

Preface

For many Malaysians, having grown up in a richly diverse multi-ethnic nation, the whole notion of developing varying linguistic and cultural identities to suit different contexts is a competency that many of us quite naturally acquire in our lives. In this context there is a need to understand the various factors and agendas that impact on decisions made on the roles and functions of various languages. These are decisions that influence the development or the decline of varying linguistic and cultural identities.

My personal journey of unravelling these complexities began in 1976, when I began my career at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia), as a language instructor teaching English. Over the years, I gradually climbed the academic ladder. I was always curious to examine how language was used by society and for society—this sowed the seeds of unpacking the complexities of sociolinguistics. My professorial scholarship was pegged in the area of sociolinguistics and international communication, with a strong focus on the English language, which included the varieties of English and the standards required for professional and international communication. This phase of research resulted in numerous publications in various international journals, some of which have been compiled into a book (Gill 2002) titled, “International Communication: English Language Challenges for Malaysia” which has been reviewed in a number of international journals.

In the throes of nationalism post-1969, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was set up in 1970 to develop and use Bahasa Malaysia as the academic language. This led to the institution of Bahasa Malaysia as medium of instruction and to the development of academic scholarship through the language. In this context, together with the demands of the forces of internationalisation, UKM constantly works to create a balance between the national demands of Bahasa Malaysia and the international demands of English.

I hold this university very dear to my heart and all issues and concerns that affect UKM are also issues that concern me. I started writing this book with an awareness of the need for sensitivity and neutrality required in examining language policy and planning and its impact on identity in the challenging context of the interplay between ethnic, national and international identities.

Against this backdrop, and as I got older, the value of maintaining and strengthening the ethnic identity for minority communities began to emerge. I began to realise that ethnically as a Punjabi–Sikh, I belonged to the “lost generation”—a generation that was able to communicate in Punjabi at a social level but was not able to read and write in Punjabi. I grew up in a home speaking, writing and dreaming in English. My parents brought us up with strong values and principles of honesty and hard work. They also tried their very best to ensure that we were taught the Punjabi language when we were young but at that period of time, there were challenges with providing interesting and sustainable language teaching content for the young. These challenges have spurred my interest and awareness in how communities in these present times have worked at maintaining and sustaining their ethnic languages, culture and identity.

Thus began the journey of migration of my area of scholarship from one that focused only on the English language to one that tried to create understanding of how governments and people planned for and how society responded to decisions made on the role and function of various languages—the national, the ethnic and international languages. This is the field of macro-sociolinguistics. In this field we examine the relevance and concerns of various languages from the perspective of the varying members of society—what do the roles and functions of these languages mean to members of society, how and when do they use it? How are decisions made on the selection of languages for their national roles? What is the impact of decisions made on the status of dominant languages on minority languages that may exist in society? How do we ensure inter-generational transmission of languages? How do economic, political and socio-cultural factors impact on decisions made on language policy?

This book *Language Policy Challenges in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia* seeks to address these issues and to trace the factors that have influenced language policies in Malaysia. Whereas much of this book is dedicated to provide an extensive discussion on English and Bahasa Malaysia, there is also space for the ethnic languages of Mandarin and Punjabi. It will take the reader on a journey through the history of Malaysia and how language policies were formed by overt and covert factors, until the present day where there is an educational system of national schools with Bahasa Malaysia and Mandarin and Tamil vernacular schools and private and international schools using English. It also devoted a chapter to the Punjabi language, which has over the years seen a decline in its use, but more recently seen community-driven efforts towards the revitalisation and maintenance of the language.

All of this becomes so much more relevant and important to us as Malaysia faces the challenges of an integrated vision of our multi-ethnic population; how much do our language policies impact our heritage, our identity, and our unity in this country? How do we promote unity-in-diversity when we look at how intimately language is so much a part of who we are individually and communally? How much do the different cultures in Malaysia—both the main and minority cultures—have a ‘voice’ to speak as one? That is how, through scholarship on language and cultural policies, we can contribute to a better understanding of the challenges our beloved multi-ethnic Malaysia faces.



<http://www.springer.com/978-94-007-7965-5>

Language Policy Challenges in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia

Gill, S.K.

2014, XV, 124 p. 1 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-94-007-7965-5