

The Ideological Stance of Multilingualism in Education in Malaysia in the Press 2000-2020

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The past 20 years have witnessed major shifts in language and education policy in Malaysia. This reflects a range of social, economic, and political forces that influence and shape the policymaking in this multi-ethnic and multicultural country. Past research has suggested that language and education policies in Malaysia tend to have two main stances and are generally related to Malay (the national language), English, Mandarin, and Tamil. One stance is related to issues of globalization and employability, and the other is related to national and ethnic identities. In view of these stances, this paper seeks to contribute to the discussion and debates on these issues by empirically investigating inherent ideological positions in official statements published in two newspapers in the past 20 years. Specifically, it adopts concepts from critical discourse studies, and uses methods from computational linguistics to examine official statements from a total of 30,508 Malaysian newspaper articles published between 2000 and 2020. The findings indicate that the role of Malay and national ideology, and the global positioning of English continue to be central concerns in the discussion of language and education in Malaysia. In addition, the importance of learning Mandarin is also emphasized. However, indigenous and minority languages are largely absent in the discourses on education policies in the country. The effects of this exclusion are already apparent in the shift to languages like Malay, Mandarin, and English as a first language, and the increasing number of languages considered to be under threat in Malaysia.

Keywords: Education Policy; Indigenous and Minority Languages; Language Policy; Malaysia; Multilingualism



INTRODUCTION

As a multi-ethnic and multilingual country, Malaysia is a rich site for the study of language and education issues. The Malays make up more than half of the population in Malaysia, followed by the Chinese and Indians who make up about 25% and 7% of the population, respectively (Nagaraj et al., 2015). Malaysia also has many indigenous groups. In East Malaysia, the Ibans are the largest indigenous group in Sarawak, accounting for about 25% of the population in this state, while in Sabah, the main indigenous groups are the Kadazandusun comprising about 30% of the state's population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011). The indigenous groups in Peninsular Malaysia, also known as

the Orang Asli, only comprise about 0.7% of the Malaysian population, which is a similar percentage to those classified as *others*. The latter generally includes those who do not fall into any of the officially listed racial categories such as Malaysians of Portuguese descent.

Given the diversity of the population in Malaysia, it is therefore not surprising that there are almost 137 living languages spoken in the country (Eberhard et al., 2020). These include Bahasa Melayu, or the Malay language, which is the national and official language in Malaysia, and other Malay dialects spoken in the various states in Malaysia such as Penang, Kelantan and Sarawak Malay. The indigenous languages, which comprise almost 89% of the languages in Malaysia, include those spoken in Sabah and Sarawak, such as Bajau, Bidayuh, Iban, Kadazan, Murut and Penan, and those spoken in Peninsular Malaysia. The latter include Jakun, Semai, Mah Meri, Temiar, and Temuan, and like most of the indigenous languages in Malaysia, are under threat of disappearing (Coluzzi, 2017; Eberhard et al., 2020). Other languages in Malaysia include Chinese languages like Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, and Mandarin, and Indian languages like Malayalam, Punjabi, Tamil, and Telugu. There are also homegrown languages due to language contact, such as the three creole languages, Baba Malay, Chitty Malay, and Melaka Portuguese, as well as the colloquial variety of English (Austin & Pillai, 2020).

Despite this linguistic diversity, four languages are dominant in education: Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil. Malay is the main medium of instruction in public education. There are also Chinese¹ and Tamil medium² primary schools. This includes provisions that have resulted in an increasing number of private and international schools, where the main medium of instruction is English. In fact, the past 20 years have witnessed major shifts in language and education policies in this country. This reflects a range of social, economic, and political forces that influence and shape the policymaking. Past studies have suggested that language and education policies in Malaysia tend to have two main stances and are generally related to these languages. One stance is related to issues of globalization and employability, and the other is related to national and ethnic identities. Indigenous and minority³ languages are, however, largely ignored in official discourses surrounding language and education (e.g., Albury & Aye, 2016; Puteh, 2006).

This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion and debates on these issues by empirically investigating inherent ideological positions in the official statements published in two newspapers in the past 20 years. Many of these statements were made by politicians and government officers while others by leaders in communities or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While they in no way represent the whole official discourse on language and education, these statements indicate important views and beliefs publicly expressed in the newspaper. At the same time, they also have the potential to shape and influence public opinion, perceptions and/

1 In Malaysia, Chinese-medium schools refer to those where Mandarin is the main medium of instruction.

2 Tamil is the mother tongue of the majority Indian ethnic group in Malaysia, the Tamils from South India and Sri Lanka.

3 The minority languages are those spoken by a small segment of the population and include Chinese dialects and Indian languages (apart from Tamil), and creoles.

or the actions of policymakers. Using methods from computational linguistics alongside critical discourse studies to identify and examine official statements from a total of 30,508 Malaysian newspaper articles published between 2000 and 2020, we explore the intrinsic interplay between language choice and the associated ideological positions.

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION POLICIES IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia has witnessed a few major changes and shifts in policymaking concerning language and education over the past 63 years. The first defining decision regarding language was the institutionalization of Malay as the national language upon independence in 1957 as stated in Article 152 (¶1) of the Federal Constitution⁴. This was done with the aim of promoting and creating a common national identity. However, the same act also states that “no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using (otherwise than for official purposes), or from teaching or learning, any other language” (Federal Const. art. 152, ¶1a). Given the country’s British colonial history, English was to be used for legislative matters and legal proceedings. English could also be used in parliament and state assemblies. The use of English was to be allowed for ten years after Independence Day in 1957 “and thereafter until Parliament otherwise provides” (Federal Const. art. 152, ¶2, 6). Subsequently, the National Language Acts (1963/1967)⁵ declared that Malay was now to be the official language throughout Malaysia except in the two new states on the island of Borneo: Sabah and Sarawak. However, the act gave power to the king to permit the continued use of English for official purposes. Similarly, English could still be used in parliament state assemblies and the courts with permission. The latitude given to English in the act caused a considerable amount of dissatisfaction in the Malay community and Malay language groups (Mohd Rus & Sharif Adam, 2008; Roff, 1967).

