

The medium-of-instruction debate in Malaysia

English as a Malaysian language?

Peter K. W. Tan

National University of Singapore

This paper investigates the medium-of-instruction debate in the press and news agency reports in 2002 in Malaysia in the wake of a policy change which would see the introduction of an English-Malay bilingual or mixed medium education in schools from 2003. The author uses this debate as a springboard for examining the position of English in Malaysia. This is done within the framework of the development of non-Anglo Englishes. Whilst there is much evidence pointing to the indigenisation of the English language and an acceptance of it to represent a Malaysian identity, especially in situations of mixed ethnicity, it is interesting to note that much of the debate appears to stay clear of these issues and instead emphasises the international, as opposed to the Malaysian, status of English. The paper proposes some reasons for this silence and suggests that this might problematise a characterisation of English in Malaysia in the manner of Schneider.

Preamble

In Huzir Sulaiman's play *Election Day* (2002), we encounter the narrator-character Francis reporting what happened on election day in Malaysia in 1999. Ethnic Indian Francis shares a house with ethnic Chinese Detric and ethnic Malay Fozi, the last two being opposition party campaigners. Francis begins by quoting Detric:

'It doesn't matter, Francis. It doesn't matter where they [the Barisan Nasional campaigners] check the IC, inside when they have the ballot paper is a different story.'

'Well, Detric,' I said, 'then we should adjust our strategy. Instead of wasting time and energy chasing them here and there, let's just stand and get them

as they go by. Interception. The PAS and Keadilan flers, let them speak to the Malay voters in Malay. You, Detric, can speak to the Chinese voters in Chinese. And I will speak to the Indians in English.’

So that is what we did. But the problem is the Barisan Nasional flers were damn good, you know. I take my hat off to them. There was one little old lady in *tudung* who used this approach, ‘Think of your family, think of your children, think of your grandchildren,’ all said with just the right threatening undertone. Worked wonders on the older voters. And she could say all of this in Cantonese too. Fluently. It was very intimidating. (Huzir 2002: 156)

Reference is made to various languages — Malay, Chinese, English and Cantonese — in a disarming and totally unself-conscious manner (here, ‘Chinese’ and ‘Cantonese’ are probably co-referential, but that does not detract from the point). Multilingualism is taken for granted in this Malaysian play — Malaysian because the play was written by a Malaysian, was first performed in Kuala Lumpur for a Malaysian audience in December 1999, and was published in Kuala Lumpur: the play is for local consumption, the language is for local consumption. Terms like *Barison Nasional*, *IC*, *PAS*, *Keadilan* and *tudung* are not glossed. *Fellows* is written *flers* to suggest an informal Malaysian pronunciation. We see the so-called Malaysian subjectless clause (‘inside when they have the ballot paper is a different story’). All these languages, including English, are seen to be appropriate when dealing with the electorate. Additionally of course the play is written in English.

I have stressed the Malaysianness of the play merely to emphasise the point that English, together with other languages, is a Malaysian language. In Asmah’s nomenclature, it is a ‘second primary language’ (1996: 259), or following the *Razak Report* of 1956, it is the ‘second most important language’ (Asmah 1996: 259). We can think about ‘national identity’ and ‘national language’ (in lower case) as encapsulated in everyday, ordinary life or about ‘National Identity’ or ‘National Language’ (in upper case) as encapsulated in official documents and symbols. If we are concerned with the latter, there is no controversy: Malaysia has a *sole* National Language that symbolises its National Identity: Malay or *Bahasa Melayu*.¹ It seems to me that if we are concerned with the former, English is part of the Malaysian ‘linguistic scenery’, to use another term from Asmah (1992).²

Introduction

The earlier description seems a long preamble to the focal point of this paper, which is an examination of the position of English in Malaysia through the debate on the issue of the medium of instruction in Malaysian national schools.³ It does, however, provide a way into the issue. I will discuss Malaysian English through the framework of the dynamics of non-Anglo Englishes formulated by Schneider (2003a, 2003b). The label 'non-Anglo Englishes' is used to refer to what others have referred to as the New Englishes or ESL (English-as-a-second-language) varieties.⁴

Education in Malaysia has been multilingual (see Hashim 2003, Solomon 1988) and Malaysia has continued to practise linguistic segregation as far as individual schools are concerned, a divide-and-rule system inherited from the colonial era, and has adopted the 'ideal' of monolingual schools (Solomon 1988). That is to say that whereas education through different languages is widely accepted in Malaysia, each individual school is mainly seen as operating through *one* medium and is thus a monolingual school except that other languages may be taught as subjects. Therefore, particular schools are labelled as Malay- or Chinese- or Tamil-medium schools and, up until recently, there have been virtually no mixed-medium schools. (The exception is the transitional period in the 1970s when English-medium education was being phased out; there, mixed English- and Malay-medium education was employed.) If we accept the definition of bilingual education as one where two languages are 'used as [mediums] of instruction to teach subject matter content rather than just the language itself' (Cummins 2003: 3), what I referred to as 'mixed-medium', it is only in 2003 that a bilingual education policy is being implemented, although calls for it were made earlier (Ng & Jomo 1984).⁵ What is envisaged is a full (rather than transitional) Malay-English bilingual education. If successfully implemented, the policy will have a major impact because it envisages a new generation of Malaysians who will be bilingual in at least Malay and English. (There are to be Mandarin-English and Tamil-English bilingual options too, but I will not focus on these here.) This is a *volte-face* that might require a reconstitution of the notion of a Malaysian identity that is more hybrid — multilingual and multicultural. Of particular interest then is the way in which the English language needs to be looked at in the Malaysian context: as a language that promotes, rather than stands in the way of, 'nation building'.

