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Dr M's speech has Aussies calling up linguistic experts

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FUNNY how popular culture has a way of appropriating our earnest contemplations of life, turning affected reflections into lighter moments.

It's the way of the political cartoonist: "Hey, this is life, live it; have a laugh."

Out of the levity, weighty missives stay in our consciousness. In the way the surreal detachment with which CNN brought the Gulf War into family TV lounges invented a lexicon for hyperbole: "the mother of all battles".

Now every excess is the mother of this, mother of that ... In the way former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating sent diplomatic minders scurrying for the dictionary in saying he would have no truck with "Dr Mahathir and ... any other recalcitrants" for what he said was their disdain of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum.

Now everyone who is disagreeable with any point of view, world altering or mundane, is a recalcitrant.

It's been eight years since the Keating remark brought Australia-Malaysia relations to their lowest point.

Colourful prose and poetry had sections of the Australian public revisiting classical theatre after the "strain of Strine" that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was reported to have delivered at the Umno general assembly.

For a while, it would seem a remake of My Fair Lady would be a sellout at the box office, if only for a re-staging of a parody of the "Strine-isation" of the Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle.

"The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain" was on the tip of many tongues. So, too, the similarly "ocker rendition" of "It is a good day today".

There were those who felt it was time Australia responded to Dr Mahathir's "Aussie-bashing". Others read the remarks in the context of Malaysia's domestic politics.

One newspaper thought it worthy of linguistic analysis and took it to the experts.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer would not be drawn into responding. "This is domestic politics in Malaysia and we certainly don't wish to interfere with domestic politics there," he said.

His Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade had apprised him of the circumstances under which the remarks were made.

It was not lost on Downer advisers that coalition partner, the MCA, was split over the party's purchase of Nanyang Siang Pau and China Press.

Dr Mahathir's accusation of Australia, along with England and the United States, forcing its citizens of Chinese descent to learn English was made in that context.

As The Australian interpreted it, Dr Mahathir's message to an "angry Chinese community" was clear: "It could be worse, you could live your life sounding like an Australian".

It was reported here that Dr Mahathir himself had days earlier urged Malaysians to learn English, the "language of knowledge", because "there is no language belonging to a backward and poor race that can progress in this world".

In the best of cricket tradition, a Downer aide said the department would "let that one go through to the (wicket) keeper".

The Age took it to the language experts. "Well, it's almost a music hall

stereotype of an Australian accent," said Mark Newbrook, of Monash University.

"It wasn't that convincing because the accent involved very specific vowel sounds - it was a parody rather than a good attempt."

Other experts in linguistics concurred. Among the political commentators, Scott Burchill, a lecturer in international relations at Deakin University, said Dr Mahathir's speech was "designed to shore up domestic political support".

Of the academic commentators, Burchill has been described as the enfant terrible among observers of Australia's neighbours in Asia.

Burchill thought the subdued response from Canberra was an indication of the Government's attitude to Dr Mahathir.

"I think they're just progressively treading water until his departure," he said.

For all the fallout, The Australian Financial Review notes the resilience at other levels of the relationship between the two countries, especially in the areas of education and trade, which continue to provide a strong bond.

"Two-way trade has grown 40 per cent during the past two years to total about A\$8.3 billion (RM18.6 billion)," according to one correspondent.

"Australia has more than 250 companies based in Malaysia, far more than in Singapore and Thailand.

"While there has been a drop in Australian investment in Malaysia, reflecting a regional trend, it continued to be the favoured base to gain a foothold in Southeast Asia."