

# Language Policies in Malaysia: From Colonial to De-colonial Era<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article sketches briefly construction and re-construction processes via language policies commencing from the very outset of the colonial establishment in Malaya to the contemporary Malaysia. The present writer argues this whole process normatively represents the plurality of the language policy owing to the changing actors and changing purposes throughout the various eras. Hence the research object of this article is to draw attention into two overall language policies: the first was implemented during the colonial era, and the second one has been the product of the Malay ruling elite after the independence. In the course of time, the language policies, as the reflection of cultural force, inevitably have become significant catalysts to inculcate and transmit respective cultural values as well. These processes will be traced through significant data in archival documentaries and contemporary researches.

From the education of the children of Malay ruling elites in British schools to vernacular schools and national schools, language policies took an impressive place in the history of Malay Peninsula in the sense of reconstructing the society designed on the basis of the political power. On the other hand, the same era also witnessed development of national awareness owing to some certain policies. It is plausible to urge that language policies seem to have been very decisive for the formation of national consciousness starting from the early decades of the last century. And the efforts of the founding fathers of Malay community played crucial roles by introducing language policies reconstructively as unifying factors of multilingual and multiracial society.

**Key Words:** Language Policies, Malay education, social change, colonial era, modern Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

During the modern era, Malaya emerged gradually as a multi-ethnic society by the large number of migrants from China and India/Sri Lanka due to the changing phases of economic production system in the Peninsula. In this condition, the British administrators commenced to establish educational attempts as a result of their ethical approach. They aimed to educate all classes of peoples in Malaya by founding English schools, then after some initial individual attempts opening Malay vernacular schools for Malay people. These initiatives were the very first steps of the developments of English and Bahasa Malayu as national and official languages in modern sense.

On the other hand, the efforts of the mission organizations cannot be underestimated. They also gave full support to the above-mentioned policy by establishing both their own schools and being a constructive actor in the creation of overall education policy. By this way, it may be argued that the secular administration and mission groups designed together education system organizing the English schools and allowing the missionary groups' involvement in education.

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As a consequence of this development, the natives gave much attendance to the newly grounded English schools facilitated under both government and mission groups in the course of time, owing to fruitful results of the education system.

The British colonial government language policy under overall education policy was developed by Thomas Stamford Raffles himself as soon as he established the state organization in Singapore. During the initial meeting with the palace circles, nobility and leaders of migrant groups he highlighted general vision of education policy. And as the most significant issue pertaining to ethical policy, he emphasized the import of mother tongue education. Throughout the colonial era, language policy was considered under overall education policies commencing from the first Free School's opening in Penang (1816) [1], and a sound contribution initiated in 1867, when the Malay states ceased to be under the Indian government and became a separate Crown Colony, under the Colonial Office in London. There were also some impacts of committee reports, such as the Woolley Report (1870) and the Isemonger Report (1894), which were the first serious constructivist initiatives by officials and had a formative influence on planning and structural change of education [2]. These reports openly criticised the decision of the British colonial rulers to not expose native Malay youths to educational facilities and strongly recommended the allocation of funds for the education sector and the appointment of an Inspector of Schools [3].

The British orchestrated a cumulative change starting from the role of language implementing English as the main medium of instruction at English schools. This policy was very pragmatically exercised due to the functionality of English in both private economic developmental sectors and also designing administration cadres of colonial regime. Regarding the historical and cultural basis of the Malay Peninsula both British colonial administration and later on the founding fathers of modern Malaysia emphasized the importance of Malay language as national language of the peoples living in the Peninsula. As it is worded in the Report of a Mission [4].

### **Language Policy Under the Colonial Rule**

Language policy is very strategic phenomenon for the sovereign powers in order to continue their existence and make it legitimate. When the British entered the Malaya, their main interest to unite people around the language aspect in terms of both social and economic favor of colonial regime. Hence the union could not be argued to have worked well since there were some more parameters to be dealt with by the authorities. For instance, the variety of racial factors was compulsory element to think about not only union, but more than this, it was a result of ethical and liberal approach. And more than this, the social system among the Malays, was much considered critically by the British authorities. As seen in the approach and attitude of Frank Swettenham, the main policy was not to cause a drastic change the social fabric of Malay society. In this policy, the place of English and Malay languages was replaced each other by playing distinct functions. While English tuition to the members of ruling family served for the continuous relation with the British superior administrative body, teaching Malay at vernacular schools was aimed to stabilize the society by its own values simplistically without allowing creation of a social domain which might cause a potential danger for the British rule [5].