In this paper, I will focus on the reactions as reported in the press in the period April to July 2002 as this constitutes a significant period when issues

pertaining to language and Malaysian schools were discussed. It was on 6 May 2002 that then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad announced that the government was willing to re-introduce English-medium education 'if the people [wanted] it'.⁶ On 11 May 2002, the then Education Minister Musa Mohamad confirmed that a bilingual system would be set up with English used for teaching science and mathematics. And on 21 July 2002, Musa Mohamad announced details of the implementation of the new system in national schools: a phased-in bilingual system. I will mainly refer to press reports and comments from the *New Straits Times*, a Malaysian broadsheet in English, and the news feed from the Malaysian news agency Bernama.⁷ Obviously a wider spectrum of views will be garnered if we include other print and on-line newspapers, including those in other languages. For the purposes of this study, I will restrict myself to these news reports and comments. The *New Straits Times* and the Bernama news agency are likely to provide mainly pro-government views, but as we are interested in the rationale given for the policies by various personages or by commentators, we should still find a range of reasons albeit for a more converging view of the issue. But first a word on the dynamics of the non-Anglo Englishes and some background on Malaysian education.

National identity and non-Anglo Englishes

The study of new varieties of English, or non-Anglo Englishes, began in the early 1980s and has been steadily gathering momentum. Until fairly recently, there has not been any clear unified theory or framework to examine them. Schneider's 'dynamic model of the evolution of New Englishes' (2003a: 243) attempts to track the development of various Englishes in different nations in five phases:

- foundation
- exonormative stabilisation
- nativisation
- endonormative stabilisation
- differentiation

(The version in Schneider 2003a is more elaborated than the version in Schneider 2003b.) I will not attempt to expound the framework in detail but will focus on certain aspects of it in order to relate the medium-of-instruction debate to Schneider's model. A central aspect of the model is the notion of identity

construction *vis-à-vis* English and the country concerned, which is why it is relevant to examine public statements made in relation to the English language in Malaysia at this critical period.

Not all countries will go through the five phases. Phase 1 (foundation) represents the initial period of colonial occupation, phase 2 (exonormative stabilisation) the period of colonial stability. Some degree of weakening of the ties with the 'mother' country occurs in phase 3 (nativisation); innovative indigenous speakers of English begin to make modifications to the English language so that more conservative speakers notice this, and these modifications become the mainstays of the 'complaint tradition'. Phase 4 (endonormative stabilisation) occurs after a significant event, such as independence, when the setting up of a national identity becomes important and ethnic differences are played down; linguistically this is seen in an acceptance of local norms, a movement towards a more positive evaluation of these norms and the rise of literary creativity. Finally phase 5 (differentiation) marks the period of stable nationhood when internal socio-political differentiation occurs. Therefore, Schneider puts Hong Kong in phase 3, Singapore in phase 4, and Australia and New Zealand in phase 5. He puts Malaysia, together with the Philippines, in phase 3, but goes on to comment that

both countries are very similar in having successfully implemented a language policy developing and promoting a national language (Malay and Filipino, respectively), which restricts the range of uses of English and, more importantly, successfully bars it from the role of symbolizing identities, national or otherwise. Thus, while there are no signs of English being recessive because of its international usefulness, in both cases the development along the cycle appears to have been halted and become fossilized, as it were. (Schneider 2003a: 260–261)

If we consider the situation described in the preamble, it would appear that Malaysia has gone further in the developmental phases. Hashim (2002), for example, takes us through different Malaysian texts in Malaysian (or Malaysianised) English intended for local consumption, including essays, newspaper articles, print advertisements, brochures, short stories and radio advertisements.

Some of the phase 4 characteristics, according to Schneider, are some degree of de-ethnicisation, and acceptance of the local norm and the onset of literary creativity in the new variety. In this light, we might say that Malaysia seems to be further down Schneider's (2003a) line of development.

On the other hand, we might point out the urban-rural divide where, in contrast to the points made above, English is hardly used and regarded as a

foreign language (see Hazita 2002 on the literacy practices in rural Malaysia). How to view English seems to be a difficult issue to resolve and will problematise Schneider's assessment of the situation in Malaysia.

Historical context

We can discern four stages in the development of the bilingual system in Malaysia (see David & Govindasamy 2003, Hashim 2003, Pandian 2003, Solomon 1988, and Watson 1983), as follows:

1. Immediately prior to independence in 1957, primary school was available in four mediums in Malay.⁸ The earlier English *v.* vernacular school label had been done away with. 'Standard schools' used the Malay medium, whereas 'standard-type schools' employed English, Mandarin Chinese or Tamil as their mediums. At this stage, Malay-medium, Mandarin Chinese-medium and Tamil-medium schools catered almost exclusively to ethnic Malay, ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian pupils respectively. As the ethnic groups tended to be geographically distinct, the schools were also geographically distinct. English-medium schools were mainly found in urban areas, and the pupils were mainly ethnic Chinese, although Indians and Eurasians were also represented. There were not many ethnic Malays in English schools because of the schools' urban location and also because many of them were Christian mission schools, which the Malays, being Muslims, were suspicious of. Nonetheless, it is the English-medium schools which had more of an inter-racial character. Secondary education was mainly through English or Malay, and tertiary education was through English.