In relation to education, a common national curriculum was introduced upon independence in a bid to inculcate national values and a national identity (Report of the Education Committee, 1956, also known as the *Razak Report*). However, as previously mentioned, in terms of language, there were essentially four mediums of instruction: Malay in the national schools, and English-, Chinese-, and Tamil-medium national-type schools. While the latter two were allowed to continue at the primary level, by the late 1960s English-medium schools began to be phased out, with the conversion fully completed by 1983 (Puteh, 2006). The 1961 Education Act also resulted in 55 Chinese-medium secondary schools making the choice to turn into national schools in return for government funding (Tan & Teoh, 2015). The remaining schools became independent (private) Chinese secondary schools. The status of Malay as the main medium of instruction in all educational institutions, except for national-type schools, was further reiterated in the National Education Act 1996.

4 https://www.jac.gov.my/spk/images/stories/10_akta/perlembagaan_persekutuan/federal_constitution.pdf

5 <http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/LOM/EN/Act%2032.pdf>

Shifts in Language and Education Policy

Emphasis on the use of English in the education sector increased in the 1990s when Malaysia was responding to globalization and aiming to be an education hub for the region (Economic Planning Unit, 1993). English started to be used as the medium of instruction in the increasing number of private colleges in the country (Gill, 2002; Omar, 1996). Then, in view of the increasing importance of English as a language of science and technology, the Malaysian government introduced the teaching of science and mathematics in English in 2003. This was considered as ‘a near-reversal’ of the initial national language policy by some (e.g., Kaur & Shapii, 2018). The policy was implemented in stages at both primary and secondary education levels. The policy was not popular among language associations, and it was reported that students were performing badly in the two subjects because they failed to understand the content that was being taught in English (Hashim, 2009; Rashid et al., 2017). Thus, in July 2009, the Minister of Education announced that the policy would be gradually phased out. This involved a switch back to the use of the Malay language, as well as Mandarin and Tamil to teach these subjects.

In 2012, a new policy known as MBMMBI, the Malay acronym for *Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language*, was introduced in a bid to create proficient bilingual speakers. This initiative was part of the *Malaysia Education Blueprint* (MEB) 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). To support this policy, roadmaps for both Malay and English language education were formed with time-based strategies and action plans: *Pelan Hala Tuju Pendidikan Bahasa Melayu 2016-2025* (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017) and *English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025* (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

This MEB also called for the acquisition of a third language. At present, more than 300 day-schools and fully residential public schools in Malaysia offer languages such as Arabic, Japanese, French, German, Korean, and Mandarin (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). The list of elective language subjects that upper-secondary school students can take from 2020 includes three indigenous languages (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019), although these are likely to be limited to the areas where these languages are used, and by the availability of teaching and learning resources. These languages are Iban, Kadazandusun, and Semai. Apart from Semai, which thus far has only been available at the primary level, the other two languages have been taught in primary and secondary schools in two states for more than 25 years now: Iban in Sarawak and Kadazandusun in Sabah.

In 2016, two further programs related to language education were introduced: *The Highly Immersive Programme* and the *Dual Language Programme* (DLP). These two programs can be viewed as extensions of the MBMMBI policy. The Highly Immersive Programme supports students by providing more opportunities for the use of English within and outside the English language classroom, which was among the aims of MBMMBI. The DLP policy offers a choice to schools to use Malay or English for the teaching of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Kaur & Shapii, 2018; Pillai & Ong, 2018). From January 2020, the state of Sarawak began teaching science and mathematics in English to Year One students in all national primary schools, except for Chinese-medium schools. It should also be noted that, as part of the policy

to make Malaysia a regional hub for education, there has been a sharp increase in the number of international schools and institutes of higher education. More than half of the students in international schools, where English is the main medium of instruction, are Malaysians (Nasa & Pilay, 2017). This does bring into question the original aim of having a common curriculum with fully Malay-medium public education at the secondary school level.

Ideologies in Language and Education Policy

A nation's language policy-making is often the result of several factors. Spolsky (2004), for example, highlighted four: national ideology, the role of English in the globalization era, the nation's sociolinguistic situation, and an interest in linguistic minority rights. Gill (2014), on the other hand, identified the following reasons in her analysis of the observed shifts in Malaysian language and education policy: globalization, international economic competitiveness, the need for access to science and technology, and employability. Indeed, these factors mentioned by Spolsky (2004) and Gill (2014) exemplify some of the ideologies inherent in Malaysian language policies. As mentioned previously, by giving Malay the status of the sole national language in the country, the government promoted the national language as a strong identity marker of all Malaysians, replacing the role that English had occupied during the colonial period. The role of Malay as the official national language is not open to dispute as it is enshrined in the constitution. Over the years, this, and the fact that Malay is represented as the main linguistic resource for national integration, have been constantly reinforced by both the governing (which have been predominantly Malay-based) and non-governing political parties. However, the interaction between English as a global language, and Malay as the national language, has been an intrinsic and complex one in Malaysia (e.g., Zhou & Wang, 2017). On the one hand, English is important given its role in ASEAN as its de facto working language alongside its use in ASEAN in a wide variety of domains (Low & Hashim, 2012), its global position, and its value in international trade and commerce. On the other hand, nation building requires a common language to help form a national identity, and Malay, as a language spoken by the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, naturally becomes the language choice (Kementerian Perpaduan Negara, 2021). As Albury and Aye (2016, p. 78) summarize:

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 [Malay] while operating nonetheless a highly internationalised economy which demands effective English language proficiency amongst Malaysians.

