

## The Malay Language and Ethnic Identity in Modern Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

*Colonial discourse about the Malay language and the Malay ethnic group were often at odds with each other. Yet, this conflicting, orientalist mythologizing about "Malay" still functions in contemporary discussions about language and ethnicity in Malaysia. This essay aims at constructing a new vantage point from which to view Malay. Instead of focusing on its uniqueness, Malay is seen within the context of its language neighbourhood, that is its relationship to Malaysia's other Malayo-Polynesian languages, Malaysia's non-Malayo-Polynesian languages and the diverse regional and social dialects of Malay in Malaysia. Instead of discussing Malay as a political, nation-state phenomenon, Malay is considered as a demographic, emblematic and negotiated phenomenon. We must find new ways of looking at and talking about Malay language and Malay ethnicity; we need to produce new knowledge, not merely repeat colonial myths.*

*Key words: colonial discourse, Malay language, ethnic identity, Malayo-Polynesia*

### ABSTRAK

*Wacana kolonial tentang bahasa dan bangsa Melayu sering saling bercanggah. Namun, mitos orientalistik yang bertentangan itu masih berperan dalam perbincangan hari ini tentang bahasa dan jati diri di Malaysia. Tulisan ini bertujuan mencari perspektif baru untuk melihat "Melayu". Bukan keunikan bahasa Melayu yang akan ditekankan, tetapi keberkaitannya dalam lingkungan bahasanya, maksudnya hubungan bahasa Melayu dengan segala bahasa Melayu-Polinesia dan non-Melayu-Polinesia yang dituturkan di Malaysia serta pelbagai dialek Melayu sosial dan regional di Malaysia. Bukan bahasa Melayu sebagai fenomena politik dalam pembinaan negara yang hendak ditinjau, tetapi sebagai fenomena demografi, perlambangan dan persetujuan. Kita wajar mencari pendekatan baru untuk menyemak bahasa dan etnisiti Melayu; kita wajib menghasilkan ilmu baru, bukan hanya sekadar mengulang-ulangi mitologi kolonial.*

*Kata kunci: wacana kolonial, bahasa Melayu, identiti etnik, Melayu-Polinesia*

## INTRODUCTION

Discussions about the Malay language usually rest on a variety of preconceptions – some expressed, others implied – about status, loyalty, function. Many of these preconceived arguments are simply untested, indeed unprovable, beliefs and assumptions. They all make up the mythology of the Malay language (Collins 1999). Among the sources for contemporary Malay language mythology are the assumptions of western writers, which have long since been incorporated into the local belief systems and form part of the discourse about Malay today a not uncommon development in the history of postcolonial Asia (Said 1979; Cohn 1996).

Indeed, the Malay language was one of Europe's earliest 'discoveries' in Asia. Even among the English, who were rather slow getting to Southeast Asia, the Malay language was known as early as 400 years ago – not merely known, but in 1598 "reported to be the most courteous and seemlie speech of all the Orient" (OED 1986:1704). This early reputation for courtesy and seemliness persisted throughout the colonial period, even though the term 'Malay' was most often found in collocations such as the "murderous ... quick-tempered Malay", "the cursed Malay crease" and, of course, "Malay pirates" (see OED 1986). Indeed, in the colonial era, even more neutral uses of the term 'Malay' still reflected the romantic brush strokes of the English authors; note the titles: *Six years in the Malay jungle* (Wells 1925), *In Malay forests* (Maxwell 1907), *Malay magic* (Skeat 1900) and *Malay poisons and charm cures* (Gimlette 1915).

How could 'Malay' refer to the most courteous language of Asia and at the same time to murderous pirates armed with cursed krisses? How could Malay be the most seemly speech, when it was associated with wild jungles, deadly poisons and nefarious magic? Clearly, orientalism had epistemological room for a bundle of mythologies ranging from exotic speech rituals to bracing tales of treachery in dark forests. Romanticized orientalism embraced the Malay language just as firmly as it demonized and, later, trivialized the speakers of Malay. In contemporary Malaysia, patterns of romanticizing and also of trivializing the Malay language persist (Shamsul 1996); moreover, the uneasy link between language and ethnicity is a critical means of characterizing the Malay identity.

