

Chapter 2

Language, Nation-Building and Identity Formation in a Multi-Ethnic Society

Abstract This chapter defines the terms nation, nationality and nationalism particularly in the context of a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic developing country such as Malaysia. It examines ethnic linguistic identities vis-à-vis nation building and nationalism and whether such identities create pluralism or divisiveness. It then looks at supranational identity and the role of English, the language of globalisation. Hence, three variations of identity in the context of Malaysian society are examined—the ethnic, the national, & the supranational, and their relationship to identity formation in Malaysia.

Keywords Ethnic · National—and supranational identity · Identity formation · Nation building · Multi-lingual Malaysia · Multi-ethnic Malaysia

In Southeast Asia, the immediate post-war years (1945–1948) were a time of change. The Philippines and Burma (Myanmar), along with India, Pakistan and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) parted from the rule of colonial powers. Between 1949–1959, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, British Borneo and Malaya attained independence while Singapore acquired internal self-government. According to Nicholas Tarling, “The Southeast Asian experience towards nationalism indeed became something of an example for other parts of the ‘developing’ world in the decades following World War II.” (2004, p. 141).

Most developing countries in South and Southeast Asia, especially in the post-independence period, were constantly confronted with the problems of ethnic and cultural diversity. The presence of competing ethnic and cultural groups in these countries generally means that the establishment of new nationhood requires the cultivation of a new national identity (Kuo 1985) and language plays an integral role in nation-building and identity formation in these multi-ethnic societies. Many studies of nationalism (Tarling 2004; Nair 2009; Gomes and Rahman 2009) and the emergence of nations have shown that a broadly shared language is the most significant and critical component in the successful building of a nation.

This chapter will examine the origins of the concept of nationalism and the role of national languages, which are integral for the establishment of a national linguistic cultural identity. This will be followed by addressing the issue of what constitutes ethnic linguistic identity and whether it reflects an ethnocentric stand that contributes to the divisiveness of a nation or if a multi-lingual population contributes to the strength

of the plurality of the population. The chapter will conclude with the language that provides us with an international identity and means of communication—English. Does the hegemony of English result in an overpowering domination of ethnic and national identities potentially leading to their loss? With the acquisition of this international language, do we also acquire an international linguistic cultural identity?

2.1 Nationalism and Nation-Building

It will be pertinent to begin with a clarification of the terms and approaches as they will be utilized in this book. Fishman demarcates clearly the distinction between nation, nationality and nationalism. The nation is defined as a “politico-geographic entity” with clearly established boundaries and is more commonly referred to as the state, country or polity. Nationality is the socio-cultural entity—“essentially at the level of authenticity and solidarity of group behaviours and group values”. This is the socio-cultural integration essential for nation-building. Stemming from this, nationalism is the “driving or organizing dynamic in this nationality-into-nation process.” (Fishman 1968, pp. 39–40) The reverse may be more applicable for post-colonial nations, that is, where nationalism as the dynamic force plays a dominant role for the nation-into-nationality process.

Rupert Emerson in his seminal work “From Empire to Nation” (1959, p. 95) draws in the socio-cultural authenticity as a defining factor in his definition of a nation describing it as “a community of people who feel that they belong together in the double sense that they share deeply significant elements of a common heritage and that they have a common destiny for the future. In the contemporary world, the nation is for great portions of mankind in the community with which men most intense and most unconditionally identify themselves, however deeply they may differ among themselves on other issues.”

Realistically, in a nation made up of diverse ethnic groups, loyalty to the nation does not override all other competing loyalties. “Family, tribe, locality, religion, conscience, economic interest, and a host of other appeals may at any given time and place prevail over national allegiance for particular individuals or groups.” (Emerson 1959, p. 97). Therefore this raises the main challenge for nations, irrespective of whether they are newly developing or mature, because “all nations are constantly in the process of being built. Every nation is an ongoing and always unfinished project.” (Schmidt 2000, p. 43). This is the challenge of ensuring political, socio-cultural and economic security amongst its citizenry so that “national allegiance takes precedence over all other claims which may be made upon them when they are confronted by alternative choices of allegiance . . .” (Emerson 1959, p. 97). The people of a nation concerned must have a will to live together—“To have done great things together and the will to do more, these are the essential conditions for a people . . . The existence of a nation is . . . a daily plebiscite.” (cited in Kamenka 1976, p. 10)

