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MALAYSIA'S NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY IN INTERNATIONAL THEORETICAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the motivations behind Malaysia's national language policy in theoretical terms to allow the Malaysian narrative to be positioned in an international context. To do this, it applies Spolsky's (2004) theory of what influences language policy making in contemporary nation-states, namely national ideology, the role of English in globalisation era, the nation's sociolinguistic situation, and an interest in linguistic minority rights. The paper argues that all factors are relevant in the Malaysian context. However, the domestic sociolinguistic situation only influences policy in so far as Malaysia's response to its ethnolinguistic minorities is limited to minimal linguistic rights in the education system. This limited acceptance of linguistic diversity continues a tradition of protecting what Malaysian law sees as the supremacy of Malay culture and language. The paper concludes with an invitation to apply this theory in the study of other nations in the region to foster a robust body of comparative data on national language policies in Southeast Asia.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Nation-building processes call on governments and its populations to both define the linguistic character of their nation-states and to manage ethnolinguistic diversity, and for Malaysia this remains a central policy concern. Malaysia would, under current sociolinguistic thinking, be termed *superdiverse* (Blommaert & Rampton, 2012) in that the convergence of ethnicities, languages, and religions on the Malaysia peninsula and in the states of Sarawak and Sabah on the Borneo Island have rendered Malaysia a complex melange of ethnolinguistic traditions and interests. The Malay form only a narrow majority against the country's ethnic Chinese and Indian communities, and their majority status is not evenly distributed across Malaysia. Furthermore, contemporary Malaysian citizenship has generally not resulted in minorities shifting from their heritage languages to Bahasa Melayu as the majority language and language of administration because ethnic belonging remains central to self-identification in Malaysia (Frith, 2000). Instead, Malaysia is ethnolinguistically dynamic, with its many communities holding to their traditions, cultures and languages. In complicating this picture, British colonialism cemented a role for the English language. However, beyond being an

uncomfortable reminder of imperialism, English is also primarily the language of Malaysia's open, thriving, and highly internationalised economy. This superdiversity, while attractive in concept, has also been viewed as problematic since Malaysia attained independence from the British Empire in 1957 and embarked on an ambitious project to define Malaysia and propose effective language policy that would unite the polity.

Language policy and planning in Malaysia has attracted scholarly interest to trace the Malaysian socio-political environment vis-à-vis linguistic diversity and to account for language policies that have been implemented to regulate diversity. Important overviews of the language policy timeline have been provided by the works of David & Govindasamy (2005), Gill (2013), Mauzy (1985), and Noor & Leong (2013) among others. These have shown Malaysia fervently instituting Bahasa Melayu, the language of the Malay Muslim majority, as the national language for all Malaysians, including the Chinese, Indian, and indigenous minorities. They have also examined Malaysia's vexed relationship with the English language including how Malaysia has continued to reposition its role in the Malaysian education system, as well as debates about the desirability of English as a *lingua franca* instead of, or parallel to, Bahasa Melayu. This means that important scholarship has already traversed Malaysia's political history on language. This paper, however, seeks to contextualise Malaysian language policy by examining it in theoretical terms. To do this, the paper reviews Malaysia's language policy in respect to what Spolsky (2004), as modified by Albury (2015), sees as the four drivers behind the language policies instituted by contemporary nation states. Under this theory, government language policy today is informed, to some interrelated degree, by national ideology and identity, the prominence of English as the language of globalisation, the domestic sociolinguistic situation of the country, and an increasing pressure from the international arena to offer language rights to ethnolinguistic minorities and promote linguistic diversity. This paper analyses to what extent and how these factors have motivated the Malaysian government's language policies since the country's independence in 1957.

This means the analysis allows official Malaysian language policy to be understood in theoretical terms comparable to those used to examine the motivations and forces behind government language policy in other international studies. Spolsky (2004) himself has offered a high-level application of his own theory while discussing its relevance and called for it to be tested further. Albury (2015) accepted this invitation and tested the theory for its adequacy in accounting for the forces behind protectionist language policy in Iceland. In other work, Wright (2003) has discussed nationalism, nation-building, and globalisation as influences that drive the government language policies. May (2011) discusses ethnicity and nationalism in language policy, and earlier work from Fishman (1971) theorised the role of national legacies and traditions in newly formed nation-states. Thus, this paper serves on one hand to offer Malaysia as a case study for exploring and applying Spolsky's national language policy theory where it has not yet been tested. On the other hand, the findings of the paper allow the Malaysian language policy narrative to be framed in established theoretical terms so that the analysis can contribute to the body of theoretical work on why nation-states institute their language policies, by default offering the Malaysian context as a reference for comparative studies and theorists.