In this paper, we hope to set aside various mythologies of Malay, both the colonial examples as well as the more modern versions propagated by bureaucrats and politicians. Instead, we plan to talk plainly about the world's fifth largest language with more than 200 million speakers. In an era when most of the world's languages are shrinking and even disappearing (Mühlhäusler 1996), Malay is a growing language; its speakers are expected to increase their percentage share of the world's population by about 0.5 per cent within just two decades (Collins 1999:10).

Under different names, Malay is spoken as the national language in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore. Moreover, Malay is the largest minority

language of Thailand and it is spoken by smaller groups in almost every country of Southeast Asia, as well as in Sri Lanka and some territories administered by Australia (Collins 1998). In Europe, Malay has official status as a language of instruction in the Netherlands. However, in this paper, the focus of discussion will be only upon Malay in the context of modern Malaysia. The paper first considers the place of Malay in Malaysia and among Malaysia's neighbours; how does Malay fit into the language and ethnic complex of Malaysia and its neighbours. In the second section, Malay is viewed from three social perspectives related to identity. The paper concludes with an emphasis on the need for more research about Malay in modern Malaysia.

### MALAY AMONG NEIGHBOURS

Among the many myths about the Malay language, that persist until today, is the myth of its uniqueness. While there are many aspects of Malay as a social phenomenon that are unusual and worthy of our attention (Collins 1998), the time has come to view Malay as a natural language among a community of languages; Malay is neither a powerful mantra nor a besieged island. In this brief section, let us consider the place of Malay in the national and regional ecology of languages.

#### MALAYSIA AND MALAYO-POLYNESIAN LANGUAGES

Certainly, Malay is the most important Malayo-Polynesian language spoken in Malaysia. It has the largest number of first language speakers; it is the sole official language of government and education. Indeed, among the world's Malayo-Polynesian languages, Malay – because it has been studied for so long – has been the keystone in developing Malayo-Polynesian linguistics. Yet, Malay is only one among a thousand Malayo-Polynesian languages in the world (Ross 1990: 901). And Malay is only one among more than fifty Malayo-Polynesian languages spoken in Malaysia (see Wurm and Hattori 1983; Sheet 37, 41, among others).

According to Leete (1996: 15, 124), in 1991, the total population of first-language speakers of Malay in Malaysia was 8,918,000; however, there were an additional 1,870,800 first-language speakers of other Malayo-Polynesian languages.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in 1991 first-language speakers of Malayo-Polynesian languages *other than Malay* comprised 17.3 per cent of all Malayo-Polynesian speakers in Malaysia.<sup>2</sup> Most of these Malayo-Polynesian speakers live in two Malaysian states: Sabah and Sarawak, stretching along the north coast of Borneo.

Because basic linguistic research about most of the languages of Sabah and Sarawak has not yet been conducted, it is difficult to provide a precise number of the languages spoken there. The boundaries between dialect and

language are not well-established (Asmah 1994:76) and local ethnonyms may not be a reliable guide to language groups. However, an estimate of at least 50 Malayo-Polynesian languages spoken in Sabah and Sarawak is a conservative one.<sup>3</sup>

Only two of these 50 languages are rather closely related to Malay. The first is Iban, the second largest Malayo-Polynesian language in Malaysia, spoken by more than 500,000 Malaysians (Leete 1996). Many scholars have pointed out that Iban, though spoken by an ethnic group displaying a culture distinctly different from that of the Malays, is among the closest linguistic congeners of Malay (see, for example, Asmah 1983 and elsewhere, Nothofer 1996 and Adelaar 1995). Another language spoken in Malaysia is Selako (Silakau), spoken by fewer than 5000; Wurm and Hattori (1983) estimated 3800 speakers. Hudson (1970) demonstrated the close relationship of Selako to Malay, again despite numerous cultural differences between the two groups; Adelaar (1995) has provided additional evidence. Because of the demonstrably close relationship of Iban, Malay and Selako, all three languages are classified together in a single sub-branch of Malayo-Polynesian (Adelaar 1995).

