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**Conceptualization of Nationalism through Language -  
An Analysis of Malaysian Situation**

**Maya Khemlani David, Ph.D.**  
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# Conceptualization of Nationalism through Language – An Analysis of Malaysian Situation

Maya Khemlani David, Ph.D.  
Wendy Yee Mei Tien, Ph.D.

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## Abstract

Malaysia is a multiethnic society with people of many religions and languages. Ethnic diversity and polarization among the young has made the creation of a sense of national identity not only important but also urgent. After independence, the government drew up a National Language Policy to inculcate and nurture national consciousness among the diverse ethnic groups by promoting a common curriculum and a common language across the different types of schools to foster national unity and national identity.

Bahasa Malaysia, the national language is used as the medium of instruction in national schools while in national type primary schools; it is taught as a compulsory subject. However, it is unclear if the use of the national language has had an impact on the formation of a national identity among Malaysians. A research study was conducted to compare the impact on two different groups of Malaysians (aged >45 and <30). The reasons for the focus on two different age groups will be explained. This paper will discuss the results and describe what patriotism and a sense of national identity means to these two groups of Malaysians.

## Introduction

Malaysia is a multiethnic society with diverse race, religion and languages amongst her 27 million people. Such ethnic and linguistic diversity has made the creation of a sense of national identity more complex. After independence, several policies, such as the 'National Education Policy' (NEP) and the 'National Language Policy' (NLPol), were enacted to promote a common curriculum across the different types of schools so as to foster national unity and national identity.

*Bahasa Malaysia*, (literally the Malaysian language) was Malay and became the national language and the medium of instruction in national schools. However in national-type schools vernacular languages like Mandarin and Tamil were the medium of instruction but only at the primary level, i.e. the first six years of schooling. In such schools both *Bahasa Malaysia* and English were taught as compulsory subjects. The idea of using a standard curriculum and mandating the study of the national language after independence has been recognized as occupying an important role in establishing fundamental attitudes and images of national identity among the younger generation and it is hoped that these will form the core values which they will carry over into adult life.

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## **National Language and Nation Building**

Nation building is essential to national unity, vital in multiracial and multilingual countries. Cheah (2002) in his book, *'The Making of a Nation,'* defined nation building as 'both economic progress and socio-political integration of a nation.' If there is no strong binding nationalism, multiracial nations are inclined to polarization and competition especially along ethno-religious lines (Nazrin, 2007).

Although Malaysia has enjoyed Independence for 50 years, there is still a certain degree of separation and polarization among its multi-racial inhabitants. The policy of preferential treatment for Malays, known as the New Economic Policy, has contributed to this (Burton, 2007).

The main aim of this policy was to narrow the income gap between wealthy Chinese and poor Malays and indigenous people, known as *bumiputra* or "sons of the soil", by giving the latter preference for university places and state jobs. The policy has to some extent succeeded in eradicating poverty among Malays but has been accused of leading to an informal apartheid (Burton, 2007).

The adoption of the Malay language rather than English as the language of instruction in state schools in the 1970s led Chinese and Indian families to place their children in vernacular or national type schools so as to preserve their native language. The overwhelming majority of students in state primary schools or national schools today are Malays. At one time soon after independence Malaysia's national or government schools were mostly racially integrated, now they are largely segregated (Kissel, 2008).

## **Language in a Multiracial Society**

Language is not only an important element in communication in a multiracial society like Malaysia but it is also the main marker determining the membership in an ethnic group and the loss of language identity is tantamount to the loss of ethnicity (Gothom, 2008). Although the learning of a vernacular language by the minority groups in Malaysia is undeniably important (Oo, 1991) it is also essential to have a national language as it has a major role in fostering socialization and creating national unity.

This is clearly seen in Uganda which does not have a national language. When Ugandans travel a few kilometers away from their home district, they find it difficult to communicate. English becomes the only lingua franca and that too if they had gone to school. Ugandans thus become strangers to fellow Ugandans in their own country (Wandega, 2008).

## **Civil Unrest and Language Policy Around the World**

Many incidents of civil unrest in different parts of the world have demonstrated the importance of having a sound language policy to achieve national unity. Based on a research conducted by

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Gothom (2008) on the problem of language in border provinces of Southern Thailand, language is an important issue in any ethnic conflict. Gothom (2008) advocated that language issues, like religious issues, can be the driving forces behind ethnic mobilization against the established order perceived as unjust.

