

书评  
Book Review

## ***National Language Planning and Language Shifts in Malaysian Minority Communities***

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Language shift among minority communities as a result of the promulgation of national language policies has always been a key concern for sociolinguists primarily because language shift could bring about the much feared language loss or language death. This concern is underpinned by the fact that national language policies in most plural societies tend to lead to language homogenization and standardization at the expense of language diversity. This is largely the result of subscribing to "the linear 'one language, one nation, one people' principle of linguistic or organic nationalism" (May 2008: 91). This notion of nationalism is predicated on the confluence of nation and state and on the establishment of a common civic or national language and culture (May 2008). However, language shift among minority communities may run counter to the expectations of the

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national language policy. Language shift among minority communities is influenced by a myriad of factors, among which, "language shift often reflects a pragmatic desire for social and vocational mobility, an improved standard of living, a personal cost-benefit analysis" (Baker 2010: 80).

Viewed against the above, this edited book by Dipika Mukherjee and Maya Khemlani David certainly deserves our attention. This collection of eleven chapters sets out to explore language use and language shift among minority communities in Malaysia, some of which are numerically very small. The chapters show how educational level, religion, employment opportunities and prospects, marriage, generation and gender combine to influence language use and language shift at the societal and family levels. All the contributors have worked within the ambit of national language planning and its effects on these minority communities, and this adds greatly to the coherence of the book. Most of the contributors have examined the above issues within their own sub-specialisms of ethnic minorities.

The introductory chapter by David and Mukherjee provides an overview of the development and contemporary status of language planning and policy in Malaysia. Other chapters document language use and language shift among several minority communities in Malaysia: the Iyer Tamils, the Tamils of Kuching, the Sindhis of Kuching, the Malaysian-Filipino couples, the Portuguese Eurasians, the children of Indian Bidayuh of Sarawak, the Malayalees, the Bengali, the Chinese of Sarawak and the Malay Javanese migrants of Kampung Jawa, Hulu Langat, Selangor. Most of these minority communities are from the Indian sub-groups. The findings of most of the chapters are drawn from micro-level case studies that may not be able to provide convincing generalizations over language shift and language use among the selected minority communities. Even so, these case studies remain relevant and could provide the empirical bases for more comprehensive studies.

National language planning in Malaysia is the result of much political bargaining and trade-offs among the three main ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese and Indians) in Malaysia prior to Independence and the result of which is enshrined in Article 152(1) of the Federal Constitution. This Article clearly stipulates that the Malay language as the national language is the sole official language of the country and other languages could only be used for non-official purposes. This was subsequently adopted by the National Language Bill enacted in 1967. However, in terms of educational language policy, the minority communities are allowed to use their languages as media of instruction at the primary level. This was the result of the promulgation of the Razak Report prior to Independence. Nonetheless, beyond

the primary level, there is a strict adherence to the Federal Constitution and the National Language Bill as far as medium of instruction is concerned. The promulgation of a new educational policy in 1970 in the aftermath of the May 13 racial riots further consolidated Malay as the main medium of instruction.

Arguably, the national language policy in Malaysia should lead to more minority communities shifting to the Malay language. However, going by the findings of this book, this is obviously not the case. There are a lot of intra-community variations. Only the Muslim Malayalees and the Javanese (who are assimilated into the Malay majority group) surveyed by this book have shown a significant shift to the national language. This is hardly surprising because "Malay as the national language has yet to transcend ethnicity" (Tan 1984: 208-209). To the non-Malays in Malaysia, the Malay language is essentially the language of the Malays. Thus, they are ill at ease to adopt the language lest they will be tagged as Malays. Such a problem does not confront the Muslim Malayalees who have converted to Islam. In Malaysia, the conversion to Islam is not merely the embracing of a new religion but also entails a change in ethnicity leading to the identification with the majority Malays. This also gives the converts access to the perks available through the positive affirmative action policies normally reserved to the Malays. The main reason is that Islam is generally regarded as a religion of the Malay ethnic group (Osman 2005). For the Javanese who are assimilated into the Malay community, it is only natural that they pick up a Malay identity marker in order to facilitate their assimilation into the Malay community. The strong identification of the Malay language with Malay ethnicity is perhaps one of the main stumbling blocks restricting the spread of the national language in Malaysia beyond its confined ethnic boundary. In view of this, policy makers in Malaysia must find ways and means to ensure that the national language is not encapsulated by Malay ethnicity so that it could bring about a greater societal impact.