The dozens of other Malayo-Polynesian languages spoken by the indigenous populations of Malaysia are far more distantly related to Malay. The same can be said for those Malayo-Polynesian languages spoken by long-standing immigrant groups in Malaysia, such as Javanese and Mandailing. Many of the indigenous Malayo-Polynesian languages of Malaysia are spoken by very small communities of less than 10,000 (Wurm and Hattori 1983, Sheet 41 and Grimes 1988); a survey of the actual number of speakers of these minority languages has never been conducted. The future survival of many of these languages is uncertain.<sup>4</sup>

#### MALAYSIA AND ITS OTHER LANGUAGES

In addition to the Malayo-Polynesian languages of Malaysia surveyed above, several other language families are represented in Malaysia. One is certainly indigenous; others are represented by communities of immigrants who have retained their ancestral languages. And one is foreign but widespread.

Although spoken by only a small percentage of the total population, the largest number of languages in peninsular Malaysia belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family of languages. Most scholars agree that these languages are indigenous languages of the peninsula and that they represent remnants of very old autochthonous groups (Benjamin 1973). There are at least 14 different Austro-Asiatic languages spoken in peninsular Malaysia (Collins & Diffloth 1994). Many are spoken by very small communities, a few of which still maintain semi-nomadic cultures in the remaining forests of the peninsula. Other Austro-Asiatic languages are spoken by relatively large, sedentary groups, such as Semai with about 20,000 speakers, although this language is characterized by a large number of diverse dialects.

Language families represented by immigrant groups in Malaysia include Sino-Tibetan, Dravidic, Indo-European and Tai-Kadai. Only one Tai-Kadai language is spoken by Malaysians. Near the Malaysian-Thailand border in Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan, a number of Malaysians speak Pak-Tai (southern Thai) as their first language; there are no reliable data about the number of Pak-Tai speakers in Malaysia, though it is estimated to be quite small.

The largest group of Malaysians speaking non-indigenous languages speaks languages in the Chinese branch of Sino-Tibetan. In 1991 (Leete 1996:18, 21), at least 5,200,000 Malaysians spoke various Chinese languages as their first language, including Hakka, Yue and Min variants.<sup>5</sup> Mandarin, taught in many Malaysian schools, used in many publications (including several newspapers) and allocated broadcast time on Malaysian television, is not often spoken as a first (home) language, although more and more Chinese families do use Mandarin at home, at least some of the time.

The next largest group of speakers belongs to the Dravidic language family. In 1991 there were 1,380,000 'Indians' in peninsular Malaysia; most of these were speakers of Tamil, with smaller groups speaking Telugu and Malayalam. All three of these languages belong to the Dravidic family. Tamil is taught in many Malaysian schools and has a niche in Malaysia's mass media; other Dravidic languages have a much lower profile.

Several Indo-European languages are spoken by Malaysia's ethnic groups. In Melaka on the southwest coast of the peninsula, a small enclave of Portuguese speakers – perhaps 1500 in all (Posner 1996:73) – has maintained its heritage language apparently since Melaka's Portuguese period (1511-1641), although the Melaka variant has diverged from metropolitan Portuguese spoken in Europe or Brazil. Among other Indo-European languages in Malaysia are Punjabi, Bengali, Hindi-Urdu and Sinhalese, though none is spoken by a large number of Malaysians.

Indeed, among some speakers of Indian languages, both Indo-European and Dravidic, there has been a shift towards another Indo-European language; English has often become the first and primary language of the home. This shift to English has also occurred among many Chinese and even among some Malay households, although no reliable data are available. English, as the colonial language of the past and as the often acknowledged global language (see Philipson 1992), is spoken by a large percentage of Malaysians; moreover, it is taught in Malaysian schools at all grade levels and enjoys a disproportionate share of television time as well as a healthy profile in Malaysia's publishing endeavours. Recently, Crystal (1997: 58) estimated that 31.9 per cent of all Malaysians speak English as a first or second language. Indeed, this percentage may be an underestimate!

