

## **THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF LANGUAGE AND NATIONHOOD**

**MARRIOT HOTEL, PUTRAJAYA, 18 DECEMBER 2003**

### **“Language and Nationhood : Confronting New Realities”**

I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to speak at this International Conference on Language and Nationhood. I apologise for being unable to speak at the beginning because I suddenly realised I would be abroad just one day before. The organisers have so kindly allowed me to speak today, at the end of your conference and I am very thankful.

2. I had accepted this invitation to speak because the subject “Language and Nationhood” interests me very much. I believe that multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious Malaysians are interested in the subject because we are trying our best to achieve nationhood through developing a common national language, a language based on that of the indigenous people, the Malays; a language that historically was the language of all the races who resided in the Malay states.

3. Before the British came, there were already a number of Arabs, Chinese and Indians in the principal cities of the Malay Peninsular. These people had not only adopted Malay as their home language, but developed a culture that was distinctly influenced by that of the Malays.

4. The Babas and Nyonyas and the southern Indians had actually forgotten their original languages, very much like the Chinese who settled in the Dutch East Indies. But in Malaysia, except for the Arabs, who were Muslims and had identified completely and been integrated into the Malay community, the Chinese and Hindu Indians retained their religions and separateness.

5. Contact with these foreign settlers and traders who used Malacca as a trade centre resulted in enriching the Malay language with words from the Arabic, Sanskrit and Persian languages. Later when the Portuguese conquered Malacca, numerous Portuguese words were incorporated into the Malay language and was used by all the different races which had settled in the Malay states.

6. The Dutch had little influence over the development of the Malay language. When the British came, they decided to popularise English. This slowed down the development of the Malay language as English started to replace it as the language of administration and commerce. The Malay speaking Babas and Nyonyas and the Indians began to switch to English, using Malay less and less. The new immigrants from China and India who were encouraged by the British to come to Malaysia, did not learn Malay at all. Instead their presence resulted in the Babas and Nyonyas relearning their original mother tongue so that affinity and integration with other Malaysians became more difficult. The Malays were pushed out into the rural areas. The few Malays who remained in the urban areas worked as Government employees and learnt English in order to cope with this administrative language. The Malay educated Malays could only work at subordinate jobs and contacts with non-Malay speaking Malaysians were limited. There was little incentive for the non-Malays to learn Malay.

7. Thus at independence the majority of the citizens of different races in Malaya could not communicate with each other. Their top leaders however, were able to use English with each other. But their numbers were rather small and Malay nationalists rejected English as the national language of the independent Federation of Malaya and later Malaysia. However, even though literary Malay was not well understood, bazaar Malay was quite widely used by all races.

8. The socio-political contract between the different races in the Federation of Malaya formulated at independence accordingly accepted Malay as the national language, but Chinese and Tamil may be learnt and used as teaching media in the schools of the Chinese and Indians. It was a liberal provision, considering that all the neighbouring countries, and most countries of the world support education and official use of only one language as the national language.

9. A national language is an essential cement for the development of nationhood. In the Dutch East Indies, the people cemented their unity during the struggle against the Dutch by adopting the language of a minority as the national language of the Indonesian nationalists. Only a small community in what is now known as Indonesia spoke Malay. But Malay had been historically the lingua franca of the Malay Archipelago. Only the Malays of the Peninsular speak Malay as their mother tongue. But Indonesia's adoption of Malay as Bahasa Indonesia was easily accepted by the independence fighters, as Dutch was not acceptable. As Bahasa Indonesia, it helped to unite the 200 over language groups in the Dutch East Indies, in the struggle for independence.

10. Incidentally, the Chinese who had lived in the Dutch East Indies, though familiar with the Dutch language, had over the years also adopted Malay as their home language. The acceptance of Malay as Bahasa Indonesia enabled these immigrants to integrate with the indigenous people and even to join in the struggle for independence. Those who chose to support the Dutch were in the minority and many migrated out of Indonesia.