2. The situation immediately after independence remained largely the same. However, in 1967 Malay was declared the sole national language. (English had been another official language prior to this.) The severe race riots in Kuala Lumpur in May 1969 resulted in the then Minister of Education, Dato Haji Abdul Rahman Ya'akub, declaring in July that beginning from January 1970, English-medium schools would be phased out in Malaysia and by 1985 all former English-medium ('national-type') schools would become Malay-medium ('national') schools. Pupils in the transitional period might have a mixed-medium education: English for science and mathematics; Malay for history and geography. Tertiary institutions also became Malay-medium. Mandarin Chinese-medium and Tamil-medium ('national-type') primary schools were

still available. David & Govindasamy attribute the switch also to 'nationalistic fervour' (2003: 223).

3. Asmah (1996) suggests that within the above framework, English is still available in tertiary education through pre-university and university studies abroad and the various twinning programmes in Malaysia. She asserts that with these, 'local English-medium education has made a comeback, and with great vigour' (Asmah 1996: 519).

4. Finally we come to the events of 2002 mentioned above. Concerns about the falling standard of English (and the resultant lack of competitiveness), the unemployment rate of the ethnic Malays who are largely monolingual and the continued segregation of the races prompted the then Minister of Education, Musa Mohamed, to declare that beginning from January 2003 a Malay-English mixed-medium education would be implemented in national schools.

Analysis

In the mini corpus of 57 texts, there are 41 articles from the *New Straits Times* (NST), 2 articles from the *Business Times* (BT) and 14 news stories from Bernama taken from the period April to July 2002.⁹ I have numbered these chronologically. This represents the period when the news about the new bilingual education policy is announced up until the first concrete announcement about implementation details. It is at this stage that the arguments for a change to the existing system would be expected. Subsequent news reports focus largely on implementation issues, which will be of less interest to us in the present context. A list of the articles examined can be found in the appendix.

All the Bernama items are straight reports and the majority of the NST articles are also news reports. These typically report and quote officials or occasionally members of the public. There are, however, 5 leading articles (editorials) as well as 3 feature articles in NST; both BT articles are comment articles. The views represented are those of various more powerful personages, such as ministers, representatives of various bodies and journalists, as well as some not-so-powerful personages such as web surfers in the NST site (Text 20). Notwithstanding this, I accept that we cannot and should not claim that these are *representative* views of the public, and newspapers and press agencies reserve the right to edit or omit items as they see fit. Nonetheless, they should provide us with a window to the issue at hand.

1. Quantitative lexical analysis

I will begin by focusing on the quantitative lexical aspects of the mini corpus, using them to feed into my qualitative discussion later on. The mini corpus runs to nearly 26,000 words.¹⁰ An indication of the preoccupations of the articles is the recurrence of specific lexical items. I will take items representing more than 0.5% (this translates to 15 occurrences or more) as significant. A lexical analysis indicates that the top 20 highest frequency items are all grammatical words (rank 1: *the*, 2: *to*, 3: *of*, 4: *in*, 5: *and*) as is typical of most English texts. The exceptions are *English* (rank 6), *language* (rank 12) and *Malaysia* (rank 18). This is not unexpected as the texts were pre-selected to focus on the issue of teaching through the English language in Malaysia.

Going down the list of frequently occurring lexical items, I pick out six items that stand out as being worth commenting on. The first is *knowledge*, which occurs 40 times in the mini-corpus. An analysis of the collocation (clustering) patterns reveals that the phrase *language of knowledge* occurs six times; in four of these the language referred to is English, and in two it is Malay.

The item *information* occurs 21 times. It can occur with *knowledge* in the phrase *information and knowledge* but this only occurs twice. It is much more likely to co-occur with *technology* in the phrase *information technology* (6 occurrences) or *information and communication technology* (5 occurrences, in its various forms with *and* being optional, and *communication* being either in the singular or plural). Therefore *technology* (or *technologies*) also appears to be a significant term, occurring 23 times. *Communicate*, with its various cognate forms (*communicative*, *communication(s)*), occurs 20 times.

In addition, the item *globe*, with its various cognate forms (*global*, *globally*, *globalisation*), occurs 23 times, with the form *globalisation* being responsible for 11 of those occurrences. There are also 28 occurrences of the item *compete* in its various cognate forms (*competing*, *competitive*, *competence*, *competency*, *competition*), with the phrase *competitive edge* occurring five times.

Finally, another significant item is *rural*, which appears 22 times in the mini-corpus. This is in contrast to the antonym *urban* which only occurs four times and is therefore not significant.

All this indicates in rough brush strokes the kind of preoccupations in the articles. It would appear that many of the arguments for reinstating English as a medium of instruction centre on the notion of English as the main language of knowledge, and for the information and communication technology that Malaysia needs to be competitive in today's globalised world. Also important

is apparent cognisance of potential problems or resistance in the rural or less developed parts of Malaysia.