The main shifts in language education policies in Malaysia observed over the past 20 years reflect and capture this tension and competition between English and Malay in the country. The present study, as noted earlier, seeks to explore and understand the inherent ideological positions of language and education issues captured in official statements of these past 20 years, as reported in two Malaysian newspapers (*The Star* and *Malaysiakini*) from 2000 to September 2020.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the data is based upon concepts adopted from critical discourse studies (CDS), namely, the notions of ideology, power, and access. Van Dijk (1998) refers to ideology as a set of belief systems, social representations, and social practices that are shared by group members. Ideologies are expressed in various structures of text and talk, and often influence the ways in which social attitudes are expressed in various texts, such as in media and policy, among others. Critical discourse analysts argue that all media texts are inherently ideological as the mass media has ideological power that translates into the direct or indirect articulation of ideological stances on specific issues and phenomena (Fairclough, 2012). Connected to ideology are the notions of power and access. Bourdieu (1993) argues that power takes the shape of 'cultural capital', where the power of dominant groups is likely to be legalized through laws, traditions, culture, and consensus. Hegemonic power, then, exhibits itself once it becomes entrenched in tradition and culture, as well as habits and norms. This is significant because hegemonic power can control access to resources (often in terms of knowledge or material things). Hegemonic power also enables specific ideological stances to be exhibited in different forms of discourse where access to the control of a particular type of discourse (in this case the discourse of language and education issues) points to the powerbase of a significant ideology.

The notions of power, ideology, and access have often been used by critical discourse analysts to gain deeper insights into how texts are articulated and how power operates within them. For instance, Woolside-Jiron (2011) employed CDS to explain the ways in which reading policies are taken up in California, arguing that these policies socialize us into accepting certain values and goals while rejecting others. Similarly, CDS enables us to reveal the workings of ideology and ideological stances in media and policy texts on education in Malaysia. These texts would necessarily point the way for people to accept certain ways of thinking about education in Malaysia, and in the process, position people, and language and education issues in very specific ideological ways. The analysis itself is based upon five analytical categories derived from the data, which signify the arguments or reasons by which the support of or objection to a particular language, or to specific language policies is articulated. These categories (which are explained further below) are (1) employability, (2) national identity, (3) ethnic and cultural reasons, (4) globalization, and (5) economic or commercial value.

Methods

The study considered all the articles published in the press in Malaysia from 2000 until September 2020 for official statements that highlighted reasons for language choice and education policy in the country. Initially, the focus was on three main English language newspapers in Malaysia: *The New Straits Times*, *The Star*, and *Malaysiakini*. However, only articles from *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* were fully searchable online from January 2000 to September 2020, while the articles from *The New Straits Times* were only available from 2013 to 2020. We therefore focused on these two newspapers to identify official statements on language and education issues.

Methodologically, we employed computational linguistic tools to first identify the related articles, then the prominent categories of analysis. Finally, we embedded ideological concepts from critical discourse studies into the analysis and discussion.

Data Collection

To identify related articles, the following search terms from *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* were used:

Chinese/Chinese Language, Malay/Malay Language, English/English Language, Tamil/Tamil Language, Mandarin, Bahasa, Minority Language, Iban, Dusun, Kadazan.

A web crawler program was developed based on Pyspider, a spider system in Python, to download and gather all these articles in a folder, including details such as URL and date of publication. Based on this method, a total of 30,508 related articles were identified. All these articles were later coded according to the label pattern, *year-newspaper+number*. For example, the coding 2011-TS00028 indicates that it is an article published in 2011 and that it is the 28th article in the collection of articles from 2000-2020 appearing in *The Star* (TS). The coding 2016-MK00862, on the other hand, indicates that it is an article published in 2016 and that it is the 862nd article in the collection of articles from 2000-2020 appearing in *Malaysiakini* (MK).

As this study focuses on official statements in the discussion of language and education issues, the challenge was then to identify and extract relevant statements from all these 30,508 articles. To this end, the search was restricted to those articles that discussed language and education issues based on the word *education*. Further, the computer capacities were exploited where the official statement sentence pattern, *Official Label + Express Label + Language Label + Others*, was created and pattern matching was achieved through Python regular expression. Here, *Official Label* refers to and includes such keywords as *Minister, Director, Ministry, Bureau, Association* and *NGO*. *Express Label*, on the other hand, refers to expressive verbs (i.e., *say, tell, express, claim, state, point out, mention, issue, stress, assert, report, declare, and announce*) and single/double quotation marks. *Language Label* comprises terms such as *English language, Mandarin, Malay, Malay language, Bahasa, Tamil, Tamil language, Chinese, Chinese language, Iban, Dusun, Kadazan, and Minority language*. Only sentences that meet all these three requirements at the same time were extracted.

It must also be noted that all these terms were constantly refined in the light of close reading of relevant articles. For example, it was observed that the pronouns *he* or *she* occurred quite frequently in quoted official statements to refer to a particular minister or director in the government sector. Therefore, these two pronouns were eventually included in the *Official Label* to achieve a more accurate identification of all relevant statements in the newspaper articles. This close, interactive analysis involving both automatic computer search and human observation yielded a total of 2,914 instances of related official statements.