Nationalism then is the nation-level socio-cultural dynamics integral for nation building. As a consequence, identity formation, which hinges on culture, is an integral part of nationalism. Smith links the three dimensions together when he reminds us that,

... we cannot understand nations and nationalism simply as an ideology or form of politics, but must treat them as cultural phenomena as well. That is to say, nationalism, the ideology and movement, must be closely related to national identity, a multidimensional concept, and extended to include a specific language, sentiments and symbolism. (Smith 1991, p. vii)

In this context, it would be pertinent to begin by briefly exploring the historical origins of nationalism, which created a strong position in a national language. The French Revolution in 1789 played a dominant role in influencing the nature of nationalism in many countries both in Europe and Asia. It was the French that elevated the concept of citizens from that of subjects to that of sovereignty. “Thus, in elevating the concept of citizen, the French Revolution came to elevate the concept of a nation.” (Kamenka 1967, p. 10). “A nation for them was a political-administrative unit, an aggregate of individuals able to participate in a common political life through their use of a common language and their physical propinquity to each other.” (Kamenka 1976, p. 10). It was in this setting that the ideology of one nation, one state and one language attained a strong influence (Kamenka 1976, p. 11). Fishman explicates this process as that of the “state into nationality process” meaning that these states already had over the centuries “developed their primary institutions (their royal houses, their governmental traditions, their educational systems, their well-established commercial and industrial experiences and above all, their centuries of “shared experiences”) and they now needed the means to integrate themselves socio-culturally. It was through the “integrative capacity of political-operational institutions” that emerges the need for “a more abstract level of sociocultural authenticity.” (Fishman et al. 1971, p. 6–7).

Therefore in Europe, it was language that played a pivotal role in providing the state with the means of developing a national identity and “sociocultural authenticity.” Language was used to give a nation a distinct identity that separated it from other nations. There was no quarrel as to which language should be the national language or that some minorities might be disadvantaged. This is largely because in a predominantly mono-ethnic society, there is usually a common direction forged through similarity of ethnicity, culture and tradition. All of this is reinforced “in many cases through the presence of the ‘outsider’, against whom struggle takes place and whose domination or potential threat stresses the necessity of collective endeavour. (Ager 2001, p. 14).

In contrast, greater social and cultural complexity existed in especially post-colonial nations with diverse ethnic populations, which due to the exigencies of history is a defining characteristic of Malaysia. These nations have not just one but many significant languages, largely as a result of the immigrant ancestry of the multi-ethnic population, created under the aegis of colonial powers. This then raises one of the fundamental challenges in nation-building facing developing countries which is that of “the problem of the opposition between primordial group loyalty and the civic loyalty to the nation” which then raises the bigger challenge for those holding power,

which is “the political art of holding diverse units together in a national community.” (Das Gupta 1968, p. 19). In this context, Coulmas (1988) urges caution when he says that the European model cannot be simplistically applied to the developing world. He explains, “The notion that each nation is, or should be, endowed with a language of its own, comes into serious conflict with demographic and political realities when applied to other parts of the world, Asia, Africa and the Pacific in particular.” (Coulmas 1988, p. 13). Language plays both a unifying and a separatist role. In multi-lingual societies, policy planners seek a common or national language to unify the population, but unless care is taken, the choice may cause conflict. As Kelman says,

Language is a uniquely powerful instrument in unifying a population . . . However, some of the very features of language that give it this power under some circumstances, may, under other circumstances, become major sources of disintegration and internal conflict within a national system. . . . While the development of a national language may be highly conducive to the creation and strengthening of national identity, the deliberate use of the language for purposes of national identity may—at least in a multi-ethnic state—have more disruptive than unifying consequences. (Kelman 1971, p. 21)

Despite the varying demographic and political realities, the national-language ideology was embraced by many post-colonial nations leading in many instances to occasions of conflict. Beer and Jacob, (1985, pp. 217–23) analysed cases of nations that faced the challenge of politics, power and language domination, which they articulate through a theory of linguistic mobilization.