By and large, beyond the official domains, the national language is only being used for inter-ethnic communication involving the non-Malays and Malays. But given that residential neighborhoods in Malaysia are largely segregated, there is little need to use the national language for inter-ethnic communication. As such, most non-Malays are deprived of the opportunity to improve their proficiency in the national language through inter-ethnic interactions. The acquisition of a language through social interaction with the people who speak the language is an important aspect of language acquisition. As pointed out by Ellen Bialystok (2001), "Learning a language is much more than learning syntax. A competent language learner will



additionally master the social conventions and conversational styles that the language incorporates. It is these conventions for framing intentions and styles for interacting in social contexts that embody the personality of the language, the culture, and the individual speaker" (p. 240). The lack of opportunity to use the national language beyond the official domains has resulted in many non-Malays to regard the acquisition of the national language as merely an academic exercise during their schooling years. This is exemplified by the Portuguese Eurasians surveyed by this book (p. 95). It is also not surprising that the Bengali women surveyed by this book have shown rather negative attitudes toward the national language as they regard Malay as not necessary in their lives beyond schools (p. 139).

Apart from that, the implementation of the national language policy has been affected by its failure to make inroads into the upper strata of the Malaysian society whose members favor English over Malay as an intra- as well as inter-ethnic communicative language. More devastating is its failure to curtail the traditional role of English as the language of commerce in Malaysia. More challenges to the national language policy came in the 1990s following new developments in the educational sector that culminated in the re-emergence of English as a medium of instruction. These new developments were welcomed enthusiastically by the non-Malays who generally favor English over Malay for its greater social and economic values. One such development was the introduction of English as a medium of instruction for science and technology courses at the public institutions of higher learning in the mid 1990s. This was made possible by the enactment of the 1996 Education Act which permits the use of other languages as media of instruction upon approval by the Minister of Education as stipulated by Section 143 of the Act (see MDC Legal Advisers 2005). Another development was the implementation of the policy of teaching science and mathematics in English beginning in 2002, though this policy was recently aborted. Again, this was made possible by the enactment of the 1996 Education Act. The proliferation of private institutions of higher learning that teach in English beginning in the mid 1990s is perhaps the most significant development that has spurred renewed interest in English. This was the result of the enactment of the 1996 Private Higher Educational Institutions Act (see Legal Research Board 2001). One of the main reasons that abetted these developments is the emergence of English as a global language following the accelerated pace of globalization beginning in the 1990s.

From the foregoing, it is to be expected that the national language policy has

had only limited impact on language shift in Malaysia as a result of the strong challenge from English. It is not surprising that the shifting to English or the adopting of English as a dominant language or first language is a major recurring theme in this book. The younger generation of the Iyer Tamils is shifting to English to ensure their economic and social mobility (p. 39). The younger generation of the Telegus and Tamils in Sarawak are also shifting to English for similar reasons (p. 55). Even the Bengali women who have a strong pride in their Bengali heritage and the Bengali language have shown positive attitudes toward English as a tool of economic advancement, though it is not indicated in the book that they are shifting to English (pp. 136, 138). Meanwhile, the majority of the Hindu and Christian Malayalees are shifting to English too (p. 121). In Malaysia, English has always been the dominant language in urban areas. As such, the shifting to English is most prevalent among urban residents. In the context of this book, this pattern of language shift is exemplified by the children of urban Indian-Bidayuh who have adopted English as their first language in sharp contrast to their rural counterparts who have adopted Bidayuh as their first language. The reason underpinning this shift is that they regard English as a language of prestige which has greater economic value than Malay or Bidayuh (p. 105). The shift to English among the Portuguese Eurasians is most pervasive in the sense "they have cut the umbilical cord with their ethnic language (i.e., Kristang) even before they knew the language" (p. 99). The Malaysian Filipinos surveyed by this book have also adopted English as their dominant language. For this minority community, the shift to English would allow them "to interact with other people outside their homes, particularly in the community they live in" (p. 81). It appears that the ability of English to cut across ethnic boundaries has influenced their language choice, though the instrumental value of English could be the underlying factor.

