

Do you speak-a my language?

MALAY MAIL ONLINE

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By Praba Ganesan

FEBRUARY 25 — Literally, Malaysians are not talking to each other.

There's a language problem, or to be precise, we pretend our national language sync happened.

Don't get me wrong, almost all Malaysians can speak in Malay but there's absolutely no consensus on how much of it is necessary, whether it's mandatory for life in our federation or where each language resides in the pecking order in practical terms.

Therefore, the language migration of 1972 — as expected after Merdeka — never actualised.

Which results in persistent flare-ups about Malay and English — with various sides spouting their truths — and dies down eventually out of boredom listening to the same damn arguments over and over.

Quiet prevails. And then we start again.

It's Malaysia's own Groundhog Day.

As long as we don't give language combatants knives, I reckon we'd be OK-ish.

The latest edition includes Tommy Thomas' unflattering Malay, stumbling teachers on education channel DidikTV and Minister Rina Harun's doubtful delivery for a United Nation forum.

The column wishes to steer clear away from populism, easy wins and cliches. At least try.

How did we get here, this language kerfuffle?

The over-eagerness — from Emergency rule (Part I) 1969-1972 — to rush Malay as the medium for primary and secondary education was duly completed by the early 80s.

It was vital for optics for Malay nationalists. To appear Malay language triumphs proves Malay domination.

Unfortunately, while primary and education shifts occurred, the transition at tertiary level stalled dramatically. An extensive body of intellectual work exclusively in Malay did not materialise. In teaching material, academic books and academic research.

Fun to say, the Malay nationalists did not roll up their sleeves and write scintillating opuses on chemistry, biology, archaeology or construction engineering.

They were busy chest-thumping.

Here, a segue to the simpletons about to boast how Germans and Japanese did it in their language and exclaim so should we, they are clearly not comparing apples and apples.

First, they started earlier, German cities were industrial revolution centres and Meiji reformations were well ahead by the start of the 20th century. In short, they built a repository of knowledge adopted, innovated and researched by them in their languages for decades.

Second, the present inclusion of English in those nations' schools, universities, businesses and cultures today is at breakneck speed now. An MBA in Germany is conducted in English. So, Joe Simpleton, pick a new example.

Back to Malaysian schools, coupled with the burgeoning information age, the question in the late 90s and the early noughties was whether the colonial language needs a comeback. They'd need English, these kids to code and set up websites.

Since our public schools' system is a proper rojak — *SRK, SRJK(C), SRJK(T), SRA, SMK, SMK(B), SMJK(C), SMKA, SMA, SMV, MRSM, SBP, SBPI and more — the permutations of how to infuse English back were unending. Get that boarding school to be our Eton or have that religious school to prioritise English rather than Malay, since they have enough Arabic.

What is not discussed is that in an environment of chaotic change in our multiple systems, those from middle- and upper-class families had coping mechanisms. In the form of tuition, family support and strong educational foundation.

The kids at Sekolah Rendah Bukit Damansara are going to jump up and down if maths and science is in English, and still ace it if it's in Malay. So too, those kids at SJK(C) Damansara Tropicana, whether it is in English, Malay or Chinese.

But not for the PPR kids.

Look deeper into it, it's the kids in the plain dry simple national schools who are screwed over every single time.

They don't know but they live the reality. And their parents are too busy driving, calling and serving the upper classes to fight it.

Poor Tommy

The Who's Tommy — it's a rock opera — was “deaf, dumb and blind”, but the former attorney-general Tommy Thomas was none of that. In fact, to be studying in Manchester and finishing dinners at Middle Temple, and to have Nazir Razak refer to you as an old family friend, speaks about privilege.

How does an attorney get caught up in a language debacle?

To start, how many were discomforted with his admission of Malay language deficiency.

In an interview he spoke about how his 42 years in the legal profession was cloistered in an English speaking, writing and expressing world. That should alarm not about him, but about the lies we ignore.

How does a person thrive in the Malaysian legal fraternity for almost half a century with so little Malay?