2.0 A THEORY OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY

The postmodern turn in language policy scholarship has broadened the scope of language policy inquiry to include governmentality and language regulation as it occurs outside the corridors of political power (Pennycook, 2006). That is to say, scholarship agrees that language policy agents are now vast and many as language policy is interpreted, created, and implemented across the many layers of society by many social actors. Therefore, Hornberger

and Johnson (2007) have conceptualised language policy as a multi-layered onion where the various layers of the onion represent various levels in society from government to the individual who are dynamically interconnected in language policy processes and engage in language policy as policy implementers and makers. Other work has specifically emphasised ethnography as a tool from linguistic anthropology to investigate localised language policy situations as they manifest through social relations, such as those in classrooms or businesses where language or linguistic diversity is in some way, managed explicitly and implicitly (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Canagarajah, 2006; Johnson, 2009). The expanding field of family language policy focuses on how linguistic diversity is fostered, hindered, or otherwise managed in domiciles with the view that families are crucial agents in determining ethnolinguistic vitality, especially amongst minority groups. The notion here is that families strategise how to manage language in multilingual homes.

These postmodern perspectives adhere to progressive definitions of what counts as language policy. They accept, for example, that language policy need not solely be official documents or rules created by an authority. Instead, language policy may be implicit *modus operandi* or unspoken rules that are culturally determined and socially applicable but operate like *de facto* policy. As Schiffman (2006) explains, each language policy situation is unique and is born out of its community's own *linguistic culture* whereby language policy may reside in the norms and practices that simply are *the ways things are* for a certain community based on local preferences, ontology and epistemology. By giving agency to many actors across society, language policy scholarship therefore accepts that language attitudes and ideologies play a crucial role in language policy processes (Cameron, 2006; Spolsky, 2004). Parents, teachers, sporting groups, religious groups and governments bring convictions and dispositions about language to their language policy activities in order to advance a particular language outcome. For example, some languages may be valued more than others in local contexts, and policy makers respond to such beliefs. This is however, often cyclical as policy making (where languages are valued or stratified) creates or sustains linguistic hierarchies, marginalisation, and prestige.

Amidst this theorising of what counts as language policy and who does it, the role of government as a pertinent policy maker now appears to be often overlooked. As Albury (2015: 4) has argued, because scholarship considers that "the real language policy situation of a community is realised via the multitude of actors, contexts, processes, interpretations, negations and contestations," a focus on national language policy theory to the exclusion of grassroots policy processes "is not without challenges." However, this does not remove the impetus to examine government policies. Governments, equipped with both ideologies and budgets, determine, potentially through non-democratic and less than transparent processes, what language rights linguistic minorities will enjoy and in what form. They decide what language citizens will use with their public authorities. They determine what language school curricula may be taught in, and they decide what languages may be taught as a second language. They can even manage a language's corpus and standardise it, or impose language tests on young children to ensure their populace is proficient in a society's dominant language as has been the case in Denmark. The power of governments to establish core ideological, legislative, and policy frameworks within which societies must operate should not be overlooked. While grassroots language policy research is no doubt valid and important, this nonetheless occurs within defined jurisdictions. Language policy processes across society must be seen in dynamic relationship including in relation to national language policies. This means that examining and theorising national language policy remains important scholarship.

To this end, Spolsky (2004) has theorised what he sees to be the four key influences that determine the language policies of governments in modern nation-states. He claims that these influences are:

- *National identity or national ideology*. This refers to the beliefs and ideologies of a nation that form its collective identity whereby the corresponding languages of those identities are being promoted through language policy. This may include a cultural or religious identity which is a reminiscent of Fishman's (1971) discussion on *great traditions*. An example would be that when northern African nations obtained independence from France, they referred to their Islamic identities and the tradition of the Qur'an to institute Arabic instead of French as the official language in their postcolonial nation-building process.