For developing countries, it would be pertinent to broaden the perspective here and state that it is not only language that poses a challenge in establishing a national identity in a multi-ethnic demography but also the economic, historical, cultural and religious dimensions. Shil emphasizes the primordial nature of these dimensions in the national context by stating that the “key ones for the creation of ethnicity are a distinctive history and one or more of the other cultural dimensions—religion, language . . . customs.” (cited in Smith 1981, p. 66). In the Malaysian context, Mahathir, in the throes of the period of attaining independence with the challenges of a multi-immigrant population, takes this argument a step further by unequivocally stating that all immigrants to a country should be willing to assimilate totally with the “definitive race” in terms of language and culture for true national identity to be established especially in the early throes of nation-building (Mahathir 1970, p. 134). Given this, is the message we are receiving, one that emphasizes that it is essential for a nation to ensure a common culture and language since they are contributors to establishing a national identity? Religion and culture are very closely linked in many Asian ways of life and especially the Muslim way of life, which is the practice of the dominant Malay ethnic group. For a multi-ethnic nation, the pragmatic reality of the implementation of this approach is not as unambiguous as the articulation of rhetoric. The complexity of this issue in a multi-religious, multi-cultural society is explicated by Saravanamuttu, who in discussing the recognition provided to communal societies and their heritage in a multi-ethnic environment, puts forth a crucial consideration, when he argues that,

A particularly important point in the politics of recognition or equal worth is the suggestion that ontological differences stemming from culture and religion are often deeply incompatible, especially when survival of a culture or religious formation is at stake. (Saravanamuttu 2004, p. 107)

It is the survival of a culture or religious community that is very pertinent in the Malaysian context since many of the cultural and religious identities of the ethnic groups are communal based and communally protected. The change of one's ethnic identity is relatively difficult, if not near impossible, for most individuals because it involves changing one's race, religion and culture, which are deeply embedded in the psyche of many ethnic individuals. Thus, the deep psychic attachment to one's culture and religion is in most cases not contestable.

Therefore, if we go by the European model, does this mean that multi-ethnic nations can never have integrative socio-cultural bonds? The European model is not a realistic approach to adopt without adaptation because the history of post-colonial nations has seen them inherit a demography that has constituted ethnic groups made up of different races, religions, cultural practices and languages. For many of these nations, on attaining independence, they had to struggle with establishing not only "the politico-institutional instruments" but also the "socio-cultural authenticity" (Fishman et al. 1971, p. 7) in their multi-ethnic milieu. How then should they progress from here?

If there is any cultural dimension that can transcend the ethnic and religious differences, and establish the bonds across ethnic lines that will provide a means for a sense of national identity, it is that of language.

This is because it is language that enables a person to be culturally ethnically rooted and yet reach out communicatively to a national level—it provides the bridge between the "segmental attachment" and the "civil ties of the nation" (Das Gupta 1968, p. 19). This flexibility is manifest through competencies in varying languages, which enable citizens to operate from different cultural bases, whether from national, ethnic or international platforms. After all, language can function as a pillar of identity at all levels and the citizen of the 21st century should be able to move from one cultural linguistic base to the other, as the particular context requires. Mastery of a repertoire of languages is a human capital benefit for the citizen, viewed as assets. (Grin 1999, p. 14).

Even more importantly, this raises the advantages for governments to provide the necessary support for the maintenance and sustenance of the varying languages no matter what their status is in society to enhance the development of a multi-lingual population. In line with this, Das Gupta provides sound advice in the context of continuous nation building, when he says,

The greater the institutional capacity revealed by the political community to handle such divisions through pluralistic coordination, the greater the prospects of national development in the long run. This institutional capacity cannot be built by denying or deriding the existence of the language divisions in a multi-lingual society. (Das Gupta 1968, p. 24)

Handling such divisions through pluralistic coordination means accepting the existence of, and understanding the linguistic cultural needs of, varying ethnic groups (especially the minority groups, both the significant and the smaller groups).