One more language should be mentioned here. Arabic, an Afro-Asiatic language, has a special status among speakers of Malay in Malaysia. All Malays have at least formulaic competence in the language, which is a prerequisite

competence for all Muslims. Malays in Malaysia are defined legally as Muslims who speak Malay and practice Malay culture. So the connection between Arabic, the ritual and scriptural language of Islam, and Malay is constitutionally implied. Many Malay speakers have acquired Arabic language education; so the status of Arabic is more than a symbolic one. Again little research has been conducted about language use and language attitudes in Malaysia; but the continual flow of Arabic loanwords into Malay suggests a level of bilingualism that needs to be studied.

#### MALAYSIA AND REGIONAL DIALECTS OF MALAY

Healthy, living languages usually have a large number of regional dialects.<sup>6</sup> Malay, an expanding modern language, is spoken as a first language in at least nine different countries. In Southeast Asia, Malay-speaking communities stretch from southern Burma to western New Guinea – a vast arc of more than 6000 kilometres. In this span of islands, about 75 regional dialects of Malay are spoken as the first language of diverse peoples. Of this number, at least 19 Malay dialects are spoken in Malaysia (Collins 1999).

Most of these dialects serve communities of ethnic Malays. Among the largest is Kelantan Malay, spoken throughout the northeastern part of the peninsula; in 1991 there were more than a million speakers of Kelantan Malay (Leete 1996). The degree of mutual intelligibility between Kelantan Malay and Patani Malay, spoken in southern Thailand and some areas of northern Malaysia, is so high that it would be reasonable to talk about a Kelantan-Patani Malay dialect. In that case, the total number of speakers of Kelantan-Patani Malay can be reckoned at two or three million. Another dialect with a large number of speakers is Kedah Malay, spoken widely in the northwestern part of the peninsula, probably by almost two million Malays.<sup>7</sup>

Other dialects include those spoken by only a few thousand Malaysians. In Pahang, for example, the Malay of the upper Tembeling river basin is spoken by fewer than 5000 Malays. On the islands off the southeast coast of the peninsula, Tioman, Aur, Pemanggil and elsewhere, a distinctive dialect of Malay is spoken by fewer than 3000 Malay islanders. In the heart of the old trading port, Melaka, on the peninsula's southwest coast, Baba Malay is spoken by a small community of ethnic Chinese as their home language; a subdialect of that very localized Malay variant is spoken by ethnic Indians also living in the heart of Melaka. The Orang Kanak, a small aboriginal group living near the southeast coast of the peninsula, speak a variety of Malay as their home language, as do at least three other (larger) aboriginal (non-Malay) groups (Wurm & Hattori 1983; Sheet 37).

Regional koines are also spoken in Malaysia. To some extent, Sarawak Malay, originally a dialect spoken mostly along the Sarawak River, can now be considered a koine that competes with standard Malay throughout the state of Sarawak, even in areas where other dialects of Malay are spoken as home lan-

guages, for example, along the lower reaches of the Saribas River or in the Limbang River basin. In the peninsula, another koine emanating from southern Johor has spread along the west coast especially in areas of complex immigrant composition, for example coastal Selangor and the lower reaches of the Perak River. Some linguists (Gil 1998) detect the development of a distinctive dialect of Kuala Lumpur Malay, largely based on this southern koine.

In short, Malay in Malaysia is a language strongly linked to and dependent on the vitality of a wide range of regional Malay dialects. Malaysian language planners have not always acknowledged their connection to regional Malay variants, but this network of regional dialects lends credibility and emotional depth to the standard language of the country.

#### MALAYSIA AND THE STANDARD DIALECTS OF MALAY

Standard languages are specific dialects, regional or social, which are acknowledged as languages of prestige and learning. Once a local or social dialect is elevated to the rank of a standard language, or a national language, it (spontaneously) absorbs elements from other dialects and it undergoes tinkering by language planners, the well-known language engineers.