2. For or against?

I will now move on to a more quantitative and nuanced discussion of the articles. For a start, there appears to be no disagreement that English is an important language and that Malaysians should know it in addition to at least Malay, the official National Language. The news reports also claim that the majority of Malaysians would like to reinstate English-medium education in some form:

Bring it back. This is the general reaction to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's remarks yesterday that English could be re-introduced as the medium of instruction in schools. Educationists, politicians and a prominent unionist agreed that the move was feasible but would require much work. (Text 8)

Debate on the NST Online Surfers' Survey still favours the return of English-medium schools although the proposal has since been ruled out by the Government. (Text 20)

This is not to say that no objections were recorded: the voices of various academics are captured, as well as of the UMNO Youth leader (UMNO is the United Malays National Organisation, the main component in the ruling coalition):

Academician Datuk Khoo Kay Kim said re-introducing the English-medium school system might not immediately arrest the decline in the language. (Text 9)

Umno Youth education bureau chief Dr Adham Baba said the movement's executive council at its meeting today decided that shortcomings in the teaching and learning methods were the reasons behind declining English standards among students and opposed the proposal to re-introduce the English-medium school system. (Text 9)

It might be relevant to add that these views were expressed in relation to the full English-medium school system rather than to the later compromise bilingual proposal. What I find interesting however is the presence of attributed objections rather than direct objections as above. This is clearly evident through the use of negation or negative evaluation of a certain position. The use of strong evaluative labels like *linguistic chauvinism* can be found in these contexts:

Plainly, the Education Ministry is no longer gripped by the politics of linguistic chauvinism. (Text 1)

I am delighted that the Government is no longer gripped by the politics of linguistic chauvinism. (Text 2)

Those two texts represent the voices of the editor and journalist. Examples from non-comment articles that use the negation strategy report the views of various people.

‘However, the attitude that learning and mastering English is un-nationalistic should be discarded before we can improve.’ (Text 8)

Roslina said writing and speaking English did not mean that Malaysians would forget Bahasa Malaysia or would be ‘culturally violated’. (Text 15)

The Deputy Prime Minister however stressed that the programme to enhance the use of English should not be misinterpreted as a step backward by the government in upholding the dignity of Bahasa Melayu as the national language. (Text 36)

There is a clustering of reports in the vein of the last quotation, and in some the view being negated is attributed to PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia, or the Islamic Party of Malaysia), an opposition party. It is relevant to add there these comments were made in the context of by-election campaigning. The views of PAS do not seem to have been reported directly. This underlines the fact that the medium-of-instruction issue seems to have been used for party political purposes.

3. Implementation issues

An understandable preoccupation is the issue of implementation, represented in more than half (30) of the 57 texts. Clearly if we believe that the devil is in the detail, there is much to be debated, but these details are not pertinent to the present paper.

4. Reasons for English

A change of education policy requires explanation. The reasons given for greater emphasis on English also feature prominently in the texts. The reason given most frequently is that English is the language of wider communication, and in order to tap into current knowledge, a knowledge of English is necessary. This is mentioned in nearly half (26) of the 57 texts. This will be obvious from the quantitative lexical analysis discussed above: key terms include globalisation, and information (and communication) technology (IT or ICT). English is also described as the ‘lingua franca of business, science, technology and research’ (Text 21). The Minister of Education, Musa Mohamad, suggests that it is

possible just to emphasise what Halliday (1975) calls the pragmatic (language-as-action) and mathetic (language-for-learning) functions of language almost to the exclusion of others when he says, ‘we cannot help but acknowledge the instrumental role of the English language’ (Text 42). I understand Musa’s term ‘instrumental function’ to refer to how English can allow us to access information (mathetic function) and perhaps also get on in life (‘pragmatic function’), but without affecting the Malaysian’s inner psyche, outlook or culture. In two other texts, this is further extended to encompass building networks with foreigners (rather than other Malaysians): ‘We want them [Malaysians] to build networks with people from other nations’ (Text 42); ‘It means that you have one of the skills to communicate with others, especially foreigners’ (Text 15).

At least nine of the texts also make explicit reference to how English helps job-seekers become employable: this is the pragmatic function of language.

At least 2,000 entry-level executive jobs remain unfilled in the professional services sector because of a shortage of English speaking graduates, a public relations expert has declared. (Text 22)

It therefore follows that with English, Malaysia will be more competitive, presumably in attracting investment and building a more efficient workforce. The notion of being progressive or competitive as a result of English is mentioned in at least 12 texts. The following is not untypical:

Free Industrial Zone Penang Companies’ Association (Frepenca) president Datuk Wong Siew Hai said although an English-speaking workforce was not a criterion [for Malaysia to be an offshore investment site], Malaysia would be at an advantage in competing with countries that offered the same incentive. (Text 12)

These would seem to represent the main reasons for re-introducing English for teaching science and mathematics. A *New Straits Times* leading article provides a label for the increased emphasis on English without diminishing the role of Malay: ‘pragmatic nationalism’ (Text 7). Nababan (1981) suggests three kinds of orientation on the medium-of-instruction issue: nationistic (uniting the nation), pragmatic (promoting economic welfare) and ideological (symbolising national identity). The text suggests that the last two should be given emphasis. We also recall the label *language chauvinism* mentioned above: this label now damns the ideological (nationalistic) orientation when it completely overrides other orientations.

