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## How to save Malay

WHEN it comes to the Malay language, I have some good news and some bad news.

The good news is that terrific new words are being added to its corpus at a pace that makes keeping up seem like a hectic part-time job. The past decade has seen the emergence of wacana (discourse), wahana (medium of communication), madani (civil), mapan (established), prasarana (infrastructure), nahdah (renaissance) and dozens more.

These words were taken mainly from a choice of four foreign languages: Arabic, Javanese, Sanskrit and our Finance Minister's Budget speeches.

What they have in common is a refusal to do the easy thing of kidnapping English terms and just spelling them in a Malay way - you know, like diskus or sivil or infrastruktur. And as they conform more readily to Malay orthography, they seem all the more cun and gempaq and all that.

What's even more interesting about the words, taken collectively, is their subtext. They all describe intellectual abstractions; there's an almost palpable sense of the language guardians seeking to demonstrate the ability of Malay to handle higher things. You see, Malay has got a case to prove.

"What case?" I hear you ask. "It's already the National Language; its continued existence and preservation have been written into the Constitution. So why has it got a chip on its shoulder?"

Well, I never said it had a chip on its shoulder (try to be more observant next time!). I merely said it wanted to prove something.

When the Government in 1993 allowed English to be used as a medium of instruction for selected technical courses in local universities, some people took this as an implicit sign that Malay couldn't cope with the greater demands of tertiary education. Malay just couldn't march fast enough to keep up with the newly speeded-up national anthem.

As a reaction to this, there came a book called Manifesto Bahasa in which linguists and intellectuals passionately came to the defence of the language. The ijmak (consensus) was a sense that Bahasa Melayu had been betrayed by the very people who were supposed to champion it.

The fact that the book was edited by a member of the anti-colonial Asas '50 literary movement provided a provocative sense of historical continuity. It's as if the Government's decision were analogous to something our colonial masters would have done, and should be opposed accordingly.

After the ensuing wacana, the prevailing feeling was moderate: we shouldn't be taksub (a new word which roughly means "being so proud of something that it makes you stupid") about the status of Malay as the national wahana. Temporary concessions need to be made here and there.

But it was obvious that something concrete needed to be done, lest Malay fall behind. It wasn't enough to just SAY what a modern and versatile and flexible language it is, but to PROVE it.

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka continued to do its part at its usual pace, but we should duly acknowledge the Utusan Melayu group, under the stewardship of Datuk Johan Jaafar, for being the socio-linguistic equivalent of a sprinter on steroids.

From the stable of Utusan has come the uneven Massa, which is supposed to be like Time. There came the schizophrenic Karya, which puts sexy pop stars on the cover and commentaries by ancient sasterawan inside. And

there's also my favourite reading material at the moment, the quite wonderful quarterly journal *Pemikir*, published in association with ISIS and Foreign Affairs.

Some people privately snipe that Johan's articles show him to be a shameless name-dropper. But as an amalgamation of litterateur, intellectual, and entrepreneur, he has had an impact on the way post-modern people write in Malay. (But some of his flagship paper's recent stances - like its campaign to "punish" M. Nasir and its support of the people who illegally raided the APCET II conference - do seem kind of ... well, I can't put my finger on it, but if I could, I'd have to wash it.)

Pasca-(post-) Johan, folks now try to be more cosmopolitan with their concerns and references. Suddenly EVERYBODY was quoting Samuel Huntington and John Naisbitt and Francis Fukuyama, but I suppose we all have to start somewhere. At this rate, no one will ever need to question the language's IQ.

So much for the good news. What about the bad news?

Well... think about the KLCC, the MSC and the KLIA. All have English names. Since these projects are supposed to be seminal mercu tanda (landmarks) on the road to progress, their names must reflect a lack of official commitment to martabatkan (elevate) the status of Malay.

But there's something even more worrying than this widely lamented trend. If our language guardians are serious about making Malay the lingua franca of the region, it's got to be worse news that the Malay language is still, after all these years, inextricably entwined with the Malay race, with its attendant cultural and religious psyche.

The perception is that if you speak in Malay, your world-view will usually be coloured in a certain way. A trawl through some current events will be sufficient to demonstrate this.

Firstly, there's the Malay obsession with dengki and cemburu. When an institution like *The Observer* criticises us, the immediate reaction from the Malay Press is that it's "jealous" of our success. One expects this childish bit of demagoguery from some politicians but not from serious editorials.

Then there's the lingering feudal hierarchy which treats as taboo any sign of autonomy from people other than the immediate ruler. This is the stifling atmosphere (what Rustam Sani calls an "illiberal democracy") in which our DPM has to constantly pledge his loyalty to his boss, which of course doesn't do much to quell all those rumours of Machiavellian intrigue. It's a pernicious cycle.

Lastly, it's the convenient way in which socio-economic phenomena are usually explained away not in socio-economic terms but through conspiracies and broad generalisations which can unfortunately take the form of blatant racism.

When I sat through a Finas forum last month on its imminent privatisation (the Government had sold it to HVD, a Hong Kong-based multinational), the concern was not in the way kapitalisme kuncuisme (crony capitalism) or even privatisation itself tends to run havoc over any ideals not immediately translated into profit-making terms, but in how insulting it is to have to "sembah Cina"! (There were no non-Malays in the audience then.)

In Volume 9 of *Pemikir*, the wondrous Rahman Embong has an article called 'Persoalan Sastera Nasional di Malaysia'. This is what he has to say:

(Sastera nasional) tidak seharusnya menggambarkan kehidupan dan pengalaman satu kumpulan etnik sahaja, tetapi sebaliknya harus merangkumi kebanyakan ataupun semua kelompok etnik di Malaysia. Sekiranya sesuatu karya itu tentang satu kumpulan etnik sahaja, maka pengarang harus sentiasa mengambil ingatan akan masyarakat nasional yang lebih luas, harus

mempunyai kesedaran tentang kewujudan masyarakat tersebut yang perlu dibayangkan sekurang-kurangnya secara simbolik.

Although I realise he's talking about literature and not language per se, I'd like to take things one step further. My ultimate test for how gah (glorious) the Malay language can be is that it should be the wahana of not merely inter-ethnic harmony but of chauvinism from different sides of the debate.

To be great, Malay must ultimately be a successful conduit for non-Malay chauvinism (which I'm sure exists) and not just Malay chauvinism (which I know exists).

I'm not of course advocating ethnic unrest, but I think that all languages become gah when they're freed from the people who first used them. That's the precise moment at which a language becomes more neutral.

After all, Americans of the 18th century used English to be anti-English. In literature, James Joyce arguably did the same thing.

For as long as usage of the Malay language overwhelmingly reflects the hang-ups and petty pieties of the Malay race, it'll remain small no matter how many million people speak it. It must grow to reflect the hang-ups and petty pieties that exist in ALL races.

Khoo Boo Teik's book Paradoxes of Mahathirism contains an epigram about our PM along the lines of: "To secure the survival of the Malay race, he was prepared to see the end of `Malayness`."

I'd like to adapt that to the issue of language and race by saying: "To secure the continued development of the Malay language, we should be prepared to sever it from `Malayness`."

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