The history of standard Malay is not completely clear, but it is fairly certain that in the nineteenth century the two major colonial powers in the Malay archipelago, the Dutch and the British, were in search of a language variant that they could use in developing a standardized school system that would provide them with the prerequisite number of clerks, soldiers and factory foremen needed to operate their subordinate 'nation-states' efficiently. Language officers fanned out beyond the political boundaries of their colonies in search of that ideal variant – the Dutch to Sumatra, the Riau islands and even to the peninsula, and the British to the same places. They made enquiries, they ordered up 'authentic' texts, they wrote dictionaries and grammars, they inspired Malays to write dictionaries and grammars and texts, always texts (Collins 1998 as well as van der Putten & Al Azhar 1995).

And so a special social dialect of Malay, the literary dialect used in the *fin de siècle* court of Riau (a court soon to be abolished by the Dutch), became the model for standard Malay. The European language engineers got to work on that social dialect: regularizing the parts they found inconsistent, rationalizing it, shaping it into something a bit more like the languages they knew, packaging it and publishing it in a thousand textbooks for the colonial school system. But, despite an unwritten policy of sharing their knowledge of Malay, the standard language chosen by both the British and the Dutch began to diverge into two standard dialects of Malay.

Today the standard language of Malaysia, *Malaysian*, displays many characteristics not found in the standard language of Indonesia, *Indonesian*. (Prentice (1990) discussed this nomenclature and the differences that distinguish these

two social (standard) dialects.) Malaysian and Indonesian constitute two dialects of standard Malay, which remain mutually intelligible. Malaysians read Indonesian literature, watch Indonesian films, listen to Indonesian political speeches. In the very recent past, Indonesian migrant workers constituted about 8-10 per cent of the people living in Malaysia; so Malaysians were more likely to be exposed to not only standard Indonesian but also Indonesian regional and social variants. The flow of language from Malaysia to Indonesia has been more restricted but, with the advent of satellite broadcasts, Indonesians now have greater exposure to Malaysia's standard language.

The standard Malay language of Brunei resembles Malaysian, with some differences in vocabulary and pronunciation; the standard language of Singapore even more closely resembles Malaysian, though there are chosen differences. An international council of language planners from Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia (MABBIM) meets regularly to organize joint efforts towards reducing differences in vocabulary and grammar; Singapore, though not a council member, observes these meetings and generally follows the MABBIM guidelines. Thailand's renewed interest in its largest minority language has led to an expansion of the teaching of MABBIM-approved, Malaysian-like standard Malay in universities and other educational institutions in southern Thailand.

### THREE PERSPECTIVES OF MALAY IN MALAYSIA

In Section 1, Malay was described in the context of surrounding languages and variants; that is Malay was painted as part of a broader landscape of languages in Malaysia. Malay is one among the 50 Malayo-Polynesian languages of Malaysia. Malay is one among a total of about 80 languages spoken by Malaysians as home languages. Standard Malay is one among at least 19 dialects of Malay spoken in the country and Malaysian standard Malay is one of two dominant forms of standard Malay in Southeast Asia.

The Malay language must complement and compete with all these numerous other languages and dialects; yet at the same time Malay draws its strength and its vitality from its ability to interact with the other languages of Malaysia. The following brief section will focus on three different perspectives of this Malay, embedded – as it is – in a complex setting of multilingualism and multidialectalism.

#### MALAY AS A DEMOGRAPHIC PHENOMENON

So far, we have used demographic data to estimate the number of speakers of various languages and dialects in contemporary Malaysia. But demography can also be used to interpret the status and the future of Malay in Malaysia.

First, multilingualism is an undeniable fact in Malaysia. But the trends of population growth indicate that the profile of multilingualism in Malaysia is undergoing a change. In 1968, roughly 50 per cent of the total Malaysian population of about 10 million was classified as Malay. Today in 1998 about 60 per cent of Malaysia's population of approximately 20 million is Malay. Based on current fertility rates and other data, Leete (1996: 190) estimated that in the year 2020 Malays (including all Malayo-Polynesian speakers) would comprise 70 per cent of a Malaysian population of 31 million. It is important to clarify that Leete's projections do not rest on increases through immigration, but simply on the fertility trends among Malaysia's ethnic groups.