Nonetheless, there are other reasons that appear to be played down or only hinted at. First, English plays a potentially integrative role (Nababan’s

nationistic orientation). Clearly, this is a tricky issue because Malay, as the official National Language, has the role of symbolising the nation, and therefore the people of the nation. Indeed, the role of Malay is mentioned in Text 21:

These schools [Malay-medium schools] also complemented and supplemented the objectives of the New Economic Policy (NEP) by successfully enhancing national integration.

To allow another language to serve this integrative function might complicate matters; yet, it seems that there is a hint of English having a role here, as in this report on Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the then Deputy Prime Minister:

He suggested that schools come up with programmes to promote the usage of the English language and to create awareness among students on the importance to master the language. Another aspect teachers should give emphasis to, said Abdullah, was to inculcate the spirit of tolerance among students considering that Malaysia has a multiracial society. (Text 19)

The need for tolerance is juxtaposed with an earlier paragraph on the importance of English. We know that the Malaysian government is very concerned about racial segregation and that the separate-medium primary school system exacerbated it. We also know that, as a result, the 'vision school' concept was introduced a couple of years earlier, in which different-medium schools share the same compound and facilities like the canteen and library. A Malay-English bilingual primary school could potentially be more attractive for ethnic Chinese or ethnic Indian parents. The fact that a sizeable number of ethnic Chinese Malaysians (the figure given is 7,000) are going to English-medium schools in Singapore is also something that has caught the attention of the media (see, for example, *Bernama* 2002, 23 August).

This has in fact been highlighted in the Singaporean press, perhaps not surprisingly, since English is promoted as a 'neutral' language between the different ethnicities in Singapore. Leslie Lau, writing in the Singaporean *Straits Times*, entitles his article in August 2002: 'Mahathir sees English healing inter-racial rift.' This is also mentioned in Brendan Pereira's article in December 2002:

The aim is simple: If children from all races attend the same school, sit side by side in the canteen and tough it out on the playing fields, everyone will get on better. Racial integration will be better and chauvinism and intolerance will be at more acceptable levels in Malaysian society. The task of getting everyone to attend national schools is not going to be a walk in the park, though. At present, about 95 per cent of Chinese students attend Chinese-language schools,

about 700,000 Malay students are in religious schools and about 90 per cent of Indian students are in Tamil schools.

In the mini-corpus the notion that English could unite Malaysians appears to be played down.

Similarly, that English could be culturally appropriated or could be seen as part of the Malaysian heritage is not an element that is given much prominence. There are, nonetheless, strong suggestions of this. Here is an interesting reference to reviving the glory of English or reclaiming English:

English teachers should make efforts to revive the glory of the language as the success of programmes to improve English proficiency lies in their hands, Educational Ministry's director-general Datuk Abdul Rafie Mahat said today. (Text 23)

They [Malaysians] must now support the move to reclaim English in education. (Text 7)

The reference seems to be to a heyday of English in Malaysia, with verbs like *revive* and *reclaim*, and therefore seems to allude to a recognition of English as not just a global or international language, not just a European language, but also as a Malaysian language. Another reference to English as a culturally-grounded language is by an academic, Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid:

... he stresses the need to 'understand the socio-cultural perspective of the motivation for language learning'. This, he says, is a neglected area which rests on the notion of 'cultural permission'. 'Cultural permission' signifies the acceptance of the English language and its importance in a certain culture. (Text 45)

The claim that English is or could be a language that is culturally-grounded in the Malaysian context, if it is made at all, is very muted. How then do we account for Malaysian writing in English or for Huzir Sulaiman's plays?

5. Discussion

If we make a distinction between 'English as a Malaysian language we don't want to lose' and 'English as an international (foreign) language we must acquire to be competitive', it would seem obvious that the debate overwhelmingly focused on the latter almost to the exclusion of the former. The notion of English being relevant to Malaysian national identity seems to be passed over or made only in a very muted fashion. What is interesting is not only what is emphasised, but what is not. Avoiding reference to English as a Malaysian language could point to a difficulty in accepting that English could be an ingredient in the

Malaysian national identity, in spite of its use in cultural situations in Malaysia at present. The discussion reinforces the assumed division of labour between the languages: Malay is for national identity and English is for progress and for wider communication. The assumption is also that only a single language can serve the function of national identity and national integration. The kind of dynamics found in Huzir's play where English co-exists with other languages and where English could be appropriated and Malaysianised is not envisaged.

It could also point to a realisation that there are disparate groups in Malaysia and that it might not be appropriate to address the needs of the more urbanised, fully English-literate and middle-class sections of Malaysian society.

Conclusion

How then does this fit into Schneider's scheme? The timorousness in claiming English for Malaysia seems to confirm Schneider's assessment that Malaysia has reached phase 3 of his dynamic model of the evolution of non-Anglo Englishes. In spite of the various indications, mentioned earlier, of English being used for cultural purposes, the public face of the debate in the English media seems to avoid these issues, perhaps seeing them as peripheral or imprudent. Perhaps the avoidance is also indicative of a discomfort about the status of Malaysian English and an insufficient lapse of time from the colonial period.

Earlier I noted problems in the description of the situation in Malaysia. There are vast differences in the experience of the English language. It may be that a country-based analysis, such as Schneider's (2003a) or Kachru's (1990), is problematic and that it is more appropriate to talk about individual communities or sections of society rather than the whole country. Admittedly, Schneider (2003a) tries to allow for separate strands within each national variety. He talks of the indigenous (IDG) and settler (STL) strands. The earlier discussion, however, suggests that even with these, the situation appears far too complex to be captured simply by reference to these two strands.