This interactive analysis for data refinement also applied to the identification of official statements associated with ideological positions. Initially, the official statement search was restricted to articles discussing such reasons as standards,

employability, and national and ethnic identities. Upon close reading of some relevant articles in this initial phase, the search was expanded to include such frequently occurring notions as culture and globalization. This generated a larger number of articles containing the official statements relevant to the current study. Another round of random but close reading of articles in this collection suggested additional, important notions such as economic and commercial values. The resulting list of categories of reasons for the debates and discussion of language and education issues in the official statements comprises the following:

- a) Employability
- b) National identity
- c) Ethnic and cultural reasons
- d) Globalization
- e) Economic or commercial value.

With these categories identified, the sentence pattern for computer processing mentioned before was then revised as *Official Label + Express Label + Language Label + Reason Label + Others*. Based on this revision, a total of 381 relevant official statements were identified. For the benefit of future replication studies, here is the full list of search items used in this study based on the procedures previously described:

- a) Employability: job / employ / career / hire
- b) National identity: national identit / patrio / national unity
- c) Ethnic and cultural reasons: culture / ethnic / root / mother tongue / extinct / indigen
- d) Globalization: global / international / worldwide
- e) Economic or commercial value: econom / financ / commerc / business

Since the automatic analysis of the corpus is restricted to superficial linguistic features (Sinclair, 1991), the search results of 381 statements were manually checked. Each official statement was checked and examined by two members of the research team against the original article in which the statement was found. This also involved reassigning official statements to the relevant categories upon the agreement of both readers. Through this labor-intensive process, a final total of 131 official statements were identified for the analysis and discussion of this study.

FINDINGS

The 131 official statements were, as noted earlier, based on five categories of arguments or reasons that were used in the statements as arguments in support of or against the promotion of a language or language policy. They are: (1) employability, (2) national identity, (3) ethnic and cultural reasons, (4) globalization, and (5) economic or commercial value. A comparison of the focus of arguments for the promotion of each language is particularly revealing of the ideological stance in the discussion of language and education issues in Malaysia.

Arguments for Language Choice

Table 1 presents the results of the analysis of arguments in support of particular languages in the official statements in the two newspapers considered in this study. There were noticeable differences for reasons of language choice in the debates and discussion of language use and policymaking as reported in the newspapers. The importance of employability, for example, is often cited in support of an emphasis on English (82%) (1) and Mandarin (18%) (2):

- 1) Mohamed Khaled [Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin] said students entering universities should first have excellent communication skills and a good command of the English language, adding that such students have better employment prospects, particularly in big companies. (2013-TS00851).
- 2) Earlier, Dr. Fong, who is Human Resources Minister, said employees in the private and government sectors were encouraged to learn Mandarin, as it would help them enter the Chinese market. (2004-TS00252).

	Total		Employability		National Identity		Ethnic and Cultural Reasons		Globalization		Economic or Commercial value	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Malay	26	20	0	0	18	82	7	32	0	0	1	3
English	50	38	9	82	1	5	0	0	32	68	8	28
Mandarin	46	35	2	18	2	9	8	36	14	30	20	69
Tamil	6	5	0	0	1	5	4	18	1	2	0	0
Minority languages	3	2	0	0	0	0	3	14	0	0	0	0
Totals	131	100	11	100	22	100	22	100	47	100	29	100

Table 1. Reasons for language choice in the newspapers (2000-2020). (own compilation).

English (68%), and, increasingly, Mandarin (30%), have also become the focus of emphasis in the country due to their global value:

- 3) Being a global language, young people should make sure that they are proficient in the English language, said Deputy Education Minister II P. Kamalanathan. (2013-TS00124).
- 4) “Having mastery of the English language prepares students for the rapidly changing globalised world”, said EON Bank Bhd senior executive vice president and Group Business and Investment Banking head Peter Y C Chow. (2011-TS00806).
- 5) Najib [Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak] said Mandarin is important in linking Malaysians to the global community. (2011-TS00021).
- 6) “Tomorrow’s global language is Mandarin, so we must move towards this in collaboration with all these industries and foundries”, he [Human Resources Minister M. Kulasegaran] said after a working visit to the ITI here yesterday. (2018-TS00234).

Similarly, these two languages have been the primary languages named to offer economic or commercial value, with Mandarin accounting for 69% of the total official statements and English 28%:

- 7) “Like it or not, English and Mandarin have commercial value and language skills are important for a country like Malaysia, whose export industries play a vital role to its economic growth”, said party president Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek after attending a Chinese New Year celebration organised by Taman Soga MCA branch here on Saturday. (2013-TS00099).
- 8) Dr Chua [MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek] said languages such as Mandarin and English have commercial value, and a good command of both languages would enhance one’s competitive edge. (2013-TS00087).

As expected, national identity is predominantly used as an argument for a focus on the Malay language, accounting for 82% of the total official statements in this category:

- 9) “Proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia will help us carry our national identity to enable Malaysians to communicate and integrate with other communities in this country”, Najib [Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak] said when opening the new school block of SJK Chung Hua No. (2017-TS00198).
- 10) He [Information, Communications, Culture and Arts Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim] also said that championing Bahasa Malaysia as the national language should not only be the responsibility of the Malays, but the other races as well. “Our national language can be the vehicle for racial unity and communication to facilitate the realisation of 1Malaysia involving all the communities in the country.” (2009-TS02008).