- *English as the language of globalisation*. Proficiency in English has, in most parts of the world, become synonymous with economic development in today's internationalised economy. As a result, nation-states respond to English with policy as embracing English can create international advantages. Thus, measures such as developing English language proficiency in the community in the interest of economic development and international connectivity have been taken by many nation-states. However, governments may see the rise of English as threatening local identities and may seek to thwart the advancement of English into domestic sociolinguistic domains by protecting and promoting the status of local languages. This is, what May (2014) describes, a tension between the Global and the Local. For example, China embraces English language acquisition by stripping of its American or British cultural or ideological context for instrumental purposes (Pan & Block, 2011) while New Zealand invests heavily in protecting and reviving the Māori language after colonisation in the interests of Indigenous identity and culture in a context where English is both one of its national languages and also the global lingua franca (Albury, 2016).

- *The domestic sociolinguistic situation*. This refers to what languages are spoken within the nation-state's borders. That is to say, policies acknowledge linguistic diversity and respond to this either by promoting, tolerating or suppressing it. An example would be post-Apartheid South Africa where its plethora of local Indigenous languages have been made co-official by law which affords them, in theory, equal status with Afrikaans and English (Kamwangamalu, 2000). Indonesia, on the other hand, recognises its massive ethnolinguistic diversity but has codified Bahasa Indonesia as the unifying language in its nation-building process (Dardjowidjojo, 1998).

- *An interest in affording minority language rights*. This refers to an increasing pressure on and interest among nation-states to recognise their linguistic minorities and grant them linguistic rights. Spolsky (2004) argues that the global civil rights movement inspired by American politics and aided by human rights instruments introduced in the 20th century have led governments to address the minoritisation of ethnolinguistic groups. Rights may be given, for example, through heritage language-medium education or enhanced provisions to use a minority language in public office. For example, Norway now allows its Indigenous Sámi population some language rights including the right to undertake education through a Sámi language and to use Sámi in official business in selected council areas in the Sámi homeland (Bull, 2002).

In testing Spolsky's (2004) theory, Albury (2015) found that language rights have influenced language policy making in Iceland, but not as Spolsky envisaged. Instead, Iceland's interests in language rights are self-reflexive and position Icelandic, the majority language as a minority requiring protection in the global language ecology, rather than offering, for example, language rights to its sizeable Polish population. Accordingly, Albury (2015) argued that Spolsky's theory does not account for non-rights-based approaches to managing language

diversity (Réaume & Pinto, 2012: 14). He therefore proposes that instead of this component viewing nations as necessarily adopting positive stances on minority rights, it should instead be seen as a political domain which nations are increasingly required to engage in some way whether the results are permissive or restrictive for the minorities concerned. This amended theory now forms the basis for analysing what appears to have driven the Malaysian government's national language policy.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

For the context of this paper, language policy is defined as *language management* as it amounts to "explicit and observable efforts by someone or some group that has or claims to have authority over the participants in the domain to modify their practices and beliefs" (Spolsky, 2007: 4). Policy therefore includes laws, regulations, and official programmes. To analyse Malaysia's language policy vis-à-vis Spolsky's amended theory, a critical desk-top review of existing literature was undertaken. This includes both primary and secondary sources on Malaysia's language policy as well as literature from prominent scholars on Malaysia's language policy, sociolinguistics and multiculturalism (see David & Govindasamy, 2005; Frith, 2000; Ghazali, 2014; Gill, 2005, 2006, 2013; Gill, 2004; Mauzy, 1985; Noor & Leong, 2013; Saat, 2012).

4.0 NATIONAL IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY

When Malaysia gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1957, a key task in language policy was to define Malaysia in linguistic terms as part of the postcolonial nation-building process. The task was significant because at an intersection of Asian traditions, Malaysia (including the states of Sarawak and Sabah on Borneo Island) is ethnolinguistically and culturally diverse. The Malays, who are Muslim and speak Bahasa Melayu and its dialects, form a small majority. The waves of migration from China and India have established Taoist, Buddhist, and Hindu diasporas speaking a range of Chinese and Indian languages, including Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Foochow, Teochew, and Mandarin as their lingua franca, as well as Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Hindi, and Punjabi. In Sarawak and Sabah, the largely Christian and Indigenous majority retain a plethora of local heritage languages including Bidayuh, Iban, and Dusun-Kadazan. Today, the nation roughly comprises of 67% Malay and other *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil including Indigenous people in Borneo), 25% Chinese, and 6.8% Indian (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015).