These figures indicate that the ethnic and, therefore, the linguistic composition of Malaysia is changing. As noted elsewhere, the next two decades will see the increasing Malayization of the population of Malaysia (Collins 1999: xxii): 50% → 60% → 70%. But it is probably more accurate and more relevant to talk about the Malayo-Polynesianization of Malaysia, because even today speakers of Malayo-Polynesian languages other than Malay comprise more than 17 per cent of the total classificatory 'Malay' population (see Section 1 above).

Second, changes in Malaysia's education policy beginning in 1970 have resulted since the early 1980s in the use of Malay as the only language of instruction which functions at all levels of instruction from primary through university education.<sup>8</sup> This policy change has been accompanied by a tremendous expansion in the availability of education for Malaysians. The result has been a dramatic increase in the number of Malaysians of all ethnic backgrounds who have been educated in Malay and are indeed competent members of the Malay-speaking community of Malaysia. Malay is no longer a narrowly ethnic language in Malaysia because it is already widely used by non-Malays for a variety of different purposes (Collins 1999).

Assuming the overall maintenance of these educational and language policies, the role of Malay in Malaysian society can be assumed to increase significantly by the year 2020. According to Leete's (1996: 190) estimate, by that time less than 8 per cent of the population will have been born in the colonial period (before 1955). Indeed, in 2020 more than 50 per cent of Malaysia's population will be below 28 years of age. This suggests the increased importance of Malay in Malaysia's general population which will be young, well-educated, literate and fluent in Malay.

#### MALAY AS AN EMBLEMATIC PHENOMENON

The functions of a language go beyond the mundane purposes of communication and education. Language often serves as a marker of identity and social affiliation. Language is the emblem by which social group membership is signalled (Grace 1981: 154). As such, language can bear a value that exceeds practical uses. In Malaysia this metalinguistic function of language requires our consideration as well.

As noted above, the Malay language is a chief element in the constitutional definition of a Malay. But more than that, the Malay language is closely linked with the historical struggle of Malay and Malaysian nationalism. For example, The National University of Malaysia is not the oldest or the biggest university in Malaysia; some would say it is not the best university in Malaysia (*Asiaweek* 1997). But the National University of Malaysia pioneered the use of Malay as the sole medium of tertiary instruction in all disciplines from its inception. Clearly, it is the national university because from the beginning Malay was the only medium of instruction and research. The university's name was chosen to reflect the link between identity and language choice.

Malay, then, is the language selected to function as the chief means of communication in an enormously complex multilingual setting. Yet it remains the language most closely associated with anticolonialism, nationalism and the very identity of the Malay ethnic group. This double burden that the Malay language must bear is a heavy one. As Malay makes steady progress towards the goal of becoming an efficient national language for everyone, some groups seek strategies to retain Malay as an ethnic emblem or identity marker of Malayness. The increasing emphasis on the Arabic-based spelling system of Malay is viewed by some Malaysians as an affirmation of the emblematic Malayness of the Malay language. Similarly, although the Malaysian version of standard Malay is moving perceptibly closer to shared uniformity with standard Indonesian through the deliberations of the joint language council (MABBIM, mentioned above), some bureaucrats have insisted on introducing Malaysian-specific spelling changes that affirm Malaysia's special status and 'unique' profile; for example, the reintroduction of consonants lost centuries ago<sup>9</sup> must be considered a peculiar example of language nationalism in the face of affirmed policies of international uniformization.

#### MALAY AS A NEGOTIATED PHENOMENON

These indicators of the emblematic nature of Malay are simply examples of sociolinguistic phenomena related to language attitude and speech strategies. Very little data are available about language use and attitudes about languages in Malaysia. Many of the existing studies are based on invalid, non-empirical research methodologies that can only lead to invalid – even naive – conclusions. What is clear, however, is that language use in Malaysia cannot be matched to a template of fixed grids.