11. Clearly the acceptance of Bahasa Indonesia as a national language contributed much to the creation of Indonesian nationhood. It is certainly an important phenomenon, for the peoples of the islands now constituting Indonesia belong to over 200 language groups and were never united before colonisation. Their common enmity against the Dutch brought them together, and Bahasa Indonesia as the common language provided the glue that binds them.

12. Had the Malay States, British North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei been colonised by the Dutch at the time of the struggle for independence, there is no doubt that they would be a part of Indonesia, and Bahasa Indonesia would have been their national language. But these states were under British rule and their struggle took a different direction. Suffice to say that they gained independence separately from the territories of the Dutch East Indies and eventually, except for Brunei, became Malaysia. But although the ethnic Malays make up a majority of the peoples of Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia, the same language which has become Bahasa Indonesia, was not so widely used and played a lesser role in bringing the peoples of different racial origins together during the struggle for Malayan independence. English played this role. To carry out the socio-political contract involving Malay as a national language is thus more difficult than in the case of Bahasa Indonesia.

13. Part of the difficulty is due to the non-Malay population being rather large i.e. 40 percent of total population. They speak the languages of their countries of origin and use only bazaar Malay for daily intercourse between the different races. Among their own races they speak their own language. For inter-racial intercourse English was and is widely used.

14. Another obstacle was the greater success of the British in the propagation of English. Malay schools were confined to primary education and the students were almost entirely from the Malay community. Not anticipating the Chinese and Indians to settle and become citizens of the Malay States, Chinese and Tamil schools were allowed. This did not help in the acquisition of Malay by these immigrant races. The only places where the Chinese and Indian students met the few Malay students were in the English medium secondary schools. Since English and not Malay was the principal language of administration, these schools were quite popular.

15. Despite Malay being designated the official language of the independent Federation of Malaya and later Malaysia; the English medium secondary schools were allowed to continue in the early years of independence. A populist Minister of Education decided to convert these schools into Malay medium secondary schools practically overnight. Instead of popularising these new Malay secondary schools, this switch encouraged the expansion of the Chinese secondary schools, and a large number of Chinese students who should have gone to the Malay secondary schools, opted to go to Chinese medium secondary schools instead. This of course reduced the contacts between Chinese and Malay students, in their formative years. It did not help in the progress of Malay as the national language.

16. Still the Malays, Chinese and Indians of Malaysia remain reasonably united. Malaysian nationhood remains tangible and real, especially when Malaysia's development and progress gave Malaysians reasons to be proud of their Malaysian identity and nationality. The coalition of racially-based parties which ruled Malaysia since independence also helped in preventing the races from becoming too deeply divided because of the relative unfamiliarity with the national language.

17. Multi-racial nations are generally friable. Instability and racial confrontations usually characterise these countries. Even if the national language is borrowed as in the case of many ex-colonial territories of the British and the French, it helps to overcome some of the animosities between the different racial or ethnic groups. In most instances the borrowed national language plays a big role in nation building and nationhood. Because the language is borrowed no race can claim possession and superiority because of it.

18. China is a unique example. The Chinese people are divided into different dialect groups. The dialects are so different that effectively the languages spoken by the different dialect groups are different. However the written language, the Chinese characters are not phonetic. They are symbols which represent things or ideas and can therefore be "read" in the different dialects. In fact these characters can also be read by Japanese speakers in their own language. The speakers of the different dialect groups can therefore understand each other in writing.

19. Still the Chinese feel a need for a spoken national language. Mandarin was chosen and Chinese education is in Mandarin. This helps to give the Chinese a single identity

and nationality. Chinese nationhood is not challenged by anyone because apart from territory and culture they do have a national language.

20. The effort to promote Malay as the national language of Malaysia has now reached a critical stage. The globalising shrinking world is forcing all the different nations closer together. Contact between the different language groups of the world are getting more frequent. New relations are being forged between nations speaking many different languages. New treaties are being entered into where misunderstanding and misinterpretation can occur unless there is a common language which is understood by all parties to the agreements.