The case study on the Chinese in Sarawak is particularly worthy of note within the context of increasing shift to English among other minority communities surveyed by this book. In contrast to these minority communities, the different Chinese dialect groups (the Foochow, Hakka and Hokkien) in Sarawak are not shifting to English, especially within the family domain. Instead they are shifting to Mandarin at the expense of their Chinese dialects (pp. 152-154). Even in the transactional domain, Mandarin has entrenched itself as the language of wider communication for the Chinese in Sarawak (p. 156). In fact, this is not peculiar to the case of the Chinese in Sarawak. There is a general shift to Mandarin as the home language as well as the language of wider communication in Malaysia following the



strong support for Chinese education, especially at the primary level. This support began in the 1970s in response to the conversion of English-medium primary schools to Malay-medium primary schools (Loh 1984). In 2003, about 80-90 per cent of Chinese parents in Malaysia enrolled their children in Chinese primary schools (Yong 2003). While the shift to Mandarin has affected Chinese linguistic diversity as far as the different variants of dialects are concerned, the Chinese community in Malaysia has never been keen to promote the use of these dialects as they are seen as a stumbling block to Chinese linguistic unity. The Chinese primary schools in particular are strongly against the use of dialects within the school compounds. They pursue the policy of speaking more Mandarin and less dialects among their students.

Language use involving code-mixing and code-switching is another important finding of this book. This is largely the result of language contact in multilingual societies. In the context of this book, the use of code-mixing and code-switching is most evident among minority communities engaged in exogamous or mixed marriages. In the case of the Malaysian-Filipino couples whose dominant language is English, there is a rampant use of mixed codes involving other languages depending on the ethnicity of the Filipino spouses (Chinese, Indian and Malays). Thus, to this community, "English serves as the matrix language while Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese dialects, Tamil and the Filipino languages function as the embedded languages" (p. 86). This pattern of language use is deemed necessary as a form of accommodation. The Tamils in Kuching who inter-marry with the Malays and Dayaks have also resorted to code-switching "to accommodate the comfort zone of their interlocutors" (p. 55). In the case of the children of rural Indian-Bidayuhs, code-switching is also a common practice. They use Bidayuh with their parents but code-switch using more Bidayuh and less English and Malay with their siblings and father. In the case of the children of urban Indian-Bidayuhs, it is a different pattern of code-switching. They use more English than Bidayuh and Malay with their parents and siblings (p. 104). Code-mixing and code-switching could also appear in other situations. For instance, in the case of the Sindhi textile merchant family in Kuching surveyed by this book, the use of mixed codes arises from the need to conduct business with people from different speech groups. The younger generation of Tamils in Sarawak has also adopted mixed codes in their language of communication. Consequently, their language of communication is no longer standalone Tamil but a mixture with other linguistic codes that are their verbal repertoire (p. 55). While code-mixing and code-switching are inevitable in certain

situations, they are, in fact, a threat to the maintenance of minority languages as noted by Colin Baker (2010): "If code-switching is very prevalent in a language group, it is sometimes regarded as a sign that the minority language is about to disappear" (p. 109).

Another interesting finding of this book is the negotiating of identity that has influenced language use. This is evident among the Iyer Tamils who are increasingly shifting to English at the expense of Tamil. Within this shift, there is, nonetheless, awareness among some Iyer Tamils to speak more Tamil during inter-community interaction than during intra-community interaction (with Iyers) (p. 38). As far as language as an identity marker is concerned, the Iyer Tamils, as a sub-group of the Indians, are negotiating a dual identity: the larger Malaysian Indian identity and the more inclusive Iyer Tamil identity. This negotiating of identity leads to the construction of situational identity involving the readjustment of ethnic boundaries in response to different socio-cultural contexts. In this regard, identity is never a fixed entity for it is subjectively always in a dynamic state, being constantly influenced by the individuals' experience of social interactions as well as other societal forces (Tan 1988). The need to negotiate a dual identity has also confronted the Indian-Bidayuhs of Sarawak. They have to negotiate their identity when they are mixing with the Indians and Bidayuhs (p. 110). The dilemma is that officially, they are classified as Indians but personally, they prefer to be identified as Bidayuhs who are the majority group in Sarawak. This is clearly exemplified by their preference for the Bidayuh language as a transmitter of their culture.

