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Making sense of language and nationhood

Ruzy Suliza Hashim

Datuk Dr Munir Majid, a New Sunday Times columnist and chairman of Celcom (Malaysia) Berhad, will give his views on language and nationhood.

He asks this pertinent question: "Will the developing world always be victims?"

He argues that one's language and mastery of it will give one a distinct advantage in global communication.

Language deficiency and the digital divide, however, will isolate and alienate one from significant influence in the determination of major global issues.

Munir's paper will certainly illuminate some of the cultural and national losses and gains when issues of language and nationhood cannot find a compromise.

* Joseph Lo Bianco, a professor at the University of Melbourne and founder and chief executive officer of Language Australia, an institute of national languages and literacy, has received extensive international acclaim for his innovative approach to language planning.

Lo Bianco will speak on "Language and nationhood in a time of globalisation".

He will discuss theories of nationalism with a focus on how they have conceptualised language. He will compare and contrast these with the contemporary global language reality.

While there is no uniform pattern of language and nationhood, given that language is taken up in national struggles in different ways according to specific local histories, all nations today are engaged with global communication needs and the pre-eminent role of English, with massive language extinctions and with the contested and ambiguous role of national languages.

All these struggle for space in sharing the communicative load of ordinary people today.

He concludes with a view of the changed and circumscribed view of nationhood that modernity based on economic globalisation makes possible.

* Niyi Osundare, a Nigerian poet, dramatist, critic, essayist, media columnist and professor of literature at the University of New Orleans who has authored over 10 volumes of poetry, two books of selected poems, four plays, a book of essays, and numerous articles on literature, language, culture and society.

Osundare will provide us with an insight into the problems relating to Nigerian nationhood.

Nigeria, he says, is one of the most linguistically and culturally heterogeneous countries in the world.

Osundare learnt early in life the complexities and challenges of diversity.

He will highlight the African anomaly and the unconscionable dominance of "foreign" languages and consequent marginalisation of the indigenous.

He will also focus on the political instrumentality of "foreign" languages in the construction of modern nation states, and their linguistic input in the degree of "nation-ness" of these states.

He will highlight the fact that even so many years after the end of formal colonisation, many parts of Africa are still called by the names derived from the imperial languages used within their borders ("Anglophone", "Francophone", "Lusophone", etc)

Osundare will also emphasise the fact that the bulk of the continent's literary output known to the outside world is written in languages other than those indigenous to it.

His paper seeks to explore the linguistic and cultural pressures on African writing, the complexly diglossic ambience of its creation, and the modes and methods it has adopted for negotiating/navigating the grey but fertile space between imported languages and indigenous tongues.

Mostly, he will draw on his personal experiences as a bilingual and bicultural writer.

* Zawiah Yahya, a professor of postcolonial literary studies and critical theory at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, UKM, will discuss the ways in which the White House manufactures patriotism.

She argues that the White House uses terms such as "good and evil", "freedom and justice", "terrorism and jihad" in order to garner undivided loyalty and support for military action.

The argument expressed in the dualism of "either with us or against us" has prompted an unprecedented show of patriotic feelings probably constructed on the overwhelming desire not to be seen to be on the wrong side.

Zawiah examines how, in times of crisis, language can have consequences that are concrete, immediate and far-reaching.

Specifically, she highlights some key speeches made by the White House to identify the discursive strategies employed for such a purpose.

* Hamid Naficy, a professor of film and media studies at Rice University, will also speak on the American scenario.

Being a person comfortable with both English and Persian, and well published in both languages, Naficy brings to light the phenomenon of accented cinema.

The movement of people crossing borders affects a sense of displacement which is captured on film.

Naficy elaborates that accented cinema emanates not so much from the speech of characters but also contributed by strategies and approaches of exilic and diasporic filmmakers.

* Saran Kaur Gill, a professor of sociolinguistics and international communication at UKM will speak on the landscape of the language ecology and policy of Malaysia.

She examines the evolving dynamics of Bahasa Melayu, English and one of the many minority ethnic languages, Punjabi.