21. Then there is the rapid expansion of knowledge, particularly scientific and technical knowledge. To translate the massive amount of highly technical new knowledge into any other language requires the services of experts in the languages concerned and also in the subject or discipline involved. There are not too many such people in any community willing to devote their time to such tasks.

22. All these factors point towards the need for a common international language. There was once an attempt to introduce an artificial international language called Esperanto, but it never caught on. Instead English on its own volition has today become effectively the international language of choice.

23. Malaysia which is trying to catch up with the developed countries cannot afford to be left behind in the mastery of the new knowledge in science and technology. It also cannot neglect the diplomatic needs of a globalising world where it has to negotiate treaties and enter into bilateral and multilateral agreements and partnerships with countries with different national language.

24. Faced with these new developments Malaysia has to take up the study of the internationalised English language more seriously. It should be noted that even when it was promoting Malay as the national language and using it as the officially supported medium of instruction in schools, Malaysia had not dropped English. It remained as the second language of Malaysia and was taught in even the primary schools.

25. But not being compulsory, many did not take learning English seriously. Mastery of English is now very poor in Malaysia. Certainly it is not good enough for Malaysian diplomats and internationally involved businessmen. As for the acquisition and mastery of new knowledge available in English, it is totally inadequate.

26. Over the years since independence English words have increasingly been modified and incorporated into the Malay language. This is of course not new. In the past Arabic, Sanskrit and Persian and even Chinese words had been incorporated into the Malay language. But the incorporation of English words is now so extensive that the Malay language and therefore the national language runs the danger of becoming a hybrid language. The question is whether we should incorporate so much English into the Malay language that it loses its identity, or we should study English more seriously as an international language and keep the Malay language recognisable as Malay.

27. For better or for worse Malaysia had decided on the latter, i.e. to study English more seriously as a second language and additionally in order to gain rapid access to new

scientific and mathematical knowledge, these subjects should be taught in English from the primary schools onwards.

28. The language nationalist must be unhappy over this new policy. It appears to undermine the national language as the cementing and definitive language of Malaysia. No doubt to a certain extent it will. But the choice is between depriving ourselves of the new knowledge and consequently slowing down the development of Malaysia, or striving for rapid development by aggressively acquiring knowledge through the use of English.

29. The reason why Arabic and English became so widespread is because both are the language of great civilisations. The Arabs gained in terms of knowledge and learning because of the willingness of Arab scholars to study Greek and other languages in order to gain access to the works of these people. Upon acquiring the knowledge pioneered by these people, the Arabs added their own work to the body of knowledge. Through this the Arabs became very knowledgeable and highly skilled and were able to build a great civilisation.

30. The Europeans including the English speakers gained knowledge by their willingness to study the Arabic translations of the Greeks and others, as well as the contributions of the Arabs themselves. In other words they learnt Arabic in order to educate themselves. Then they, the Europeans, became able to build a great civilisation.

31. In short the Arab and the European civilisations gained from the willingness to study the knowledge available in other languages. If the Arabs had confined themselves to studying only the original Arabic works, it is unlikely that they would lead the world in the fields of science and mathematics and build their Islamic civilisation. Similarly if the Europeans refused to study Arabic they would not have gained from the body of knowledge accumulated by the Arabs from numerous sources. They would not have built the European and the English-speaking civilisations.

32. If Malay is to be better known, then the Malay speaking people must become advanced in their material development, at least at par with the developed countries. To do this they must be willing to study the current language of knowledge; namely English. If they confine themselves completely to Malay it is unlikely that they would develop and build a greater Malay civilisation. It is therefore not unnationalistic to learn English, as long as Malay as the national language is not neglected.

33. Besides, the trend today is for everyone with any pretension of being educated to be fluent in at least two languages, the national language and another widely-used foreign language. For most people English is the second language of choice. This being so it is again not unnationalistic to have equal mastery of the national language and English. The nationalists of every nation would have the same capacity. The binding effect of the national language would remain and nationhood would be attained, but the nation would progress towards greater achievements to become a great nation because of its developmental success.

34. This is the reality about the role of a unique national language in achieving nationhood within the context of a globalising world.