Further, ethnic and cultural reasons were put forward as arguments for a focus on Mandarin (36%), Malay (32%), Tamil (18%), and minority languages (14%):

- 11) “The national language and English are important but other languages such as Mandarin and Tamil should also be learnt.” Muhyiddin [Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin] said by understanding the languages, Malaysians could better appreciate the way of life, values and cultures of the country’s various races. (2010-TS00050).
- 12) Earlier, Maszlee [Education Minister] had said that the creation of the Standard Malay Language Framework developed by national language experts would be a big boost to the speakers of the Malay language in the context of culture and language aspirations. (2018-MK01398).
- 13) “It is about the soul, culture and heritage of the community”, said Pathi [Tamil educationist SP Pathi], a lawyer who is also editorial advisor to Tamil monthly. (2003-MK01136).
- 14) Gobind [Communication and Multimedia Minister Gobind Singh] said he was very happy with the celebration themed ‘Bejalai Betungkatka Adat, Tinduk Bepanggalka Pengingat’ (know your culture and roots in the Iban language), which also saw the participation from the Dayak community of West Kalimantan, Indonesia. (2019-MK01331).

Reasons for the Promotion of Particular Languages

When the data for reasons for each language choice were examined, several interesting insights were obtained. Table 2 presents an overview of the reasons.

	Total		Malay		English		Mandarin		Tamil		Minority languages	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Employability	11	8	0	0	9	18	2	4	0	0	0	0
National identity	22	17	18	69	1	2	2	4	1	17	0	0
Ethnic and cultural reasons	22	17	7	27	0	0	8	17	4	67	3	100
Globalization	47	36	0	0	32	64	14	30	1	17	0	0
Economic or commercial value	29	22	1	4	8	16	20	43	0	0	0	0
Total	131	100	26	100	50	100	46	100	6	100	3	100

Table 2. Reasons for the promotion of particular languages in the newspapers (2000-2020). (own compilation).

We first turn to Figure 1 for the results of the analysis of reasons for the promotion of the Malay language.

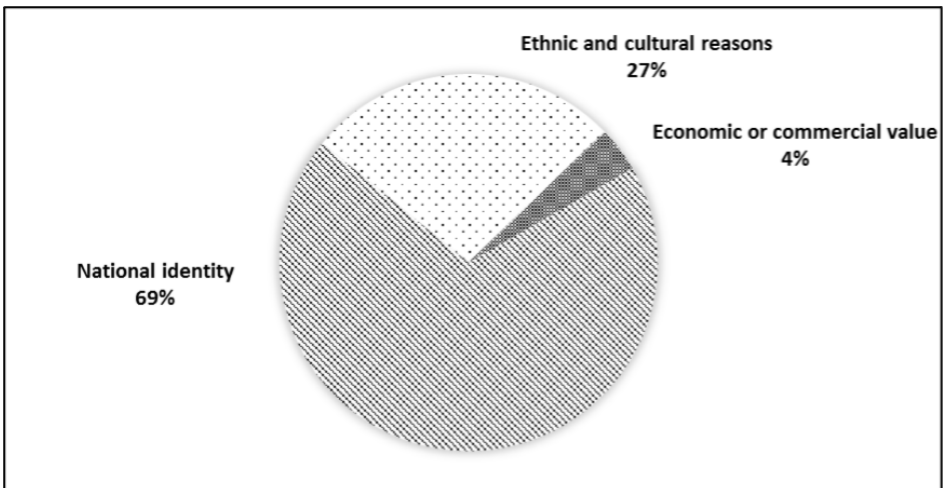


Figure 1. Reasons highlighted in official statements for the promotion of the Malay language. (own compilation).

As can be seen from Figure 1, national identity was the dominant reason in the discussion of the promotion of the Malay language, accounting for 69% of all official statements associated with it:

- 15) “Proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia will help us carry our national identity to enable Malaysians to communicate and integrate with other communities in this country”, Najib [Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak] said when opening the new school block of SJK Chung Hua No. (2017- TS00198).
- 16) He [Chief secretary to the government Ali Hamsa] added that the government was making various efforts to empower Bahasa Malaysia without marginalising English. (2013-MK01487).

Ethnic and cultural reasons are also used in support of the Malay language:

- 17) “English is important for knowledge and international communication while Bahasa Malaysia is important for national identity, culture and heritage”, she [Dr Nik Safiah, a guest researcher at Malay Studies Academy] says, stressing that problems arise only when one language is judged to be superior over another. (2011-TS00800).
- 18) Dr Rais [Arts, Culture and Heritage Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim] said that his ministry would embark on several language culture education programs to revive and protect Bahasa Melayu as the nation’s heritage. (2004-TS02066).

Turning now to English, we find that globalization accounts for more than half (64%) of the reasons expressed in all the official statements associated with it. This reflects the global language position of English (see Figure 2):

- 19) In his [Prime Education Ministry deputy director-general Datuk Dr Amin Senin] speech, Dr Amin said that in this modern era, the English language is an international language and Malaysian students need to improve their English in order to compete on an international level. (2013-TS00856).
- 20) “English is used internationally, and it enables us to communicate easily with people from other countries”, said Orando Holdings managing director Datuk Dr Eng Wei