It is true that some language domains (social situations) generally require one language, rather than another. Formal standard Malaysian, for example, will be used in the classroom; but informal regional Malay will be used in the cafeteria. English will be used in the boardroom of a major private television station, but Malaysian will be used in that station's evening news bulletin.<sup>10</sup> That evening news will be read in formal Malaysian by the television anchor persons, but

short interviews within the televised evening news may include dialogues in regional or social dialects of Malay. Two Chinese Malaysians of different sub-ethnic backgrounds may converse in Mandarin, but switch to Malay to disambiguate some terms they are not certain of. Tamil office workers may begin a conversation in English with a Chinese co-worker, but switch to Malay when the interlocutor's English proficiency interferes with communication.

Language is an emblem of a speaker's identity and speakers of several languages can choose the identity they wish to project (Grace 1981). Moreover, other speakers can insist on or catalyze the use of one language over another. In Mohamad Subakir's (1998) study, he observed that, although certain domains were associated with Malay and others with Javanese in a community that was in large part bilingual, there were significant differences in language choice according to the gender of the speaker. Women in the village generally preferred Malay to Javanese, in contrast to men whose language choice was less predictable. Moreover, the presence of a Malay outsider or stranger in the village would trigger the use of Malay (even by people who usually spoke Javanese), whereas the presence of a Chinese merchant would trigger the use of Javanese (even by people who usually spoke Malay). Were the women projecting modernity and a Malaysian identity? Were the villagers projecting their non-Chinese solidarity to the itinerant Chinese bill-collectors?

In Malaysia language choice is pragmatic and negotiated within the social setting. Changing from one language to another – whether Asian or Indo-European – is a common occurrence in Malaysia; these changes can be definitive ('permanent') within a discourse or they can flip-flop back and forth within a discourse. Code-switching in a variety of languages and dialects is part of many Malaysians' everyday lives. Language use depends not simply on relevant domains and specified types of interlocutors, but also on socioaffective messages that need to be shared.

## CONCLUSION

In the space allocated for this brief paper, we have chosen to stress the diversity and complexity of the contemporary Malaysian language setting. Precisely this diversity is the most relevant depicter of Malay. Only by seeing – if dimly – how Malay rides through a sea of languages and dialects, can we appreciate its enormous usefulness and the position it now has as Malaysia's hyperlanguage – the language by which other languages are framed and understood (Collins 1999).

Perhaps we have erred in emphasizing the fluidity of the situation, the complexity of the choices, the perceptible changes in Malaysia as a speech community. Other speakers, assigned the task of describing the Malay language and its relationship to identity, may have chosen to list out the number of scien-

tific terms coined for modern Malaysian, the number of books published in the language, the journals, the computer dictionaries, the by-laws governing the size of letters in multilingual signs, the literary awards and the international conferences. These, too, are valid parts of the description of Malay, and in a more comprehensive discussion of the topic we may have included that information too.

Nonetheless, we hope that our purposely slanted description of Malay in Malaysia will at least offer another perspective, perhaps a dislocating discourse, from which and within which to reconsider the myths and trivia about the Malay language and its relationship to Malay identity. We seek to elicit the interest of our readers, to stimulate debate, to renew commitment because so much remains to be done in the cumulative task of describing Malay, its numerous dialects, its 50 linguistic cousins in Malaysia alone and the sociolinguistic phenomena that shape its use. Malay remains the key element in defining Malay ethnicity and Malaysian identity; yet it is also a solid, indispensable foundation stone in Malayo-Polynesian studies. At the same time, the study of Malay and Malaysian can only achieve significant progress by siting that endeavour within the context of regional and Malayo-Polynesian studies.