The determination of language policy ensued of the given facts in Malaya. It means that there was a variety of language groups which were considered to be educated in their own mother

tongues. Hence the functions of Malay language and English differed from the rest owing to their respective importance. Though the migrant groups did not send their children to Malay vernacular schools, in their respective schools were entailed to employ Malay language as a course subject. And English having an undisputable importance was the main linguistic target of almost all racial groups in terms of the former's being administrative and business interactions throughout the Malay land. In this juncture, it is worth reminding the English schools were not only described as the one attended exclusively by the European and Eurasian families' children, but also English itself as the medium of language. And these schools "admitted native children" in the course of time as well [6]. The current researcher urges the periodization of language policy in order to understand the various steps emerged successively. In regard to this, there are two classifications: the first is general approach of the various parties; the second is historical process.

### **Periodic developments**

**a) 1816-1867:** The initiator of this period, Rev. Robert Hutchings, from Anglican mission, intentionally lay the foundations of English schools by forming Penang Free School (21 October 1816) which was aimed to educate a very steril way the sons of native families without any discrimination among the racial stocks of the Malaya [7]. In addition, it can be argued that the Free School policy was to cater all the variety of races under the same school run by English medium of instruction. As argued by some researchers that this policy aimed to unite distinct linguistic groups by the medium of English.

Initiation of this first phase is very supportive of the present writer's argument that generally the education policy and particularly language policy was directed by the intellectual and formative capacity of the individuals from mission groups. Just few years later, the distinguished colonial administrator, Thomas Raffles, as the secular representative of the colonial regime followed the footsteps of Rev. Hutchings, while he was constructively involving the foundation of education life in Singapore [8]. In the latter issue, since Raffles was the political authority, his initiative was more constructive than Rev. Hutchings. And his education policy since the very early days of this administration would be more effective to mold the whole phases throughout the colonial century. His approach was embodied in the sentence that giving full opportunity to the sons of the palace circles and nobility was the main objective.

**b) 1867-1900:** While the year 1867 was a turning point in terms of this and the Government of the Straits Settlements exercised its power to give interest in Malay education, it is safe to argue that the most striking improvements appeared the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This phase witnessed establishment of vernacular schools systematically for each racial group. The classical Malay language also was commenced to be transformed by the decision of education authorities to teach at schools as the medium of instruction in both Arabic and Roman scripts [9]. This era must be regarded significant at least as tripartite development which had a direct impact on education and language policies. The political status of Malaya changed from the affiliation to the authority of the Indian Government to a sort of independent Crown Colony (1867) [10].

As a reflection of this development, it can be argued that Foster's Education Act, 1870, which provided the right of each child to access education universally [11], was imitated in the education policy in Malaya. In addition, two reports had gross impact on the improvements the

education services in Malaya. For example, Woolley Report remarked the backwardness of native education, particularly among the Malays. By these efforts some developments emerged after 1870s onwards. While these reports highlighted vernacular education, it ought not to be forgotten that the vernacular education was a total expression of native/mother tongue education and was recognized as an alternative for the native children who could not find any opportunity to attend the English schools [12].

By the authority of London colonial bureau a committee was employed to restructure the state of education in the Colony: a) An urgent appointment of an Inspector of Schools; b) modifying the current grant-in-aid system; c) improving facilities for particularly Malay vernacular school system [13]. The particular importance of this new design was that the colonial regime conceived the social hierarchy in the Malaya and prioritized Malay vernacular schools where the medium of instruction was Bahasa Malayu. It is also observed that the awareness of language particularly English among the rulers was increasing. And this inclination gave a way of creation of new policies and establishment of novel institutions. In the connection with this, the Sultan of Perak requested English language education for himself and young relatives and the latter were allowed them to attend Government English schools later on [14].

c) 1901-1942; Education facilities were often regarded as a salient first for the nobility in Malaya. Hence, the evolution of language policy during this era had also impacted on the decision-making process of the palace and nobility circles to provide English education to their children took some time. In terms of this, the end of the 19th century ought to be regarded as a distinguished period when Selangor royalty and families of major elite circles invited some distinguished British educators to be given a task for the education of their sons. As a reflection of this approach, for instance, Reverend Haines, a British clergyman, was given full responsibility to take care of the children in 1889. In a similar way, Perak elite also followed the footsteps of the previous one in terms of English education [15].