So, take some truth. The Malaysian Bar's website has Malay right at the top together with its logo “Badan Peguam Malaysia” and then the Malay section ends. It's all in English thereafter.

The Bar Council President Salim Bashir's press releases are in English only. Probably Malay speakers don't need to know about human rights.

If you want to be a highly successful lawyer in Malaysia, you have to have English. Malay is a nice to have. No one tells Siti right now in Kuala Krai preparing for her UPSR in 2021 and LLB law International Islamic University graduating class of 2032 that the Malaysian Bar loves English.

This is where the can of worms opens.

A swath of Malaysian professional, commercial, business, training, logistics and information world is English. It is possible to succeed with zero Malay in Malaysia. Cruel but true. And those vanguards who claimed they were bringing Malay to the top were failing. Maybe by design.

The only time contracts are in Malay is when dealing with the government. All are aware, it is a requirement rather than devotion. I asked around the past three days, how many contracts in work are done in Malay? I asked too, how many know the Malay translation to merger and acquisition without looking up Google?

The government websites try to present information in Malay, but when it comes to highly technical legal information, you can bet your last ringgit it is only in English. The national news agency reports in Malay about the new E-Commerce Annual Certification and gives two links at the end in English. It's not Bernama's fault, the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission has the draft in English only.

After all, which E-Commerce company or its lawyers need information in Malay?

Position available: Top Malay politician, Malay Oklah, English must

So, if you really want to know, it's the Malay-speaking nationalists who were fooled in 1970. The Umno dudes want to say it's always Malay language, to

separate the Malays from those from other languages, and then say within Malays it's about those who have English, which is the Malay elites.

Quite the trick.

So why did Rina have to speak in English, badly or not? First, well done Rina, losing weight is to be congratulated. Second, at UN forums every national leader gets to speak.

But not everybody listens, and the listen count drops massively when the person speaking is a woman minister from a country not known to lead progressive social reforms. The vast majority of people who watched and laughed at her were Malaysians. So don't worry, the world is not in stitches talking about our ministers.

She spoke in English, as put above, to rise in Umno is to be pro-Malay but also English fluent, to display blueblood qualities. Yes, Rina is from Bersatu, different party but same ethos. No sane person can tell Umno and Bersatu apart. Pejuang also, but Bersatu won't approve its application.

Rina wants to join the Vaccine Minister Khairy Jamaluddin's group and away from the Health Minister Adham Baba's group. The speaking group, and not with the non-speaking group.

This is why many in Umno can't stomach the current president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi to become prime minister, he struggles with English.

It is ours

I'm not sure if it's poor form to use a Men at Work lyric as the column title, but I am sure that the utilisation of language to achieve political outcomes at the detriment of millions of Malaysians is a huge disservice.

Malay is our language.

Those who've asked millions to prioritise Malay and then to limit access to Malay speakers without English belong in a special group of evil. To realise late that poor grasp of English would set them back and probably block them from opportunities must be humiliating.

Tommy had no worries and Rina intends to move up with her English.

Malay's role is not about shouting about it. It is about emphasising its emotional role in all our lives, and then to take bold steps to uphold it.

Otherwise, the steady fall of Malay in an ever-globalising world will only accelerate.

I've changed my mind about the knives.

*SRK [Sekolah Kebangsaan/National School],

SRJK(C) [Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina/National primary Chinese type school],

SRJK(T) [Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil/National primary Tamil type school],

SRA [Sekolah Rendah Agama/Primary Religious School],

SMK[Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan/National Secondary School],

SMK(B) [Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (Mubaligh)/National Secondary Missionary School],

SMJK(C) [Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina/National Secondary Chinese type school],

SMKA[Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama/National Secondary Religious School],

SMA[Sekolah Menengah Agama/Secondary Religious School],

SMV[Sekolah Menengah Vokasional/Vocational Secondary School], more frequently regarded as Vocational College,

MRSM [Maktab Rendah Sains Mara/Mara Junior Science College],

SBP [Sekolah Berasrama Penuh/Full-boarding School],

SBPI [Sekolah Berasrama Penuh Integrasi/Full-boarding Integrated School]

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