In Malaysia, it is only the identity and national ideology of the Malay majority that have come to influence national language policy. The languages and cultures of the Chinese, Indian and Indigenous people are broadly excluded from the country's policy documents. It is important to note from the outset that this differs significantly to the policy arrangements in Singaporean which hosts a similar ethnic mix and was once part of the Malaysia Federation. Singapore nation-building was premised on egalitarian multiculturalism and no single language from any ethnic group was codified as the nation's official language, leading to the introduction of English as an inclusive and ideologically neutral lingua franca (Noor & Leong, 2013). In Malaysia, Articles 3 and 152 of the Federal Constitution define Malaysia as Islamic whereby national linguistic unity will be achieved with Bahasa Melayu as the official language for government and public office (*Government of Malaysia*, 1957). On one hand, this would give an advantage to the Malay majority who possess lower proficiency in English as compared to the Chinese and Indian minorities. Thus, balancing language policy in favour of the Malays would rectify inequalities (David & Govindasamy, 2005).

However, a more critical perspective shows that stronger ideological forces are at play. Malay ethnic identity, of which Bahasa Melayu is the corresponding language, is so intimately connected to or even synonymous with being Muslim that ethnic identity is commonly inseparable from religious identity (Frith, 2000). This means that being Malay and by default Malay-speaking is being Muslim. As Malaysia has codified the religion of the Malays as the official religion of the country, a logical consequence has been to codify Bahasa Melayu as well as the corresponding official language. This also explains why Jawi (Bahasa Melayu written by using Arabic script), which was the norm before European colonisation, is still taught in Malaysian government schools in order to ensure access to at least reciting the Qur'an in its original form even if reading comprehension in Arabic is limited. Fenton (2003) explains that making Islam the state religion serves to appease the socio-psychological interests of the Malay in a context of superdiversity. However, Islam is seemingly heralded as the superior natural state for humanity, given Malays are deemed by law to be Muslim by birth and apostasy is either illegal or impossible (Adil, 2007). Although freedom of religion is provided in the constitution alongside Islam as the state religion, Fenton (2003) argues that Islam nonetheless enjoys primacy in public life because it is the tradition of the Malays. The primacy of Islam seems to currently be resurging with a renewed wave of Islamisation in Malay-dominant politics. For example, the Malaysian government recently introduced the *Malaysian Syariah Index Report* to measure the compliance of Malaysia's policies and laws with Islamic standards (Rahim, 2016) and Islam is commonly used in political speeches to justify national policy (Ghazali, 2014). Debates continue as to whether Malaysia is a *de jure* or *de facto* Islamic state (Fernando, 2006; Martinez, 2004) and even non-Islamic schools are forbidden from teaching human evolution as this is deemed contrary to Islamic principles (Joseph, 2005). By heralding Islam as the founding moral structure of the contemporary Malaysian state where the language of the local Malay directly corresponds to that religion, Bahasa Melayu was accelerated to the top of the linguistic hierarchy to define and unite contemporary Malaysians of all ethnolinguistic groups.

However, it is also the Malay identity as *Bumiputera* that justifies codifying of Bahasa Melayu. The Malaysian' response to managing its ethnolinguistic diversity has been to stratify Malaysians as native or as migrants, even in the case of the well-established Chinese and Indian diasporas. The Federal Constitution secures the Malays' special rights and privileges on the basis that Malays are indigenous to Malaysia, and this has amounted to socioeconomic benefits in tax, employment, and education (David & Govindasamy, 2005; Noor & Leong, 2013). While the non-Malays were granted Malaysian citizenship when the state was formed, Malaysian political discourse continues to position the Chinese and Indians as *pendatang* (immigrants) and therefore less deserving of the socioeconomic privileges enjoyed by the Malays (Frith, 2000; Yu, 2015). This conviction is so strong that Article 10 of the constitution regards calling citizenship, the status of Bahasa Melayu, and *Bumiputera* privileges into question as disrupting societal harmony. This societal harmony including the status of Bahasa Melayu is overtly oriented towards Malay interests. Therefore, it appears that Malay national ideology as it amounts to Islam and the Malays as *Bumiputera* (as opposed to Malaysian citizenship) has justified codifying Bahasa Melayu as the country's only official language despite the fact that Malays only form a small majority in the contemporary Malaysian population. As Rappa and Wee (2006: 5) summarise, "this Malaysian narrative, unlike the Singapore one, explicitly privileges the ethnic Malays and pedestalizes the Malay language."