The comparative status and prestige of language has often influenced the eventual direction of language shift among minority communities. The shifting to a higher status and more prestigious language is generally the rule than the exception. This has been clearly manifested by the Kuching Tamil woman who shifted to Sindhi after marrying a Sindhi textile merchant as she felt that Tamil is inferior to Sindhi (p. 64). The lack of status of the Malayalee language, the Malayalam, is also the reason for shifting to other languages (p. 121). The urban Indian-Bidayuhs of Sarawak have shifted to English instead of Malay or Bidayuh because of the prestigious status of the language. In fact, the shifting to English among other minority communities surveyed by this book could also be attributed to the same reason. The demarcation of languages according to their status and prestige (high and low) is a critical issue in sociolinguistics involving the concept of diglossia (see Spolsky 1998). Unfortunately, none of the authors in this book has associated language shift with this important theme.



An important reason for language shift is the lack of institutional support for the minority languages. This has been mentioned in the case of the Malayalam language (p. 121). It is true that minority languages are often deprived of the much needed institutional support given that language and educational policies in multilingual societies tend to promote monolingualism based on the majority language rather than linguistic pluralism. Even if linguistic pluralism is promoted, it is always the stronger languages that are given the emphasis instead of the smaller languages of the minority communities. The onus often rests on the minority communities to propagate their languages and cultures and this is certainly a formidable task. There are also cases whereby threatened languages have been revived through community efforts. Sally Tomlinson (1987) cited numerous examples of community efforts in setting up schools or classes that would help to maintain cultural identity and language.

It is inevitable that language shift among minority communities will bring about language loss or language death if there are no concerted efforts to promote bilingualism or multilingualism. It is within this context that the maintenance of the minority languages has become a matter of great concern to proponents of linguistic pluralism. Perhaps, the role of the women is instrumental here as indicated by the Bengali women surveyed by this book who have acted as keepers of the heritage language and culture. It is at the family level where the maintenance of the minority languages is most crucial. The Bengali women who play the role as keepers of heritage language and culture are a strong case in point. The role of women in this area has generally been acknowledged by scholars [see Holmes (2008) and Ball (2010) on the role of women (mothers) to provide their children with socio-indexical input relevant for their community].

Surprisingly, to some minority communities, language shift does not necessarily herald an identity crisis. This is most evident in the case of the Iyer Tamils surveyed by this book. While it is true that other identity markers such as dress, food, rites and rituals could help to bolster ethnic identity, language shift certainly has a huge impact on identity maintenance, more so for language-centred culture. Jerzy Smolicz (1999) maintains that for language-centred culture, the loss of the native tongue usually heralds a cultural shift to the periphery. More importantly, language is a tangible and immediately noticeable indicator of group identity (Hoffman 1991). Equally important is the fact that identity is not only a matter of self-ascription but also a matter of ascription by others (Barth 1969). Thus, while the Iyer Tamils may perceive that their ethnic identity is intact despite language shift,



out-group members may perceive otherwise. It is clear that there could be different perceptions on the actual ethnic boundary of the Iyer Tamils as far as the role of language is concerned.

In the final analysis, minority communities world-wide are concerned with the maintenance of their cultural identity in plural societies, and language plays a crucial role. The patterns of language use and language shift are important indices of ongoing societal changes and community attitudes. Since language shift is rarely across the board but rather unevenly distributed in different social settings (Fishman 1991), the chapters in this book have quite effectively dealt with the data drawn from a variety of sources, especially the family. Inevitably, language use and language shift among minority communities are increasingly influenced by instrumental or utilitarian reasons. It is easy to prescribe "fixes" that cannot really be undertaken given the lack of commitment of governments, the small numbers, the communities' own lack of will, and the demographic spread of the minority communities. The answer may well lie in what Joshua Fishman (2001: 459) calls the "Gemeinschaft", i.e., the intimate community whose members are related to one another via bonds of kinship, affection and communality of interest and purpose, as the real secret weapon of reversing language shift.

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