At the same time, it is right to argue that this phase emerged as the result of economic improvement due to the production system and the scholarly administrators' involvement in the education department particularly by the leadership of R. J. Wilkinson and R. O. Winstedt [16]. For instance, the contribution of Wilkinson varies from publications to the foundation of a Malay College in Malacca [17]. And by these efforts he put his prints in the education policy continued by Winstedt in later decades. During the very early phase of this period, Wilkinson, in spite of his short term, played an influential role in education. His efforts were more purposive and showed greater initiative than other administrators', even before his appointment to the post of Federal School Inspector from 1903 to 1906. He served as the founding father of the Malay College in 1905 [18]. The establishment of Malay College in Kuala Kangsar in Perak in 1905 aimed to produce subservient Malay cadre in administration and in terms of the British policy the medium of instruction was English [19]. Wilkinson is also noteworthy for his contribution to the expansion of Malay vernacular schools, as well as for reintroducing the young Malay generation to Malay classics [20], and he is a distinguished figure for the establishment of Malay as the national language in the modern era.

The significance of Wilkinson's reformist initiative was proven when the education program was "geared to the maintenance of a plural society in Malaya" in the second part of 1940 [21]. The

revitalization of the idea of a national language was congruent with Wilkinson's attempts at bringing the peoples of Malaya together through a common language. All these endeavours resulted in Malay being accepted as the national language (*bahasa kebangsaan*) in the 1950s [22]. Even though the vernacular schools initially contributed only to the improvement of youths' Malay language skills, they later contributed significantly to the employment of Malays during the modernisation process and the publication of journals and magazines in the Malay language. Wilkinson's efforts thus show the foresight of the founding fathers, who gave importance to the Malay language and culture around the middle of the twentieth century.

**d)1945-1957:** This last phase was the result of the World War II and mainly on the way to challenge the difficulties in front of the nation-state building in Malaya. In the outset of the independence, the language policy was under the influence of a novel political approach of the colonial rule. The special committees scrutinized the language issue aligned with the nation-state establishment. This issue was considered in a great extent both in working committees in 1951, 1954 and 1956. Owing to the socio-political considerations, the official languages were decided to be English and Bahasa Malayu and both were compulsory subjects in all level of education. Particularly Bahasa Malayu was regarded as national language and prioritized for all racial elements in Malaya [23].

The committees' reports, bearing past historical imprints, recommended the establishment of a national education system, with Malay as the national language in order to overcome the sociocultural gaps among the peoples of Malaya on the eve of independence. In addition, the reports emphasized that the establishment of national unity should be based on the common language, and that this should be realised as the main objective. As proven by these developments, "Malayness has been conceived as a fundamental basis for state's ideology in Malaysia" [24]. Both reports prove that the the ideas initiated by R.J. Wilkinson materialised about half a century ago. In addition, a significant report on the relationship between native language and the building of a nation-state was written by the Education Committee in 1956 [25].

In the pursuance of enunciating language policy as a constructive factor for a new nation-state, some institutions, such as language institute was entailed inevitably for the development of language. This and similar institutions were tasked to perform various functions for instance, creation of qualified Malay language teachers and conducting research aiming to enrich Malay language. Some other criteria in relation with the facilitation of Malay language were i) requirement of admission to secondary school; ii) a subject in examinations after secondary and high schools; iii) a compulsory qualification for entry into governmental positions; iv) a condition to be able to get scholarship from government institutions; v) a compulsory element of all teacher training courses [26].

### **Post-Independence Era: Language: A Social Cement**

This historical reality leads the contemporary social-scientists have tried to find out a solution of the disunity among the peoples. It emerges that the attention much more given on the significance of national language which is regarded as social cement to build up a common ground among the various social elements. As William Marsden, who is regarded as a well-known scholar, the writer of first modern Malay dictionary, mentions that the Bahasa Malayu

*“supposed original in the peninsula of Malayo, so as to become the lingua franca of that part of the globe” [27].*

The power of language, as a social phenomenon, “is a zealous inheritance of the social groups” and an inevitable cultural resource for each community [28]. It is agreed that there is an inevitable connection between “*nation*” and “*language*” and that these two phenomena have become intertwined. As a result of this, every self-respecting nation has to have a language regarding social unity [29]. Language and socialization issue is regarded significant throughout the modern history of Malaysia which has been, since the beginning, known as a multi-cultural society. Establishing a united society, language which is also itself inevitable part of cultural entity “even culture is a part of language”, plays a function [30].