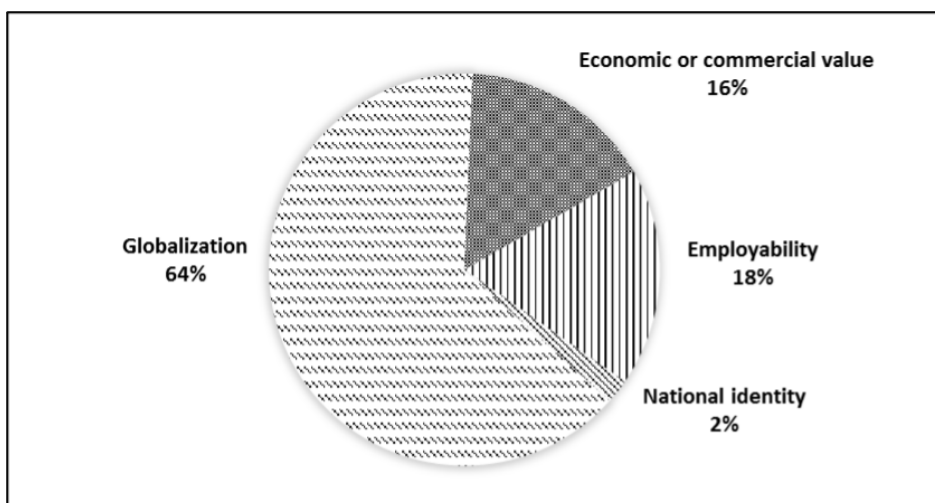


Figure 2. Reasons highlighted in official statements for the promotion of the English language. (own compilation).

Chun as he stressed the importance of the English language. (2014-TS01093).

- 21) Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today urged Malaysians to master the English language as it is vital for success in a globalised world. (2004-MK00699).

In addition, Malaysians were urged to master English to make themselves more competitive in the job market and to drive the economic growth of the country, citing reasons of employability (18%) (22) and economic or commercial value (16%) (23):

- 22) He [Sarawak Yang Dipertua Negeri Abdul Taib Mahmud] expressed the fear that more than 20,000 fresh graduates from Sarawak would have difficulty getting employed due to their inability to master the English language. (2016-MK00862).
- 23) British Trade and Investment director Tony Collingridge said competency in the English language is essential in Malaysia's drive to be an innovative, high income and high value-added economy. (2013-TS00907).

Mandarin, on the other hand, has been promoted for three main reasons. It is emphasized for its economic and commercial value (44%) (24), for its increasingly important role in a globalized world (31%) (25), and for its ethnic and cultural value (17%) (26) (see Figure 3):

- 24) Citing the Mandarin language as an example, he [Lembah Pantai MP Nurul Izzah Anwar] says Mandarin is not only the language for the Chinese ethnic group, but also an important economic language in this globalised world. (2013-MK00372).
- 25) Najib [Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak] said Mandarin is important in linking Malaysians to the global community. (2011-TS00021).
- 26) "The national language and English are important but other languages such as Mandarin and Tamil should also be learnt." Muhyiddin [Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin] said by understanding the languages, Malaysians could

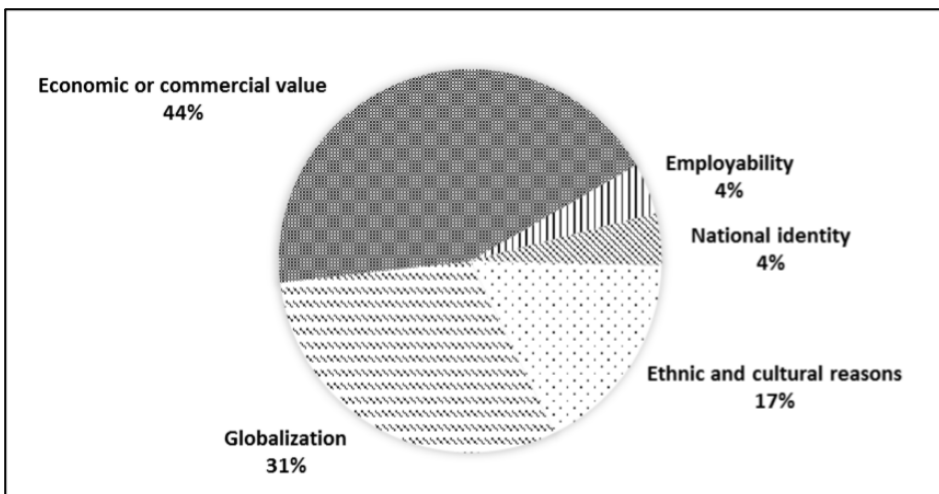


Figure 3. Reasons highlighted in official statements for the promotion of Mandarin. (own compilation).

better appreciate the way of life, values and cultures of the country's various races. (2010-TS00050).

From the newspaper articles analyzed, it was found that only a small number of official statements were made in this period related to the promotion of the Tamil language (Figure 4) and minority languages. A frequently cited emphasis on Tamil (67%) is for ethnic and cultural reasons (27). This same argument is the only reason found in the data in support of the minority languages (28):

- 27) Kulasegaran [DAP national vice-chair M Kulasegaran] said Indians should demonstrate support for Tamil education because the language is a repository of their culture. (2014-MK00321).
- 28) Gobind [Communication and Multimedia Minister Gobind Singh] said he was very happy with the celebration themed 'Bejalai Betungkatka Adat, Tinduk Bepanggalka Pengingat' (know your culture and roots in the Iban language), which also saw the participation from the Dayak community of West Kalimantan, Indonesia. (2019-MK01331).