Parallel with this, there is also a need amongst the immigrant population to understand and accept the need of the dominant ethnic group for a national language, which for most post-colonial countries is the indigenous language of the nation, to signify the break from the imperial domination to independence for the national good of the citizenry. Simpson (2007, p. 4) states,

... Many in positions of power in Asia following, or anticipating independence, or seeking modernization to avoid external threats, feel the success of their emerging nations would be well served by the promotion of a national language and a single official *lingua Franca* that could be used throughout the state, in all domains of life ...

In post-independence Malaya, this translated into the selection of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language since this was the language of the dominant ethnic group, the Malays, who had been the primary negotiators for independence for Malaya.

According to Asmah (2007, p. 346),

... The Malays wanted to see their native rights preserved: land ownership, their religion, the rule of the Malay monarchy through their sultans, Malay language and custom. While the Malays wanted the non-Malays to recognize all this, and at the same time preserve their own primordial heritage be it from China or India, they also wanted the latter to cooperate in giving the country the image of a Malay nation ... and such an image was firmly embedded in language, namely the Malay language, which had already been used as a *lingua Franca* by all the groups in Malaysia ...

Malay was therefore chosen as the one and only national language, but not without significant bargaining. The non-Malays had their own ideas about the choice, and were not in favour of a monolingual national language policy ... “A major fear among the non-Malays in accepting Malay as the one and only national language was that they would be automatically disadvantaged in certain important domains of communication ...” (347).

However, the final decision of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language was made when the significant immigrant ethnic groups, mainly the Chinese and Indians, accepted Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and Islam as the national religion in return for citizenship and the guarantee of freedom of worship for all other religions and the practice and use of all other languages (Gill 2004, 2009).

The next section then will need to unravel the differing concerns of the minority ethnic communities and why an understanding of these complex dichotomous positions is crucial for the well-being and stability of any nation. We will begin by establishing, what ethnicity is, why it is important for ethnic groups to retain their ethnic identity, and whether this stand leads to a process of divisiveness and the role of language in identity formation.

2.2 Ethnic Linguistic Identity—Pluralism or Divisiveness?

To belong to an ethnic group is to possess a common descent, cultural heritage, religion, language and a distinctive history and destiny and to feel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity (Smith 1981, p. 66; Joseph 2004, p. 162).

The one major distinction between ethnic communities and a nation is that the former does not have the territorial dimension. A nation, “by definition, requires a ‘homeland’, a recognized space and ecological base, if only to ensure cohesion and autonomy and the rights of citizenship, whereas an ethnic community . . . can maintain its sense of belonging or its distinctive cultural characteristics without such a territorial base (Smith 1981, p. 69).

This is the striking feature of most of the diasporas of ethnic groups around the globe. The struggle to maintain their cultural characteristics transcends time and holds steadfast irrespective of physical space (Smith 1981). This though, does not mean that the cultural boundaries are carved in stone. There is fluidity and enrichment across cultures that take place over time and some individuals from a particular ethnic group (for specific reasons) may even choose to move to a different ethnic group in their lifetime. In this context, Horowitz places the varying nature of ethnic affiliation on a continuum, “. . . at one end there is voluntary membership; at the other, membership given at birth” (1985, p. 55). The former involves cases of intermarriage, adoption and other instances. Generally speaking, “most people are born into the ethnic group in which they will die, and ethnic groups consist mainly of those who have been born into them.” (Horowitz 1985, p. 55). Together with the fluidity and enrichment of cultural practices across various groups, the tendency for ethnic groups to gravitate towards maintaining their own distinctive cultural attributes is strong because these features are part of an individual’s and community’s deepest thoughts and emotions.

As discussed earlier, there are many factors that contribute to one’s ethnic identity—the socio-cultural practices, traditions, language and religion. Of these, the one integral distinctive characteristic relevant to this study is that of language. Language is a strong determinant of one’s identity, at both national and ethnic levels. Given that in this section the focus is on the latter, it will be pertinent to refer to Fishman who stresses this by stating that, “It has been claimed that ethnic identity is intrinsically connected to the language as spoken language is one of the most salient characteristics of ethnic groups.” (Fishman 1999, p. 143). The tie between language and cultural identity is said to be so close that Wierzbicka (1992, p. 22) says “Languages are the best mirror of human mind and cultures, and it is through the vocabulary of human languages that we can discover and identify the culture specific conceptual organizations characteristic of different people of the world.” Spolsky (1998, p. 57) emphasizes this further when he states that an important identity signifier for a person is the social group whose language a person speaks. All of these scholars stress a common emphasis on the fact that language is an integral part of a person’s identity. It must be remembered though, as was discussed earlier, that it is also the mastery of varying languages that provides the capability of projecting different cultural bases—the ethnic, the national and the international. In this section, the focus is on the ethnic identity.