5.0 THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN GLOBALISATION ERA

English has been a core influence behind postcolonial language policy in Malaysia. Upon attaining independence, English was the lingua franca in Malaysia. Instituting Bahasa Melayu as the sole national language as discussed above served not only to define contemporary Malaysia in Malay terms, but also to shed its British colonial legacy. English as the language of that legacy is a reminder of foreign occupation. Britain had successfully instituted a divide and rule policy in Malaysia whereby the Malays, Indians and Chinese were generally separated geographically and in labour (Gill, 2013; Noor & Leong, 2013). Nation-building would mean removing English as the domestic lingua franca, and developing the Bahasa Melayu corpus so that Bahasa Melayu can fill in the role English had occupied in administration and science. However, as English has become the language of globalisation and Malaysia's economy has highly internationalised, the policy relationship with English has become vexed. Existing literature has already traversed Malaysia's complex policy treatment of English in detail. This especially includes Gill's contributions (2005, 2006, 2013) and Gill *et al* (2004) as well as contributions from others (Ali, Hamid, & Moni, 2011; Haque, 2003; Joseph, 2005; Mauzy, 1985; Noor & Leong, 2013; Rappa & Wee, 2006). However, only pertinent themes are provided here.

From May's (2004) perspective, English creates a tension in Malaysia between the Global and the Local. In other words, Malaysia's policy seeks to develop and commodify English language proficiency in accommodating Malaysia's participation in the international marketplace while balancing a local interest to preserve Malay ethnolinguistic identity and avoid English from derailing investments in Bahasa Melayu corpus planning. As Gill (2013: 3) explains, "the anxiety is that of globalisation and the hegemony of English and its impact on their cultural and linguistic identity" but, by the same token in countries such as Malaysia, English is "crucial for developing nations in this age of globalisation where there is a pull toward English as a much sought after commodity, at national, subnational and supranational levels" (p. 3). The Malaysian situation is unique in that calls are being made not just to protect the status of Bahasa Melayu, but to expand it and develop Bahasa Melayu into an international lingua franca to indeed rival the status of English.

These tensions are visible in current political debate. The semi-autonomous state of Sarawak in East Malaysia under the rule of Chief Minister Tan Sri Adenan Satem declared English to be co-official with Bahasa Melayu in November 2015. Ministers in the Sarawak government explained that "we must be fluent not only in BM [Bahasa Melayu], but also in English" and that "English is not just the language of the Western people but is used all over the world" (*Borneo Post Online*, 2015). In response, the Chief Minister has been described as unpatriotic. Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak has reiterated that Bahasa Melayu will be defended as the language of Malaysia as it is the language of the Malay race (*Malay Mail Online*, 2016b). Beyond defending the Local (in ethnocratic terms reminiscent of earlier discussion in this paper), the Prime Minister then proceeded to propose a language policy whereby Bahasa Melayu will obtain a comparable international status to English. He argued that "we should make full use of all the room and opportunities available to jointly expand Bahasa Melayu to non-native speakers," so that Malaysia can "internationalise Bahasa Melayu as a world language," and also explained that "the government had established a number of Chairs in Malay Studies in universities abroad as a collaborative effort to study other approaches to expand the use of Bahasa Melayu in foreign countries" (*Malay Mail Online*, 2016b). This is perceivably a response to the rise of English in Malaysia and at the same time, it may also be relevant to the first of Spolsky's factors i.e. national identity and ideology in so

far as Bahasa Melayu was once an important lingua franca for trade in the region (with its immediate neighbours) prior to and during the Dutch-colonial rule from 1641 (Ostler, 2005).

However, the tension with English is most pronounced in respect to planning the Malaysian school curriculum. At the outset of independence, Malaysia had phased out its English-medium schools and all education would be delivered in Bahasa Melayu as the instated national language. Since that time, successive governments have required and then banned the teaching of mathematics and science in English at schools and at universities (Gill, 2005; Gill *et al*., 2004). During an era of eager nationalism to define Malaysia's society in law in Malay terms, the move to English in 2001 reflected challenges being faced in Bahasa Melayu corpus planning. English had become well-established as the language of science and technology whereas Bahasa Melayu would require corpus planning investment to expand its vocabulary in these domains in order for the language to be used as a medium of instruction in mathematics and science. Above all, however, the shift reflected Malaysia's recognition that English is the global language of science and technology. In 2012, the policy was then reversed, with the government claiming that mathematics and science through English "was not carried out as desired. Studies also disclosed that pupils found it difficult to learn mathematics and science in English as they were not proficient in the English Language" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). However, it also seems likely that the move did not please Malay nationalists. As the New York times reported in Malaysian politics, "they decided to buckle under the pressure from the Malay nationalists who argue that by teaching students in English you are neglecting the position of the national language" (Gooche, 2009). Since that reversal in policy, subsequent concerns have been raised regarding English language proficiency and about the international competitiveness of Malaysians which suffer as a result of monolingual education (Ting & Mahadhir, 2011) and this has now prompted a softening of the policy. Now the government is also considering an amendment to the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (secondary education certificate) to require all Malaysian students to not only mandatorily pass a Bahasa Melayu and history exam, but also English (*Malay Mail Online*, 2016a). The Malaysian government seems to see itself between a rock and a hard place linguistically as it operates a staunchly Malay-oriented nation-building agenda which affords primacy to Bahasa Melayu while operating nonetheless a highly internationalised economy which demands effective English language proficiency amongst Malaysians. The tension between these two interests would explain oscillations in Malaysian language policy on English.