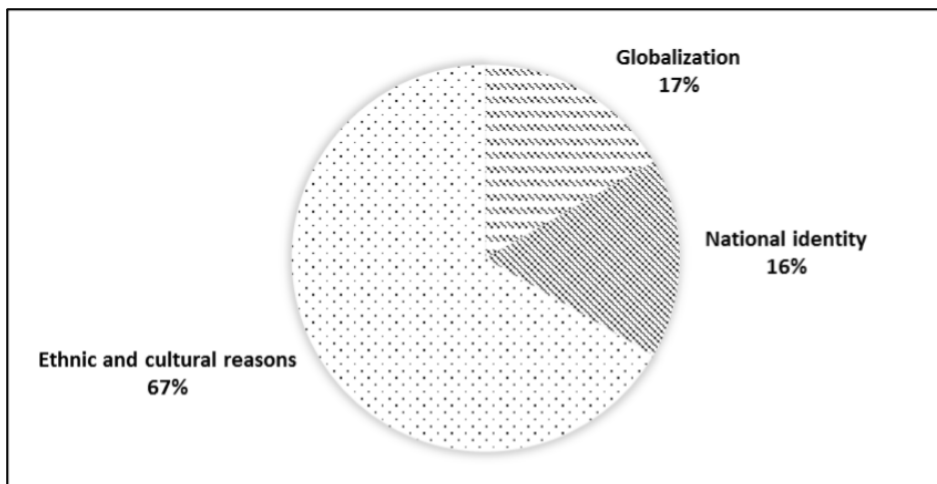


Figure 4. Reasons highlighted in official statements for the promotion of the Tamil language. (own compilation).

DISCUSSION

The results from the analysis of the official statements in the newspapers published from 2000 to 2020 suggest that English and Mandarin have often been represented ideologically as two major languages enjoying a global prominence with economic and commercial value. Having a good command of English has further been highlighted as offering the additional advantage as far as employability is concerned. The discursive connections between employability and the two languages of English and Mandarin appear to stem from current socio-economic practices that prioritize the ideologically-loaded language privilege of English and Mandarin. Mandarin is privileged specifically in terms of the

affordances it presents with access to the economic market of China, which, in turn, promotes economic power for individuals. The high value accorded to Mandarin has also been reported in other Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore (Starr & Kapoor, 2021) and Indonesia (Hoon & Kuntjara, 2019). While Mandarin is not a lingua franca in Malaysia or in any of the other Southeast Asian countries, it is already perceived to hold a substantial amount of symbolic power in terms of knowledge-based socio-economic development in connection to China, one of the largest markets in the world.

English, on the other hand, is privileged because of the power it holds within global contexts as a lingua franca. Ideologically, English holds a significantly powerful position socio-politically as a shared language across the world. The symbolic power of socio-economic development that English wields has cemented its position as a business lingua franca, where English forms the frame of reference for communication and knowledge sharing in the global business world, and in the development of a knowledge-based society. Such a stance is also evident in Singapore and the Philippines (Tupas, 2018). The tension between policies that highlight English language education or even English as a medium of instruction is not peculiar to Malaysia (Kirkpatrick, 2012). The tensions in Malaysia emerge from the dissenting voices of Malay, Mandarin, and to a lesser extent, Tamil language educationists. They can also be heard from parents, with those of the urban middle-class more likely to be pro-English medium instruction (Yap, 2015). These voices can be powerful enough to force language education policies to shift, as with the end of the Teaching of Science and Mathematics in English policy and the introduction of the Dual Language Policy in Malaysia.

It is interesting to note that, despite the predominant role of English in relation to the growing power of ASEAN (e.g., Hashim & Leitner, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Low & Ao, 2018), there was no indication of this emphasis in our media data. What was emphasized in the media texts instead was an apparent competition between English and Mandarin in terms of the privilege granted to both these languages. We can see here that not only are English and Mandarin given prominence in terms of employability; they are also privileged in terms of being global and international languages, thereby affording access to the global world. The achievement of economic and knowledge-based power for Malaysians is premised upon the value of the access that proficiency in English and Mandarin provides for Malaysians. Fairclough (2012) argues that knowledge drives economic and social processes, and that “the generation, circulation, and operationalisation of knowledges in economic and social processes” (p. 3), in turn, drive change in society. We argue that the prominence of both English and Mandarin in our findings stems from the ideologically laden perception that both languages are seen as drivers for the generation, circulation and operationalisation of knowledge, and, thus, afford access and opportunities for individuals to become members of a knowledge society.

Malay, on the other hand, is predominantly the language choice emphasized for reasons of national identity for the country. This is perhaps unsurprising given the status of Malay as the national language. The significance of national identity in relation to Malay is a socio-political representation of national unity in Malaysia. This is common in many countries as part of the decolonization process, and, as Tupas (2018) points out, “Southeast Asian social policies have largely been anchored in the desire to promote and perpetuate particular forms of nationalism” (p. 154).

At the international level, however, there is very little discussion about the value of Malay' for a global community or in global trade and demand. While there are some official statements from the newspapers that suggest plans and efforts by the Malaysian government to develop the Malay language into an international language, Malay is represented primarily in terms of its value to national identity. Legitimizing Malay as a crucial element of national identity is an ideological stance precisely because linguistic identity is intrinsically tied to the notion of a nation-state and belonging to that nation-state. While there are also occasional voices found in our corpus of official statements, which consider the four major languages in Malaysia to be 'part and parcel' of the national identity in the country, by large Malay is the language that is given prominence in the construction of the Malaysian national identity. As noted earlier, nation building has always been a focus in the discussion of language choices and education policies in Malaysia. In this sense, Malay has always had a symbolic function in the country, being the mother tongue of the Malays who are the largest population of Malaysia (Kaur & Shapui, 2018).