Is the notion of a theory of the development of the non-Anglo Englishes problematic in the first place? The whole enterprise of post-colonial studies has come under criticism because it 'has compressed the differences of other people's history on a methodological level' (Cooppan 2000: 2). Should we therefore give up the neatness of an over-arching methodological theory of post-colonial non-Anglo Englishes or should we see the enterprise as misdirected and ultimately hegemonic in yoking together many different nations in very many different circumstances?

Clearly, we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. The difficulties involve assigning Malaysia into phase 3 or phase 4 of the framework. There is no question of assigning it to the other phases. From this point of view, Schneider's framework does capture in a rough fashion the evolution of the non-Anglo Englishes. What might need refining is the country-based analysis and how contradictory evidence could be dealt with, even as we struggle about the way English is moving in these communities.

Notes

1. The language itself went by different official names, *Bahasa Melayu* ('Malay') originally, *Bahasa Kebangsaan* ('National Language') in the 1960s, *Bahasa Malaysia* ('Malaysian') in the 1970s and into the 1990s, reverting to *Bahasa Melayu* in the 1990s. I will employ the label 'Malay' throughout.
2. This is not of course to suggest that the official or the symbolic is less important or unimportant. For example, in the history of Malaysia, the Malayan Union proposed by the British after the Second World War was abandoned because it removed the *symbolic* power of the Sultans (Heidhues 2000: 157). In the present constitution, the symbolic power is returned to the constitutional monarch, the Agong.
3. The term *national school* (in Malay, *sekolah kebangsaan*) is used contrastively to *international school* (which might follow, say, a British curriculum) and *national-type school* (*sekolah jenis kebangsaan*, which follows the Malaysian curriculum, but employs Mandarin Chinese or Tamil as the main medium of instruction).
4. As far as I know, the label 'Anglo Englishes,' used to refer to the English of the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, was first employed by Wong. I prefer the term because it underlines the different cultural underpinnings of the various Englishes.
5. Apart from employing different languages for different content subjects in a bilingual system, there is also the option of having different languages to teach each content subject, usually referred to as code-switching. This option has found favour with educational authorities: 'the idea that bilingual education should proceed through a strict separation of languages on the basis of curricular subject or time of day has unsurprisingly tended to attract the support of educational authorities' (Ferguson 2003: 46).
6. Even prior to this, Asmah argues that English-medium education had made a comeback in Malaysia, though at the tertiary level, with the establishment of foreign and international universities in Malaysia, as well as through the various twinning programmes where some of the course at a foreign university could be done at a Malaysian college (1996: 518–520).
7. Bernama is the acronym for *Berita Nasional Malaysia* or Malaysian National News. The URL for Bernama is <http://www.bernama.com> and the URL for the *New Straits Times* is <http://www.nst.com.my/>.

8. Malaya, together with some other states, became the Federation of Malaysia in 1963; Malaya became known as 'Peninsular Malaysia' or 'West Malaysia' subsequently.
9. I acknowledge the help of the web news archive in the Language Policy Research Unit of the Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University (<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/LPRU/newsarchive>).
10. Some of the lexical analyses have been achieved through the lexical analysis software entitled Wordsmith Tools, developed by Mike Scott and published by the Oxford University Press. See, for example, <http://www.lexically.net/wordsmith/>. The Wordsmith Tools analysis gives the number of tokens (words) as 25,766.

References

- Asmah Haji Omar (1996). 'Post-imperial English in Malaysia', in Joshua A. Fishman, Andrew W. Conrad and Alma Rubal-Lopez (eds), *Post-imperial English: status change in former British and American colonies, 1940–1990* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter), 513–533.
- Asmah Haji Omar (1994). 'English in Malaysia: A typology of its status and roles', in Thiru Kandiah and John Kwan-Terry (eds), *English and language planning: a Southeast Asian contribution* (Singapore: Centre for Advanced Studies & Times Academic), 240–260.
- Asmah Haji Omar (1992). *The linguistic scenery in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Bernama* (2002, 23 August). 'No objection Malaysians in Singaporean Schools — Syed Hamid'. Available online: http://pgoh.free.fr/spore_schools.html (accessed 2 October 2003).
- Cooppan, Vilashini (2000). 'W(h)ither post-colonial studies? Towards the transnational study of race and nation', in Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry (eds), *Postcolonial theory and criticism* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Brewer), 1–36.
- Cummins, Jim (2003). 'Bilingual education', in Jill Bourne and Euan Reid (eds), *World yearbook of education 2003: language education* (London: Kogan Page), 3–20.
- David, Maya Khemlani and Subra Govindasamy (2003). 'Language education and "nation building" in multilingual Malaysia', in Jill Bourne and Euan Reid (eds), *World yearbook of education 2003: language education* (London: Kogan Page), 215–226.
- Ferguson, Gibson (2003). 'Classroom code-switching in post-colonial contexts', in Sinfrey Makoni and Ulrike H Meinhof (eds), *AILA Review 16: Africa and applied linguistics* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins), 38–51.
- Halliday, M A K (1975). *Learning how to mean: explorations in the development of language*. London: Arnold.
- Hashim, Azirah (2003). 'Language policies and language education issues in Malaysia', in Jennifer Lindsay and Tan Ying Ying (eds), *Babel or behemoth: language trends in Asia* (Singapore: Asia Research Institute), 93–102.
- Hashim, Azirah (2002). 'Culture and identity in the English discourses of Malaysians', in Andy Kirkpatrick (ed.), *Englishes in Asia: communication, identity, power and education* (Melbourne: Language Australia), 75–93.