What has been historically paramount in Malaysia is the nation-building and social integration among the various ethnicities. After World War II the renewed policy of the nation-building and social integration was based on the acceptance of a national language to ensure that all various ethnicities could live together as belonging to a single nationhood, say, being Malaysian. The language aspect was put as an unevitable condition by Malay ruling elites and intellectuals to make all various ethnicities to be united around a single national language, it means, Bahasa Melayu which was conditioned as the main criteria [31].

After World War II, education in Malaya appeared a salient issue for the process of establishing a nation- state. Since education was a domain in which all ethnic bodies of Malayan land would be merged into a national union. As Dr. Mahathir Muhammad says as follow: “The foundations of that nation must be laid in the schools” [32]. The thought of Dr. Mahathir seems to be parallel with the arguments worded in a report written in the year of 1951. Regarding the report, the foundations of establishing a Malayan nation should be based on educational policy [33]. Since the effort to restructure the education system and mold into a national one several committees named such as Barnes, Razak, Talib etc. were created to reexamine educational policy [34].

Regarding to the Malay Peninsula after above-mentioned period, Malay language was first determined as a medium of instruction by the establishment of Malay vernacular schools. And the founding fathers continued this process and decided decisively Malay language would become without accepting any objections from any circles as the national language in the education system in order to lead the nation to become united. Due to this decision, the cultural division among the ethnicities would be bridged by the assimilation of peoples coming from various cultural and language background to Malay. So it was an unavoidable decision for the building of national identity for all peoples living together for a long time. Though there are various ethnicities in Malaya (then Malaysia), the nation has become united around the idea of a national language whose importance cannot be overlooked in the past decades. The fact of the national language which has become a salient social cement to strengthen the multi-ethnic structure ought to be taken into consideration to be able to understand the nation’s development, mainly in economy as commonly mentioned, but in a wider sense in almost each sector of the social life.

## **Conclusion**

Language as a social phenomenon plays an important role in building national identity, and it is through this function that language may be called the ultimate symbol of a national union. In the

case of Malaya, the use of the Malay language and the adaptation of classical texts led to the creation of a sociopolitical environment conducive to national consciousness. If close attention is paid to Thomas Stamford Raffles' writings about Malays, it is evident that he was an unhesitating proponent of the Malay language and the Malayan nation [35]. In addition to Raffles' efforts, the standardisation of language, giving priority to the mother tongue in educational institutions, and improving vocabulary among students were important factors in creating unity in Malay society. This in turn helped with the establishment of a nation-state. All these features can be seen in Wilkinson's educational policy. During the colonial era, educational institutions were established and gradually developed through the individual initiatives of certain British officials as well as through the colonial government's policies. Through the creation of a new "society of outsiders" thanks to the British policy of facilitating the migration of Indians and Chinese, the Malay people gradually interacted with people of other ethnicities both passively under the British strategy of divide and rule, and actively as participants in educational and governmental institutions. Despite all the obstacles faced by Malays in acquiring an education, as stated in Swettenham's report, those who had the opportunity to be educated in Malay vernacular schools gained a consciousness of nationality over time. This slow and gradual change in the form of a politically well aware Malay intelligentsia at the eve of the modern time may be explained as an "*unintended and unanticipated consequence of action*" according to Weberian sociology.

As a follow-up to the acquiring of national awareness and identity, Malay politicians and intellectuals stressed the importance of having a common language as social cement in order to create a new nation. The thinking of the political elites was embodied in the acceptance of Bahasa Melayu as the national language to unite all peoples in Malaysia. Despite of successes, it should be also highlighted some sorts of weaknesses of these policies. There were several factors that prevented the policies from becoming a sound success and having the intended results. These included the aforementioned individuals holding their posts for only limited periods, and the central government placing greater priority on political and economic developments [36]. It cannot be denied that the endeavours of the distinguished administrators contributed to the awareness of Malayness at various levels. Leading Malay intellectuals were able to find a channel to use the Malay language as a medium for propagating nationalistic ideas. Although it is a potential research subject, it should be stated here that the reasons for the discontinuation of the Malay vernacular schools included insufficient funding from the British central authority, and lack of teaching staff, especially for the upper-level students [37].

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