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## English takes centre stage at Malay civilisation conference

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THE lively banter exchanged by participants during the conference's coffee breaks was in English, as were the majority of working papers presented and academic discussions.

The conference topic: Malay civilisation.

The pervasive use of English seemed rather incongruous going by the focus of the conference, until it was pointed out that there were foreign participants present at the three-day event organised by Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Held at a hotel in the city, the first International Conference on Malay Civilisation ended yesterday.

English, an official explained, had to be used to enable the speakers, facilitators and participants from various European countries and the United States to understand the flow of discussion.

A speaker from the Netherlands drove the point home succinctly, but poetically: English, he said, was, after all, a hypercentral language which unified the whole global constellation of languages.

No one, it seems, can or should do without English.

Indirectly and directly, this was the message that found its way to participants attending the conference.

Many speakers highlighted the need for Malays to be adept in English - whether they like it or not - in order to further advance their civilisation.

Coincidentally too, the latest developments on the Government's decision to teach Science and Mathematics in English was frontpaged in the majority of newspapers on the second day of the conference.

This, naturally, fuelled discussions among participants on how the language is set to play an even more important role in the lives of the Malays and Malaysians in general.

While the historical origins of the Malay civilisation, together with analysis on the evolution of the Malay psyche, habits and practices, were expounded on at length, the question most speakers tried to answer was: "The future, and what it has in store for the Malays?"

Prof Datuk Isahak Haron, professor of education at the faculty of cognitive science and human development at UPSI, is of the opinion that whatever the future holds, the Malays need to master English to be able to fully take advantage of it.

According to Isahak, and many other proponents of the language before him, this was because English was the dominant language in the era of information technology.

"Malay students adept only in Bahasa Malaysia will feel trapped, not unlike how those in Sekolah Melayu (Malay schools) felt during colonial times.

"In this age of IT and globalisation, Malay students are beginning to realise that being exposed purely to a Malaybased education - whether at primary, secondary school or university level - is insufficient and will make them less able to compete," said Isahak, who is also UPSI Quality Assurance Centre director.

Calling Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad a farsighted leader for proposing that Science and Mathematics be taught in English, Isahak felt that the talents and abilities of the Malays in various fields were currently stifled by narrowminded educationists.

His colleague Prof Datuk Dr Mohd Yusof Hassan concurred.

Mohd Yusof, who is UPSI Centre for Postgraduate Studies director, agreed that English would help embolden Malays and make them ready to face the challenges of modernisation, besides honing their skills in science and technology, and mathematics.

But not all speakers viewed the "assault" by English favourably, although they had to agree that those who chose to ignore it did so at their own peril.

Abram de Swaan, research professor of social science at the University of Amsterdam, did not dismiss the possibility that English may threaten the extinction of native languages.

Asking whether it was possible for there to be a society where two languages were used but for different areas, de Swaan answered his own question in the affirmative but said there was a danger - from a sociological point of view - that one would become the "language of prestige" while the other slowly loses its appeal.

"In some European countries, you can feel the teeth of English chipping away at the prestige of their native languages. The Dutch language now, for instance, is not as exciting as English."

The professor would be observing Malaysia closely to see how it would go about "living under the unrelenting assault of English".

"I must see how Malaysia maintains its equilibrium."

Datin Halimah Mohd Said, vicepresident of the Malaysian Association of Modern Languages, described Malaysia's ongoing affair with English as "torrid".

She acknowledged, however, that "the affair" is more for economic purposes.

"Just as the Malay language grew in importance in the days of trade, English is now serving the same purpose under the current wave of globalisation. It is this function the local languages are not ready to play just yet."

The vocal exchanges on English, however, was not at the expense of other trains of thought and discussions on other aspects of Malay civilisation - its architecture, prehistory, medicine, and music.

Participants had to agree that the most illuminating presentation was the one by Universiti Sains Malaysia professor in performing arts Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin, who spoke on traditional Malay music and the Malay psyche.

The accomplished musician and classical dancer interspersed his presentation with performances on the rebana (drum), violin and flute, even breaking into dance at one point.

On the same token, participants asked whether Malay civilisation or rather "Malayness" would in any way be eroded by the increasing stress on English. Are the Malays prepared to sacrifice their ethnicity in pursuit of globalisation?

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris board of directors chairman Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor summed it up:

"Whatever the changes that might affect the genius of the Malay civilisation, its identity would still, and continue to be, one that could be called 'Malay'."