In contrast to those who feel that the maintenance of minority languages is an integral part of their ethnic identity, there are some sectors of society who feel uncomfortable with the strong links that exist between language, especially minority languages and identity. These are the people who espouse that the concern with

minority languages and ethnic identities will lead to greater divisiveness in a nation made up of diverse ethnic groups. To ensure greater homogeneity, they recommend that the focus should be on just a national identity and not all else and therefore it should be just the promotion and use of the national language.

Schmidt describes these two groups as the “advocates for minority language equality . . . (who) speak in the language of justice, while proponents of national unity speak in terms of national good.” Therefore, this results in one of the most challenging complexities of language policy conflict, which is that “its partisans often appear to be speaking past each other—participating in parallel discourse—rather than to each other, seemingly motivated by differing concerns.” (2000, p. 42). It is necessary then in the following section to work out the ideologies underlying both approaches so that a greater understanding can be sought for this complex situation.

But before this is done, another perspective needs to be brought into the discussion. This is the fact that there are some from the minority groups themselves who feel that there are more significant dimensions that contribute to the makeup of ethnic identity other than language. Therefore, they claim that the loss of an ethnic language is not a major factor in the maintenance of cultural identity. In an article on the Sindhis (a minority group in Malaysia), Khemlani-David builds a case for the maintenance of ethnic identity despite the loss of the community’s ethnic language. She says, “For the Malaysian Sindhis, the Sindhi language is no longer a *sine qua non* for Sindhianness. Ethnicity can still be maintained even if a community has shifted to English . . . the ethnocultural identity . . . is maintained by the day-to-day lifestyle, religion, views and attitudes, cultural norms and dense networks among the . . . community.” (Khemlani-David 1998, p. 75). This is aligned with Asmah Omar’s stand that “the cultural heritage of the ethnic group remains steadfast. . . . No matter what language or languages he speaks, so long as the bilingual is surrounded by people of his group” (1991, p. 98).

It will be pertinent to address these three issues separately. To recapitulate, the issues are firstly, that maintenance of ethnic identity will lead to greater divisiveness in a multi-ethnic society and by default it should just be the national identity that all citizens should be concerned with. The second issue is the need to maintain ethnic identities as manifest through the ethnic heritage language. The third issue is that cultural identity can be maintained irrespective of the language used therefore suggesting that it is not necessary to maintain one’s ethnic language. For these issues to be unravelled and explicated, we will need to draw in the ideological aspects related to language-status planning. This will incorporate the ideology of linguistic assimilation and that of linguistic pluralism (Cobarrubias 1983, p. 63).

The first issue is based on the ideology of linguistic assimilation. This “attaches linguistic superiority to the dominant language and does not grant, in principle, equal rights to linguistic minorities.” (Cobarrubias 1983, p. 63) In this context, the minority groups are expected to master the dominant language so that ultimately, even for these groups, the national language becomes their mother tongue. (Asmah 1998, p. 58). If the dominant ethnic group holds on steadfast to its cultural practices and language, which is everyone’s national language, then should the other groups be expected to give up their linguistic signifiers? As, has been discussed, language

is a dominant part of the ethnic self—it is one of the key elements that constitutes identity. Should not this concern with the reclamation of ethnic identity transcend groups, irrespective of whether they are of indigenous or immigrant ancestry?

Smith (1981, p. 152) describes a similar assimilationist approach in the early American sociological perspectives on ethnicity. He says that they assumed that over a couple of generations, immigrants coming to countries with large dominant societies, like in America or Australia, would over time be absorbed into these societies. Eventually, “the several ethnic communities and their traditions would gradually disappear into the melting-pot of the overarching society . . .” History has shown us in the past and even in recent times, that the natural reaction to the strong assimilative stand by a majority evokes feelings of revivalism amongst the minority groups. As a result of the revival of ethnicity, what exists now in the American context is “a cultural mosaic, in which ethnic pluralism was fast replacing the ideal (let alone the reality) of a single-state culture and society.” (Smith 1981, p. 153).

