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KUALA LUMPUR: Calling the national language "Bahasa Malaysia", by itself, may not be sufficient to foster national unity, but the move is seen as a good way to nurture a sense of ownership among the different communities.

Socio-linguistic expert Prof Dr Saran Kaur Gill, of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, said yesterday "Bahasa Melayu" signified a direct association of the language with the Malay ethnic group while "Bahasa Malaysia" established a strong association with the nation, that it was a language for all Malaysians.

She said the change is a good start to relate the language to the nation.

"Placing the nation (Malaysia) in the term distances itself from ethnic ownership and establishes instead national ownership, a language for all," she told *the Sun*.

Saran said language can play a role in creating a sense of togetherness and unity in society.

However, she said it will take time for society to psychologically

Bahasa Malaysia seen as way to foster unity

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feel for a language so that it can truly become a language that belongs to all Malaysians.

"The challenging part of this process is that the development of emotive feelings for the national language is usually linked to other factors, which determine whether the multi-ethnic members of Malaysian society feel included or excluded in the diverse processes of nation-building," she said.

Last week, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak confirmed that the cabinet

had decided to change the term for the national language from "Bahasa Melayu" to "Bahasa Malaysia" to forge unity and create a sense of belonging to the language, regardless of one's background and ethnicity.

The term "Bahasa Malaysia" was used after Merdeka until the late 1980s, when it was changed to "Bahasa Melayu". The then education minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, was one of the ministers advocating the change.

Following the recent cabinet

decision, several parties have pointed out that a change in name alone is not enough to foster national unity among the different communities. They said it is also important to have social and economic institutions that ensured equality and justice for all.

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka director-general Datuk Dr Firdaus Abdullah said as a civil servant, he would abide by the decision made by the government.

However, speaking in his capacity as a scholar, he said the

term "Bahasa Melayu" is still relevant despite the change.

"From the point of view of historical continuity, the term 'Bahasa Melayu' is still relevant. Because of that, we have to be more alert, sensitive and careful to make sure that both terms are used in the proper context.

"If (the change) is for political unity and administrative uniformity and will help the wider, sincere and spontaneous acceptance of the language by the citizens, I have no objection."