Just *borak borak* (just say something) and give back to him
B:	Why? For fun ah.

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When the informant was hard pressed to reveal the reason why he is required to wear an MP3 player in school he played down the issue by using the expression *"borak, borak (talk, talk)"* to convey the meaning that he was not doing anything significant which warranted that much attention. His aim was not to draw attention to the recordings that were taking place.

Conclusion

Basically therefore where the language policy has made Malay the national language of the nation it appears to be used mainly in the academic domain by non-native speakers of Malay, with code switching appearing as the dominant language choice in interactions outside the public domain. Malay, Chinese and Indian Malaysian youth do not socialize in the abstract, stimulated setting like the classroom but also in authentic real life settings. They choose their own friendship groups and are compelled to use their preferred language to signal their membership in their respective friendship groups. Where the Malays prefer the use of Malay in both inter and intra group interactions, the Chinese and Indian respondents tend to use English albeit a non-standard variety which at times contains code switches. In Malaysia, code-switching has become an effective linguistic option to perform many functions (see David, 2003b, 2006a, 2006b). For Malaysian youth, code-switching aids in meaning making and to get meaning across efficiently and effectively. It has become 'normative linguistic behaviour' (Duran, 1994) to code-switch, in both formal and informal settings, in both in-group and out group encounters and for a whole range of reasons (see David, 2000, 2003a, 2006b). It should also be mentioned that linguistic or language accommodation takes place when the Chinese and Indian youth switch to Malay when speaking to their Malay interlocutors. However, they maintain dominant English in intra group settings and in interactions with each other. Switching to Malay when interacting with Malay interlocutors shows sensitivity to the majority community, the Malays. Maintaining English in their intra group interactions i.e. within their own ethnic communities indicates a shift away from their ethnic language (see other studies on language shift: the Portuguese in Malacca (David and Faridah, 1999; the Sindhis (David, 2001); the Punjabis in Kuala Lumpur (David, Naji and Kaur, 2003); the Malayalees (David and Nambiar, 2004); the Pakistani community in Machang (David, 2003) to dominant use of English, albeit a local variety which includes code switches.

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