Therefore, in most nations, there should not be an unrealistic expectation of assimilation but instead there should be active measures taken towards establishing integration, with the incorporation of the different ethnic groups as equals into the larger society. This concept of integration is closely related to that of linguistic pluralism.

Pluralism involves “the existence of different language groups and their right to maintain and cultivate their languages on an equitable basis.” In reality, this is usually never the case, which leads to different configurations of pluralism. These depend for example, on “whether linguistic coexistence is merely tolerated, whereby the language may be used for some important though restricted function such as religious rituals, education or both, or whether official support is extended to the language.” (Cobarrubias 1983, p. 65) The weakest form of pluralism is where in terms of rhetoric, it is stated that there is autonomy for the varying languages to be used within respective communities, but in reality, this is to be carried out without active state support for the sustenance of the languages. The strongest form of pluralism is active state support in terms of effort and resources for varying languages to fulfil their various roles in the many communities in a nation irrespective of their status.

When members of the dominant community say that ethnic identity can be strongly maintained irrespective of the language used, and similarly others in the minority community take the same stand, it raises the following points. The first point is even though there is support for this stand from scholars belonging to the dominant group, the support is there only because this is a matter as it is applied to other minority groups. This very same stand would not be accepted or applied if the same thing happened to them and their communities (those belonging to the dominant group), that is to conduct cultural practices and traditions in another language and not their mother tongue.

This is because once the language is lost in carrying out cultural practices, traditions and in practicing the religion, then these aspects of culture can only be conducted in a superficial, memorized manner without much meaning. To lose out on the meaning of aspects integral to one’s culture in one’s ethnic group, is to lose out on an intrinsic part of one’s inner identity.

The second point is that in this configuration of the integral role of language in establishing identity, one of the key components that tend to be overlooked is the element of choice. This is the choice to either establish one's ethnic identity through one's ethnic language or the choice to maintain one's ethnic identity through another language. Not all ethnic groups manifest the same strength of feeling with regards their cultural practices and cultural bonds and therefore for some it may be plausible to still maintain their cultural practices in another language and for others it may not be a direction that they would want to pursue. It comes down to one of the precious offerings in a democratic nation, which is that of choice. This is the crucial element that needs to be maintained in this complexity of maintenance and sustenance of one's ethnic identity through religion, socio-cultural practices and most important of all; the ethnic language.

Having established the integral link between languages and the maintenance of ethnic identity, it is now time to explore the supranational identity, which is a feature that many citizens from varying nations have to acquire to cope with increasing global competition.

2.3 Supranational Identity: The Role of English

The supranational identity is an identity above the existing national identities. In comparison with the other two linguistic cultural bases of ethnic and national identities, it comes across as weak in terms of the attachment of deep feelings to the use of an international language. This is because this base is more linguistic than it is cultural, meaning that, the language is utilized largely for instrumental purposes and has not developed from that of a common heritage or history as the other two have.

This section then builds up a case for the supranational identity that is manifest through the dominant international language—the English language, as the language that provides an international identity and means of communication. English has ‘travelled’ to many parts of the world to serve various purposes. This phenomenon has created positive interactions as well as tensions between global and local forces and has had serious linguistic, sociocultural, political and pedagogical implications (Farzad 2009). The position of English in the world today is the joint outcome of Britain's colonial expansion and the more recent emergence of the United States as the world super power, which has reinforced the dominance of English as a global language. Although the economic dominance of the US is expected to decline, as economies in Asia overtake it, the question remains whether English has become so entrenched in the world that it will continue as an international language for some time yet. Many studies have been devoted to exploring the processes, implications and consequences of the world-wide spread of English (e. g. Brutt-Griffler 2002; Crystal 1997; Holliday 2005; Kachru 1998; Strevens 1980; Graddol 1997). Crystal estimates that while one language dies every two weeks, English on the other hand, is growing. The dominance of English is a novel phenomenon in that no language of wider communication has ever been shared by a group of speakers of such size and

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