Her paper will analyse the issues and concerns of various communities expressed through these various linguistic spaces and voices.

* Shanta Nair Venugopal, a professor of sociolinguistics and intercultural communication at UKM will present a framework for understanding and interpreting identities as multimodalities in cross and intercultural communication.

She views culture as protean ways of "doing things" or inhabiting "spaces", based on a representation of culture as "approximations of social reality" in contrast to that of culture as imprints on behaviour through custom, practice and tradition.

Such view accepts that an individual can choose to be acculturated and socialised, or integrated in ways that may not fit into the ascribed templates of behaviour and practices occasioned by enculturation, thus implicating personal agencies of choice and preference.

* Imran Ho, an associate professor who is well-known for his interest in cognitive linguistics, demonstrates a systematised account of the semantics of "nationhood" in the Malaysian context.

He argues that cognitive semantics can be applied productively to complex items purporting to denote precise (or not so precise) constructs

and concepts such as "nationhood" to reveal a network-style lexical organisation and/or their inherent components.

* Koh Tai Ann, a professor of English in the new School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, tackles the issue of how to read, and the purpose of reading in these challenging times.

As print-based literacy is no longer adequate for full and alert participation in today's networked environment of the knowledge-based global economy and the so-called new "communication order", educationists have been urging schools to teach multimodal, screen-based, electronic media literacies.

This situation, as it appears in Singapore, has somewhat affected the teaching of literature.

Koh will look at the implications for national or local identities of the "new realities" of global cultural developments.

* Datuk Dr Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid, a professor of management, leadership and policy studies, and founding dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at University Tun Abdul Razak (Unitar) will talk on managing language issues with wisdom in relation to the challenges of language leadership.

He describes the recurring and newly-emerging issues in language policy and education policy as these intersect with economic and international policies.

The introduction of foreign languages in secondary and tertiary institutions of learning and the increasing number of students studying abroad is creating a new linguistic map of language attitudes and profiles among elite groups in the country.

This creates contestations between language loyalty, language maintenance, language shift and multiliteracies in the education sector as well as in other sectors.

Ibrahim will look at how the agenda of lifelong learning and the creation of a knowledge-based society is shaping the new linguistic and educational imagination.

He concludes by discussing the emergence of the new language elites and their roles in shaping language learning attitudes and motivations.

* Abdul Rahman Embong, a professor at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies, UKM, will explore the contestations of language and nationhood and their implications for the Malaysian modernisation project.

His paper unravels this vexing question of the politics of language, the relationship between language, power and ideology and how it will affect the character and direction of Malaysia's modernisation project in the 21st century.

He examines in particular the nationalist project of the Malay language, the Malay-English contestation, and the possibility or otherwise of reconciling the modernisation project and the nationalist project in Malaysia.

* Alastair Pennycook, a professor of language in education in the Faculty of Education, UTS, has been involved in language education as a teacher of English for many years in Germany, Japan, China, Canada and Hong Kong, and has published widely in areas of language in education.

He discusses global Englishes and transcultural flows and why we need to understand this as a contingent rather than an inherent set of conjunctions.

He avers that it is not that English itself implies much in terms of cultural and epistemological framing, but rather that English becomes linked in complex ways to particular practices and formations.

His paper explores two domains in which English serves as a tool and a

medium for transcultural flows: Christian missionary use of English as a language of proselytisation, and rap/hip-hop as a mode of popular culture.

Looking particularly at Malaysian and Southeast Asian contexts, he will delve into the implications and local appropriations of such flows.

* Dr Ruzy Suliza Hashim is an associate professor of literature at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Language Studies and Linguistics, UKM.

* The Solls.INTEC.03 conference on Language and Nationhood: Confronting New Realities will be held from Dec 16-18 at the Putrajaya Marriott Hotel. Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad will deliver the keynote address.

For more information, please visit the official website at www.fpbahasa.ukm.my/solls/ or call 03-8921-6491/6494/6579/6481.