6.0 THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION AND AN INTEREST IN MINORITY LANGUAGE RIGHTS

The paper now addresses the remaining two factors in Spolsky's theory collectively because the two are highly interconnected in the Malaysian context. In particular, the Malaysian government's recognition of linguistic diversity within the nation-state's borders has specifically been to afford some, albeit limited, language rights to the Chinese and Indian minorities. This contrasts, for example, to policy responses that would position the Chinese or Indian languages as part of the national ideological fabric or officialise their languages.

In the first instance, ethnolinguistic diversity has indeed informed government policy in respect to a broader nation-building agenda which means Malaysia's linguistic diversity has been central to language policy deliberations. In particular, successive governments have attempted to unite Malaysia's ethnolinguistically diverse communities with ideological proposals such as *Bangsa Malaysia* and *1Malaysia. Bangsa Malaysia* or Malaysian Race was proposed by the former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammad in the 1990s. It encouraged Malaysians to rely less on their essentialised ethnic categories for self-identification and instead

see themselves as Malaysians (Ridge, 2004). The policy appeared to have little success, and was superseded by Prime Minister Najib Razak's *1Malaysia*. This accepted that Malaysians do and can identify through their own ethnic, linguistic, religious and other cultural qualities, but *1Malaysia* would foster harmony among ethnicities by promoting unity, harmony, and government welfare assistance on the basis of socioeconomic need rather than by priorisiting the needs of the *Bumiputera* on the basis of their race (Chin, 2010). Amidst significant political and financial investment in these multicultural projects, language policy remained ethnocratic. Bahasa Melayu remained the language of the *Bangsa Malaysia*. It is still the only official language of united Malaysians under *1Malaysia* but the government has recoined the language's name to *Bahasa Malaysia* (Gill, 2013) so that it would connote national inclusiveness while still heralding the language of the Malays. Mandarin and Tamil as the lingua francas of Malaysia's two largest ethnolinguistic minorities are not given any official or national status. The same applies to other non-Malay *Bumiputera* languages, such as Iban, Bidayuh and Dusun-Kadazan. As such, Bahasa Melayu remains the language of official government business and for public communications in recognition of Malaysia's diversity.

Malaysia operates a limited tolerance-oriented rights approach to linguistic diversity (Kymlicka & Patten, 2003). While advancements are currently being made vis-à-vis the rights of Indigenous language speakers (UNICEF, 2016), the Chinese and Indian communities enjoy restricted language rights through the education system. Having acquired independence in a school system whereby Indian students commonly attended Tamil-medium schools and Chinese students commonly attended Mandarin-medium schools, government policy now funds non-Bahasa Melayu public schools but only at the primary school level. Secondary education through the public system is only available through Bahasa Melayu except for the policy changes vis-à-vis English discussed above. Secondary schooling through a community language is available only privately and currently restricted to Mandarin schools funded by the Malaysian Chinese community. The government however, does not recognise graduates from Mandarin-medium secondary schools and they therefore do not qualify for entry to Malaysian public universities.

As in the case of Iceland when Spolsky's theory was applied and tested (Albury, 2015), Malaysian policy sooner seeks to protect the rights of Bahasa Melayu speakers as they form the population's majority instead of addressing the linguistic interests of minority communities. This paper's discussions about the role of national identity and ideology in informing language policy explained that the Malaysian constitution codifies Malay cultural values, including Bahasa Melayu, as the defining characters of contemporary Malaysia to ensure and uphold the rights and privileges of *Bumiputera* as the first peoples of now superdiverse Malaysia. In other words, constitutional law has already determined that being Malay and speaking Bahasa Melayu will qualify for more rights than being non-Malay and speaking non-Malay languages as to ensure the *Bumiputera* status is protected.