- Hazita Azman (2002). 'Multilingual practices in rural Malaysia and their impact on English language learning in rural education', in Andy Kirkpatrick (ed.), *Englishes in Asia: communication, identity, power and education* (Melbourne: Language Australia), 303–311.
- Heidhues, Mary Somers (2000). *Southeast Asia: a concise history*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Huzir Sulaiman (2002). 'Election day', in Huzir Sulaiman, *Eight plays* (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks), 139–173.
- Kachru, Braj (1990). *The alchemy of English: the spread, functions and models of non-native Englishes* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press).
- Lau, Leslie (2002, 14 August). 'Mahathir sees English healing inter-racial rift', *The Straits Times* (Singapore). Available online: <http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg> (accessed 14 August 2002).
- Merriam, S N (1988). *Case study research in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nababan, P W J (1981). 'Language, perception and medium of instruction', in Asmah Haji Omar and Nor Ein Mohd Noor (eds), *National language as medium of instruction* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka), 15–22.
- Ng, Choon Sim and K S Jomo (1984). 'Schooling for disunity: education in colonial Malaya', in S M Idris (ed.), *Key questions on Malaysian education* (Penang: Penang Consumers Association).
- Pandian, Ambigapathy (2003). 'English language teaching in Malaysia today', in Ho Wah Kam and Ruth Y L Wong (eds), *English language teaching in East Asia today: changing policies and practices* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press), 269–292.
- Pereira, Brendan (2002, 3 December). 'Malaysia mines the past for future harmony', *The Straits Times* (Singapore). Available online: <http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg> (accessed 3 December 2002).
- Schneider, Edgar W. (2003a). 'The dynamics of New Englishes: From identity construction to dialect birth', *Language* 79.2: 233–281.
- Schneider, Edgar W. (2003b). 'Evolution(s) in global English(es)', in *From local to global English: proceedings of Style Council 2001/2* (Sydney: Dictionary Research Centre, Macquarie University), 3–32.
- Solomon, J S (1988). *The development of bilingual education in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk.
- Watson, J K P (1983). 'Cultural pluralism, nation-building and educational policies in Peninsular Malaysia', in Chris Kennedy (ed.), *Language planning and language education* (London: George Allen & Unwin), 133–150.
- Wong, Jock (2004). 'The particles of Singapore English: a semantic and cultural interpretation', *Journal of Pragmatics* 36: 739–793.

Newspaper articles and news agency reports examined

Articles are listed chronologically (all dates are 2002).

NST = *New Straits Times*, *BT* = *Business Times*, Bnm = Bernama.

1. English is the key to knowledge. *NST*, 8 April.
2. Malaysia's new realism towards English, by Abdullah Ahmad. *BT*, 10 April.
3. Language makes knowledge. *NST*, 11 April.
4. Low English use in rural schools, by Rahman Daud. *NST*, 22 April.
5. The English divide. *NST*, 23 April.
6. Looking back to English. *NST*, 7 May.
7. Bring back English soon. *NST*, 8 May.
8. Cautious aye to re-introducing English-medium school system, by P. Sharmini. *NST*, 8 May.
9. Mixed views on returning to English medium, by Ramlan Said and Hayati Hayatudin. *NST*, 10 May.
10. Tee Keat: Close-mindedness hampering English proficiency. *NST*, 10 May.
11. Mathematics, science to be in English, by Ramlan Said and Ainon Mohd. *NST*, 11 May.
12. DBP: Use English in certain subjects. *NST*, 11 May.
13. English in schools stirs passionate debate, by Balan Moses. *NST*, 12 May.
14. Master English to excel in studies, career. *NST*, 12 May.
15. Survey shows big aye for English medium, by Azmi M. Anshar. *NST*, 12 May.
16. Make it compulsory to pass English. *NST*, 14 May.
17. Get retired English teachers. *NST*, 15 May.
18. Make pass in English compulsory, by Chok Suat Ling. *NST*, 16 May.
19. No question of English-medium schools, by Joniston Bangkuai. *NST*, 17 May.
20. Surfers favour English medium, by Azmi M. Anshar. *NST*, 19 May.
21. The great English debate — to be or not to be?, by Zainal Rampak. *BT*, 23 May.
22. Proficiency in English gives job applicants competitive edge. *NST*, 28 May.
23. English language teachers urged to make efforts to improve student proficiency. *NST*, 30 May.
24. Gapena: Malays must master other languages. *NST*, 30 May.
25. Move to improve English faster, by Chok Suat Ling. *NST*, 10 June.
26. ELS places emphasis on functional English language skills, by R. V. Veera. *NST*, 16 June.
27. Ministry to pick 500 for English course. *NST*, 17 June.
28. UMNO club members assured about teaching of Mathematics and Science in English. *NST*, 20 June.
29. Extra English classes for students. *NST*, 22 June.
30. Short English courses for teachers in Kelantan. *NST*, 22 June.
31. English language move: 'Spare students sitting major examinations'. *NST*, 23 June.
32. Using IT to teach subjects in English, by Nuraina Samad. *NST*, 23 June.
33. Overcome shortage of English teachers in the rural, govt urged. Bnm, 3 July.
34. Senate: Be positive on use of English, Bnm, 4 July.
35. Ministry faces no problems in switching to English, Bnm, 4 July.