The emotional attachment to language is real and is often the result of a language being intrinsic to the culture and ethnic identity of a particular group of people. As shown in this study, ethnic and cultural reasons are often used in support of Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. In fact, this was the only reason identified in this study for the promotion of minority languages. In this regard, Albury and Aye (2016, p. 71) argue:

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.

While language and education in Malaysia have always been closely linked to issues of ethnicity, one interesting observation is that the promotion of Mandarin has increasingly been disassociated from an ethnic-based argument, and emphasis on the language is instead placed in light of the rise of China as a super economic power. The findings indicate that there exists a perceived competition between language choices and emphasis in education policy in multi-ethnic and multicultural Malaysia. This is particularly evident in the case of English and Malay, and English and Mandarin, as discussed earlier.

A final important observation in the analysis of the official statements is the increasing emphasis on producing multilingual Malaysians instead of focusing on one language at the expense of others in the country: that is, Malaysians have been urged to be proficient in several languages to be able to compete globally and to help the nation to achieve the status of a developed country. This stance has been consistently represented in the media, and points once again to the access to power that multilingualism can offer individuals, both educationally and economically.

The future challenge for the country, it seems to us, is how to move away from a monolingual lens in policymaking to a multilingual and multicultural perspective (e.g., Smidt et al., 2021; Tham et al., 2020) in line with the final observation made above. That is to say, the education system in Malaysia is still largely monolingual

in both conceptualization and practice, reflecting what Tan (2005, p. 49) has called 'linguistic segregation' as far as individual schools are concerned:

Whereas education through different languages is widely accepted in Malaysia, each individual school is mainly seen as operating through *one* medium and is thus a monolingual school except that other languages may be taught as subjects. Therefore, particular schools are labelled as Malay- or Chinese- or Tamil-medium schools.

In fact, in one of official statements from our data, Dong Jiao Zong (DJZ), the umbrella body for the management of Chinese schools in Malaysia, was quoted to have commented that the initial plan of language policy of the country in 1957 was with a multicultural and multilateral focus:

- 29) DJZ contended that the education system is intended to be based on multi-culturalism and multi-lateralism. It backed this by quoting the Education Ordinance 1957: 'The educational policy of the federation is to establish a national system of education acceptable to the people as a whole which will satisfy their needs and promote their cultural, social, economic and political development as a nation, with the intention of making the Malay language the national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of people other than Malays living in the country'. DJZ said the 1960 Rahman Talib Report and the Education Act 1961 have 'twisted and changed the multi-cultural and multi-lateral education system into a unilateral one' that was now in practice, under the Education Act as amended in 1996. (2011-MK01537).

The idea of an education system based on a multilingual and multicultural perspective is, however, a complex one and requires an informed approach to its conceptualization and implementation. As García and Tupas (2019) point out, many schools have been rather successful in "teaching for monolingualism, even when on the surface bilingualism is the goal" (p. 402). It is beyond the scope of the current paper to discuss this issue in detail. Interested readers may gain insights into what we mean by a multilingual and multicultural perspective by referring to Nieto (2010), García and Li (2014), Cook and Li (2016), De Houwer and Ortega (2019), and Tham et al. (2020).

We do, however, acknowledge that the findings we have reported have their limitations. First, as previously mentioned, this study focused only on two newspapers to identify official statements on language and education issues: *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*. Future research might explore the extent to which the observations reported here based on the two newspapers hold true more widely. Second, while this is beyond the scope of the present study, we note that it is always useful to have further insights into the issues discussed in this paper through, for example, interviews with different stakeholders. This would allow an exploration of how ideologies are shaped as a result of various socioeconomic and political factors. In addition, official documents by the government may be examined to ascertain the extent to which certain ideologies projected in the media are in line with what was officially published, conveyed and constructed by the relevant, responsible government bodies. This would contribute to a better understanding of the ideological stance of multilingualism in education in the country.

CONCLUSION

A consideration of the language and education issues in Malaysia over the past 20 years, seen through the official statements in the two newspapers considered in the present study, suggests an emphasis on the strengthening of the status of Malay as the national language. At the same time, the impact of globalization, economy, and employment opportunities contribute to a continued emphasis on English and a renewed interest in Mandarin in the country. Language policymaking appears to be centering upon the relationship between English and Malay, largely neglecting the requirements of other languages, which are marginalized due to their minority status. The languages and cultures of minorities, such as Malaysian Indians and the indigenous people, are broadly excluded from the discussion. All these seem to aggravate the problem in seeking uniformity due to economic globalization and nationalism (cf., Watson, 2007), rather than preservation and celebration of local knowledge and culture through multilingual education. While there is a token acknowledgement of the need to preserve minority languages and culture, this is not framed in concrete processes, leading to a deepening gap between the privileging of English, Mandarin, and Malay at the expense of other minority languages (Ariffin, 2021).

While past research has also suggested that national ideology and the international role of English have been central concerns in language policy development in Malaysia (e.g., Albury & Aye, 2016), our study further shows that the discussion and debates have now extended to acknowledge the importance of learning Mandarin *in* and *for* Malaysia, with China emerging as an economic and political superpower in the world, and the advantage of developing multilingual capacities. An implication that emerges from this finding is that policymakers need to think about how this multilingual focus can be strengthened, realized, and promoted in making the education system more inclusive and diverse. This, we believe, will be an important agenda for the country to ensure that the focus on Malay, English, and Mandarin is not at the detriment of other languages. In fact, the findings indicate that there need to be more conversations surrounding minority and indigenous languages in Malaysia, addressing in particular the type of support that can be provided to encourage their use and maintenance. At the same time, a true understanding of what multilingual capacities entail is warranted.



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