



**Beyond boundaries**  
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THERE is a sense of disbelief all around.

A quick check with our diplomats after the government's latest efforts to promote Bahasa Malaysia as Asean's second language has been met with a big "Why?"

During an official visit to Thailand recently, his second stop after Cambodia, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob shared with reporters his eagerness to speak in Bahasa Malaysia (or Bahasa Melayu) during bilateral meetings with his foreign counterparts.

"I have always emphasised on using Bahasa Melayu at official functions and since my trips overseas are also an official government matter, that is why I use Bahasa Melayu."

He gave an example of how during his Bangkok meeting, the Thais used their own language and translated it into Bahasa Malaysia for him.

"So for me it will be better if we use our own language and translate into their language. It is about time to empower our national language, especially in Asean where many people are conversant in the language.

"Even at international conferences, we can use Bahasa Melayu

# Lost in translation

The Prime Minister's proposal to ask Asean to use Bahasa Malaysia as its second language may take a long time to realise - and some question its feasibility.



**BM poser:** The PM at Question Time in Parliament on March 23, speaking about holding discussions with Asean member states to make Bahasa Malaysia the association's second language. — Bernama

like Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man who spoke in Glasgow, and maybe in the future we can use Bahasa Melayu at the United Nations," he said at the media conference.

Ismail Sabri was referring to the Environment and Water Minister who won praises for delivering his speech in Bahasa Malaysia at the United Nations climate change conference in Scotland in November last year.

Except perhaps the Prime Minister was not told that at any UN meeting, if a delegation speaks in any language other than the six official languages (and Bahasa Malaysia is not one of them), no simultaneous translation would be provided unless the meeting is informed in advance and a translator is provided by the delegation themselves.

Yes, we should be proud to hear a speech in Bahasa Malaysia at a major international conference, but would Malaysia's message and emphasis get across to the global

audience in real time?

Just last week at the Umno general assembly, Ismail Sabri reiterated his call. This week at the Dewan Negara, the Prime Minister decided to take the effort to use the national language in foreign diplomacy and relations one notch higher: Since six of the 10 Asean members are using their own official language, he is looking at the possibility of promoting Bahasa Malaysia as one of Asean's official languages.

A young diplomat's reaction to this latest announcement went like this: "What nonsense, it sounds like a policy is being made after just a few foreign visits?"

Seriously, what are the government's priorities now?

Speaking in English at international engagements, especially abroad, does not mean we are downgrading Bahasa Malaysia. It simply makes us more effective and efficient in our communication.

Ismail Sabri also told the Senate

that the Foreign Ministry would provide translation training for officers stationed overseas when asked by a senator whether the government had placed officers highly proficient in Malay abroad.

The Prime Minister should know that training means more money spent, and if he is not aware, Wisma Putra, for many years, has not been able to convince the government to give it a bigger budget.

A few years back the Foreign Ministry started intensive language courses but this was stopped due to financial constraints. Human resources is also problem at Wisma Putra, affecting even postings of officers overseas, including filling ambassadorial posts. At last count, at least 15 missions have no ambassadors, including in Washington DC, Tokyo, Seoul and a country Ismail visited recently, Vietnam.

Civil servants will, of course, have to follow the orders of the government of the day - but will this order be sustainable?

You cannot develop competent interpreters overnight because it's not just a matter of the language - importantly, they must understand the issues at hand.

"Interpretation can sometimes be inaccurate, especially if the person hired to do the job is not familiar with or doesn't understand diplomatic nuances," said one Malaysian diplomat.

Another shared a story about one of former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's foreign visits, when an academician was hired by the Prime Minister's Office to be the translator.

"After about 10 minutes of discussion between Dr Mahathir and his counterpart, the host government approached us and asked to change the interpreter due to inaccurate interpretation. We ended up using the one provided by them," he said.

It may be an easy way out to just

get home-based staff (Malaysian diplomats stationed abroad) or locals hired to work at the embassy to act as interpreters, say for a bilateral meeting, but what happens if in the course of discussion between leaders, the message gets lost in translation as happened above?

Some countries like Singapore are serious about getting their diplomats posted to non-English speaking countries to undergo intensive language courses for six months.

A Malaysian diplomat recalled that his Singapore counterpart serving in the same country had to complete a nine-month language course before being posted, apart from taking his own language course. Talk about preparation!

In Asean, English has been the language from the get go until now. It was the language used by the founding members of Asean to negotiate the organisation's establishment, and the language of all official Asean documentation used by diplomats in their work since 1967. Most importantly, the Asean Charter was written, drafted, negotiated and agreed in English.

"You can choose any language you want to speak, but to propose Bahasa Melayu to be used in Asean, impossible lah," said an official.

Those who have sat in on meetings with the Prime Minister said his basic communication in English is average, and he appears more comfortable conversing in English if he has speaking notes in his hands.

Some think his recent remarks about empowering Bahasa Malaysia is just the usual "pandering to the public" thing that politicians do - this initiative coincided with the run-up to the Johor state elections.

Perhaps Ismail Sabri has yet to understand the gravity of realising his dream and whether it is feasible.

All over the world, people are becoming more cosmopolitan. Diplomats from the least developed countries in Asean have improved by leaps and bounds and now speak more confidently in English. In Malaysia, are we regressing, becoming more insular and showing our insecurities? Or is the national language a tool for political survival too?