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#### NOTES

1. These figures probably slightly over-estimate the number of speakers of Malay as a first language. In two Malaysian states, Sabah and Sarawak, ethnic groups are delineated (with some difficulty and some inaccuracy) in the national censuses. Because of the difficulties in delineating clearly and to the satisfaction of all groups the names and distribution of all these groups, no list of language and ethnic groups is included here. Readers may refer to Wurm and Hattori (1983), Asmah (1983) and Moody (1984) for an indication of the diversity of opinions on nomenclature and enumeration of Sabah's and Sarawak's Malayo-Polynesian groups.

In the other Malaysian states, the ethnic category 'Malay' also includes first language speakers of Malaysia's traditional immigrant Malayo-Polynesian languages, in particular Javanese, Mandailing (Batak) and Bugis – all Malayo-Polynesian but linguistically not very closely related to the Malay language. It is likely that the number of Malaysians who still speak these three languages is small and in decline. See Mohamad Subakir (1998) for a case study of the maintenance and loss of Javanese in a village in Selangor.

2. This percentage is roughly equivalent to the total percentage of Malaysia's population that lives in Sabah and Sarawak. Leete (1996: 15) estimated that in 1991 19.4 per cent of Malaysia's population lived in Sabah and Sarawak. The proportion of Malaysia's Malayo-Polynesian (other than Malay) has probably increased since 1991 because the eastern states of Malaysia (where most non-Malay Malayo-Polynesians live) report a significantly higher annual growth rate; compare the 3.1 per cent growth rate for peninsular Malays (1980-91) to the 6.0 per cent growth rate for all Malayo-Polynesians in Sabah and 2.9 per cent in Sarawak (1980-91). See Tables 1.3 and 1.4 in Leete (1996: 19-21).
3. Although Asmah (1983: xii) listed only 22 languages (other than Malay) spoken in Sabah and Sarawak, she herself pointed out that her list was not exhaustive. For example, although her list contained only two Bidayuhic languages, in fact, she (Asmah 1983: 444) followed Court (1970) in enumerating four different Bidayuhic ('Land Dayak') languages. This number closely parallels the results of Topping's (1970) survey. Wurm and Hattori (1983) seem to suggest five Bidayuhic languages in Malaysia. In the enumeration here in this paper we follow the more conservative estimate of only four languages: Lara', Jagoi, Bukar-Sadong and Biatah.

On the other hand, other authors have implied even a larger number of languages in eastern Malaysia. Moody (1984), for example, listed a total of 41 Malayo-Polynesian languages spoken in Sabah alone, exclusive of Malay, Iban, Javanese and Sulawesi languages. This enumeration would bring the total of Austronesian languages in Sabah and Sarawak up to 60 or 70! Note that King (1994) suggested 'fine-tuning' this list and reducing the number of distinct languages enumerated therein.

4. Some would argue that numerous Malayo-Polynesian languages in Malaysia are in decline (Ariffin and Teoh 1994); other scholars have a less pessimistic viewpoint (McLellan 1994).
5. See Ramsey (1987) for an explanation of this nomenclature for Chinese languages.
6. In fact, even languages struggling to survive often are maintained in more than one dialect form. Hawaiian, for example, occurs in one dialect form on Ni'ihau Island, and still another in immersion courses and nursery schools elsewhere in the Hawaiian Islands.
7. This number was reached by adding the 1991 ethnic Malay populations of Kedah (1,008,600), Perlis (156,400), Pulau Pinang (422,000) and a significant portion (200,000) of Perak's 937,200 Malays (because Kedah Malay is the dominant dialect of the northwest portion of Perak state). Of course, a small portion of Kedah's ethnic Malays speak Patani Malay or even Pak-Tai (as noted above), so this total is an estimate made pending further information.
8. In the colonial school system, schools were organized along class and ethnic lines. English-language medium schools were established for the social and urban elite. Mandarin-medium schools, often begun as private schools with community support, were available for the Chinese population. Estates offered Tamil medium schools (and in a few cases Telugu medium schools) for their Indian employees. Malay-language instruction was available in some villages but usually only for the first three years of primary education. After independence (1957-70), educational opportunities were expanded, especially by establishing a large number of Malay-medium secondary schools; however, the basic quadripartite channeling of students into English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil medium students persisted until the policy changes mentioned here.





