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Bahasa Malaysia or Bahasa Melayu?

SOMEWHERE in Jonathan Swift's great novel Gulliver's Travels, a debate rages on whether it's better to crack eggs at the narrow end or the broad end.

This episode was meant as a satire on Catholicism vs Protestantism, but it can generally refer to any dispute with no real hope of conclusive resolution. The pointlessness of the exercise is precisely the point. (Besides, everyone knows eggs are meant to be cracked at the broad end!)

It's also very tempting to always divide people into two neatly differentiated schools of thought. As I have never been able to resist temptation, I happily go along with this tendency to make dichotomies.

Dog person or cat person? PC user or Mac user? Pro-Mahathir or anti-Mahathir? These, gentle readers, are just a few of the ways in which people choose to differ, and sometimes differ very loudly. Not all the debates are futile, of course. There are a few topics in which the stand you take can reveal a bit about the kind of person you are. I think the issue of what we should call our national language is one such topic.

Bahasa Malaysia or Bahasa Melayu? It started off as the latter, then shifted to the former before a U-Turn back to the latter. A reliable guide to this is the name given to government exam papers on the subject, because we know they are never wrong.

If we accept that Bahasa Malaysia/Bahasa Melayu isn't merely a semantic or grammatical distinction (like goreng pisang/pisang goreng) or quaint cross-cultural confusion (like to-MAY-toe/to-MAH-toe) then ... well, well, well, what have we here? The official position now weighs in with Bahasa Melayu. The rationale is that the language originated from the race, and the name should reflect this. This is how the argument goes: "The name may reflect Malayness, but the language is universal. After all, Americans call their language English without feeling that they are capitulating to England, so the same principle should apply here."

This is true up to a point. But most Yanks are proud to point out that they speak American English. And there are enough cross-Atlantic differences for someone (probably Shaw) to quip that America and Britain are two nations separated by a common tongue.

Besides, why seek guidance from so far abroad? Surely this is not in line with our current policy of being hyper-vigilant against Western intervention. Look closer at the example of Bahasa Indonesia, which has its roots in Malay but is meant to unify the many different races in that large, diverse and endlessly news-making country.

Back in the sadly underrated Eighties, the most common term for our own lingua franca was indeed Bahasa Malaysia. When the subtle shift in policy came about, not many people commented on it. There are probably some people who are unaware that the shift even took place.

I did a check through the computer archives of New Straits Times Press publications since 1991 (who says this column doesn't require any research?) and found what I expected. The English-language papers used the term Bahasa Malaysia 6,954 times versus Bahasa Melayu only 1,362 times (a ratio of roughly 5:1), while the BM papers used Bahasa Malaysia only 2,392 times versus Bahasa Melayu 9,359 times (a ratio of about 1:4).

This immediately suggests that the term Bahasa Malaysia is favoured by those who write in English. There is an irony here somewhere, but you can figure it out for yourself.

You may genuinely believe all this doesn't matter: "At the end of the day, it's still the same language lah!" But - oh, humour me for a minute, won'tcha? - a few slips could be made. Do you want an example? Of course you do.

There was a review of the National Theatre musical Rubiah in Mingguan Malaysia recently. The reviewer was basically kind, but she still had a few complaints. Among them: the actor Ramli Hassan has a bald head.

What's wrong with being follically challenged? She said that it symbolised "Buddhist elements" and thus should not be allowed in a Malay play!

Furthermore, she suspects that the state of Ramli's head (and, by extension, his character's religious credentials) can be blamed on his previous association with (shock! horror!) English-language theatre! Is there any oxygen in the house? If she thinks that all bald men are Buddhists, there are a few Star Trek characters I would love to introduce her to. So we can see how a discussion on the merits of a "Bahasa Melayu" production can easily get tied up with all sorts of racial assumptions, and then lost in a deep, dark ethnocentric hole. If she had used the term Bahasa Malaysia instead, there is a slim chance she would have paused before casting Buddhism as something that needs to be expelled from the stage.

Let's get real here. The vast majority of young Malaysians went through the national education system, in which BM is the medium of instruction. Even those who went to national-type schools need a pass in BM to go further. It is the first or second language of most of us.

It would be fallacious to say that BM has failed in its duty to unify. It's not only fallacious, heck, it's wrong. But more should be done if we want the language to be a truly national medium of communication, and not merely the appointed National Language.

I often hang around government schools and private colleges. (Exactly WHY I hang around them is no business of yours, thankyouverymuch). Both places are multi-racial even though the first uses BM while the second uses English. What's interesting is that in each case, the relevant language used IS very much the unifying factor.

The English/Malay difference is increasingly one of social background and inclination, not a simplistic equation of "Malays are more likely to speak Malay" or "non-Malays refuse to speak Malay". Even the old slapstick standby of having non-Malay characters speak in stilted apek or tambil accents will grow less valid with each passing year.

Some of the liveliest and most adept practitioners of BM are not so-called "native speakers". A great example is Uthaya Sankar SB, the superbly talented young fictionist who's won numerous awards.

It was Uthaya who mischievously brought up the Bahasa Malaysia/Bahasa Melayu confusion recently in the print media and mass-circulated e-mail. I say "mischievously" because I'm sure he's intelligent enough to have guessed at the reaction he would get.

Uthaya prefers the term Bahasa Malaysia and has used it all his life. But in a few cases, he says editors took it upon themselves to change the term in his writing. In a splendidly faux-naif move, he even sent a letter on the subject to the Malay Mail Hotline page, which duly contacted the relevant linguistic authority. When Uthaya expressed his dilemma through a popular literary mailing-list, there were a few who defended the choice of Bahasa Melayu on very rational, linguistic grounds. But others instantly went into defensive mode and used inflammatory racial phrases which I'm too shy to repeat here. As a realist, I know that changes in terminology can only do so much. The problems faced by black Americans didn't automatically disappear the moment they were dubbed African-Americans. But

there should be room for some ideals as well, and, in this case, the ideal of having a united nation is worth it. So that's why I'm in favour of Bahasa Malaysia.

I would like to close with something borrowed from the stage actor Adlin Aman Ramlee. He did a monologue on reformasi last year, in which he paused and asked the audience: "Anda semua sokong Datuk Seri Mahathir atau Datuk Seri Anwar?" No one in the audience dared to answer, and then Adlin said: "Saya sokong ... Datuk Seri."

So, to avoid any tedious arguments later, if anyone were to ask me whether I support Bahasa Malaysia or Bahasa Melayu, I will say: "I support BM."