36. More time must be allocated for English in schools — DPM. Bnm, 6 July.
37. 'Stop speculating on circular over English language move'. *NST*, 7 July.
38. More time for English lessons, by Ramlan Said. *NST*, 7 July.
39. PAS not qualified to campaign on language issue. Bnm, 11 July.
40. Stop speculation on use of English for mathematics and science. Bnm, 12 July.
41. PAS is confusing the people over English issue, says Hon. Bnm, 12 July.
42. Musa: Don't view English as a treat, by Annie Freeda Cruz. *NST*, 13 July.
43. DPM defends plan to teach in English. *NST*, 15 July.
44. Opposition taken to task for politicising use of English. Bnm, 17 July.
45. Continuous retraining a must, by Sumitha Martin. *NST*, 17 July.
46. Teaching of science and mathematics in English in stages. Bnm, 19 July.
47. Year 1, Form 1 and Lower 6 to use English from next year. Bnm, 20 July.
48. In English and in phases, by Ramlan Said, Chok Suat Ling and Firdaus Abdullah. *NST*, 20 July.
49. English village camp for 100 religious schools students. *NST*, 20 July.
50. Good English and just plain language, please, by Carolyn Hong. *NST*, 21 July.
51. English at three levels next year, by Chok Suat Ling. *NST*, 21 July.
52. Improve command of English, Hishammuddin tells Malays. Bnm, 22 July.
53. English language teaching workshop for Klang Valley teachers. Bnm, 22 July.
54. A reform long overdue. *NST*, 22 July.
55. Simple English for new science and mathematics textbooks. Bnm, 24 July.
56. Use of English will not change features of Chinese schools. Bnm, 29 July.
57. Sowing 'seeds' of good English. *NST*, 30 July.

Abstrak

Perbincangan bahasa pengantar di Malaysia: Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa ke-Malaysia-an?

Kertas ini menyelidiki perbincangan dalam arena akhbar dan laporan agensi berita pada tahun 2002, tentang isu bahasa pengantar di Malaysia. Pada masa yang sama terwujudnya juga pengenalan dasar baru kegunaan dwibahasa, iaitu Bahasa Inggeris dan Bahasa Melayu, atau bahasa pengantar campuran di sekolah-sekolah mulai tahun 2003. Saya ingin menggunakan perbincangan ini sebagai papan anjal untuk meneliti kedudukan Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia melalui rangka perkembangan Bahasa Inggeris bukan Anglo-Saxon. Walaupun terdapatnya fakta-fakta yang menunjukkan bahawa Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia telah dipengaruhi ciri-ciri tempatan dan penerimaannya sebagai suatu identiti Malaysia terutamanya dalam situasi berbagai kaum, adalah menarik jika diperhatikan bahawa kebanyakan perbincangan mengelakkan perbincangan isu-isu tersebut. Manakala, tumpuan diberi pada kedudukan Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa antarabangsa dan bukannya sebagai bahasa ke-Malaysia-an. Saya ingin membentangkan beberapa sebab untuk memberi penerangan mengenai pengelakkan ini dan mencadangkan bahawa keadaan ini mungkin mengakibatkan sedikit kesusahan tentang penyifatan Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia seperti yang dipertikaikan oleh Schneider.

Resumo

La instrulingva debato en Malajzio: La angla kiel malajzia lingvo?

Tiu ĉi referaĵo esploras la instrulingvan debaton en la gazetaro kaj novajagentejaj raportoj en 2002 en Malajzio sekve de politikoŝanĝo, kiu antaŭvidis enkondukon de angla-malaja dulingva aŭ mikslingva instruado en lernejojn ekde la jaro 2003. La aŭtoro utiligas tiun debaton kiel saltobregon por esplori la pozicion de la angla en Malajzio, farante tion en la kadro de la evoluo de neanglujaj anglalingvoj. Kvankam ekzistas multaj atestoj pri la indiĝeniĝo de la angla lingvo kaj ĝia akceptiĝo kiel reprezentilo de malajzia identeco, precipe en miksetnaj situacioj, estas interese noti, ke plejparte la debato restas for de tiuj demandoj kaj anstataŭe emfazas la internacian, kontraste al la malajzian, statuson de la angla. La referaĵo proponas kelkajn kialojn de tiu silentado kaj sugestas, ke tio problemigas la karakterizadon de la angla en Malajzio laŭ la maniero de Schneider.

Author's address

Department of English Language and Literature,
National University of Singapore,
7 Arts Link,
Singapore 117570, Republic of Singapore.

PeterTan@nus.edu.sg

About the author

Peter Tan is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore. His research interests and publications focus on the phenomenon of hybridity in the context of the English language (especially the development of the New Englishes in South-East Asia, and the challenges posed by computer-mediated communication) and literary stylistics (particularly of Malaysian and Singaporean fiction and drama).