7.0 CONCLUSION

By drawing on existing scholarship as well as on political discourses and policy documents, this paper has framed Malaysia's national language policy in international theoretical terms. This is not to generalise the Malaysia's policy situation. Without doubt, the situation is uniquely Malaysian and the language policies of Malaysia's successive governments since independence have juggled competing and locally nuanced ethnolinguistic, political, nation-building and economic interests and demands. Nonetheless, this paper has presented Malaysia's language policy narrative through Spolsky's (2004) theory of national language

policies operated by contemporary nation-states, and in doing so it tested how applicable Spolsky's theory is to explain the Malaysian situation.

It indeed appears that Spolsky's theory captures the core motivations that have driven Malaysia's language policy. In the Malaysian context where ethnolinguistic diversity and national building have been core policy priorities, national ideology and identity as well as the international role of English have been central concerns in language policy development. As this paper has argued, constitutional provisions herald and protect Malay culture and religion on the basis these are Indigenous and should therefore define contemporary Malaysia vis-à-vis its own domestic diversity. This means the sociolinguistic situation and language rights have concerned the Malaysian government but are being addressed through Malay-oriented ethnocratic policy. Accordingly, it is specifically Malay national ideology and identity, and not those of the sizeable Chinese, Indian, and non-Malay Indigenous minorities, that have influenced the Malaysian law which codifies only Bahasa Melayu as the defining language of Malaysia. The international prominence and local economic importance of English have created friction in national language policy. As an international market, Malaysia on one hand embraces the opportunities it sees as inherent to English language proficiency as evidenced by the strong position of English in the Malaysian school curriculum. On the other hand, English is perceived as challenging the status of Bahasa Melayu both in terms of the local linguistic identity it maintains as well as Malaysia's policy goal to develop Bahasa Melayu into an international lingua franca. Accordingly, little space has been left in policy to address ethnolinguistic diversity more holistically. While the state recognises the significant linguistic and cultural diversity Malaysia is home to, its approach has been to propose linguistic unity through Bahasa Melayu. Language rights are mostly restricted to the government-funded Mandarin and Tamil-medium primary schools with the expectation that students will transition onto monolingual Bahasa Melayu education at the secondary level.

Above all, the paper has served to position Malaysia's national language policy in theoretical terms familiar to existing international scholarship. This is not to disregard the important postmodern turn in applied linguistics that promotes grassroots language policy research with its reconceptualisation of who does language policy and where. Instead, this paper has argued that national language policies as they are created and implemented by governments remain pertinent fields of inquiry as they are responsible for determining a nation's overall legislative and political framework in regulating ethnolinguistic diversity and can therefore facilitate, impede, value, and devalue some languages and not others. Most importantly, this is not to disregard but rather to make fruitful use of the important contributions already made by scholars in the field of Malaysia's language policy, sociolinguistics, and multiculturalism more broadly. This paper's focus on language policy motivations rather than political history does however; invite for the case of Malaysia to be compared internationally on what drives governments to create their language policies. Having completed the current analysis, it is now possible to see in a comparative perspective that Malaysia appears more motivated to afford language rights and is more cognisant of its own sociolinguistic diversity than for instance, Iceland is in either regard. It also shows that Iceland and Malaysia share a similar vexed relationship with English as both are concerned with the relative status of their national languages and that both nations have turned strongly to what they see as their great traditions i.e. medieval literature known as *the Sagas* in the case of Iceland to inspire purist and protectionist language policy and Islam and being *Bumiputera* in the case of Malaysia to officialise only Bahasa Melayu as the national language.

This paper invites further application and testing of this important theory on what motivations lie behind national language policies especially in the dynamic language contexts of Southeast Asia. For example how and why did national identity and the nation-building process in Indonesia lead to instituting Bahasa Indonesia as the nation's lingua franca and how does this compare to other Southeast Asian nations? How does postcolonial Indochina respond to English in the wake of French imperialism and prestige? As Myanmar progresses on its path to democracy, what role will transpire for the nation's many languages? Such research will allow for critical and more nuanced analyses of national language policies in Southeast Asia and foster a body of work whereby the national Malaysian policy narrative as traced at a high level through this paper can be positioned in comparative context.

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