There are many examples addressing the failure of language policies across the globe. For example, when Pakistan achieved its independence, Urdu was spoken by 7% of the population, while Bengali and Sindhi was spoken by 56% and 12% of the population respectively. Clearly, the choice of Urdu as the national language favored some groups and alienated others. Such a language policy became the main driving force behind the secession of East Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh.

### **Electoral Advantages and Consequent Unrest**

Gothom's research also pointed out that if a language policy favors the majority, it can help in winning an election. For example in Sri Lanka, a Sinhalese party proposed Sinhala as the only official language, winning a competitive election but leading ultimately to Tamil grievances and eventually to the fight for an independent Tamil state. Therefore, an unsound language policy directed at delivering a short-term electoral advantage can become a long-term disaster for the country.

### **Policy of Accommodation**

In contrast, India and Singapore have handled the national language issue with sensitivity. The creation of states with certain linguistic homogeneity has helped to diffuse some ethnic problems in India. Although more than 75% of the population of Singapore is Chinese, *Bahasa Melayu* (the Malay language) is accepted as the national language and English as the de facto official language. This language policy in Singapore has been successful in creating stability and a sense of fairness.

### **Name of the National Language in Malaysia**

In Malaysia however, even the term to describe the national language has been contested. Although *Bahasa Malaysia* has been acknowledged as the national language in the country's constitution, it has undergone three phases of name change and is labouring under a fourth one (Oo, 1991). They are *Bahasa Melayu*, *Bahasa Kebangsaan*, (national language) *Bahasa Malaysia*, *Bahasa Baku* and more recently, back to *Bahasa Malaysia*.

The shifting terminology provides an insight into the development of Malay nationalism over the years. The spirit of Malay nationalism, as reflected in the use of *Bahasa Melayu*, (Malay language) was used in the pre-independence and early post independence years. It was consolidated with the promulgation of the term *Bahasa Kebangsaan* (National Language) in the post independence and the pre-NEP years. However, it seems to have tapered off with *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malaysian Language) during the NEP era, when the concern was with other dominant

issues such as the eradication of poverty and socio-economic restructuring. *Bahasa Baku* (Standard Malay) was the term used in schools in 1992.

According to Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin, the previous Information Minister (2007), *Bahasa Malaysia* will again be the official term used to refer to the national language. The Cabinet made a unanimous decision in April 2007 to revert to the term *Bahasa Malaysia* as it was felt that this would help inculcate a sense of belonging for all citizens irrespective of race. Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin in an interview with a local daily newspaper, *The Star* said, 'The Malay language belongs to Malaysians of all races and not just the Malays. The term *Bahasa Malaysia* would instill a sense of belonging.'

The term *Bahasa Malaysia* was introduced by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the country's first prime minister to inculcate the sense of a Malaysian identity. Such a move was generally accepted and no one asked for a change until Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim became the Education Minister in 1986. He dropped the term *Bahasa Malaysia* for *Bahasa Melayu* and it has remained that way (Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin, *The Star* 2007).

Datuk Seri Zainuddin added,

'But now, we feel we should go back to the original term. By using the term *Bahasa Malaysia*, a psychological barrier would be removed, not just for Malays but also other races. The Malays, for example, must not see *Bahasa Malaysia* as a language used (solely) by themselves. If Malays truly want to promote the language regionally or globally, they should not be worried if others use it for religious reasons such as their books and sermons. Similarly, non-Malays would also not see the language as a Malay language but a language that belongs to them.'

The former Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim (2007) echoed this role of the national language and supported the name change as the move was designed '...to show that the language does not belong to just one race. This is for national unity.' The former Transport Minister Datuk Seri Chan Kong Choy (2007) too supported the decision when he said, 'The term *Bahasa Malaysia* is more appropriate as it will build a greater sense of nationalism for all Malaysians.' Another Prime Minister, the fourth who ruled for over twenty years Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (In-Won Hwang 2003: 249) once explained,

'*Bangsa Malaysia* means people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak *Bahasa Malaysia* and accept the Constitution. To realize the goal *Bangsa Malaysia*, the people should start accepting each other as they are regardless of race and religion.'

### **Impact on the Education System**

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Malay as the national language has had an impact on the education system in Malaysia. The generations of Malaysians who lived in the urban areas before Independence and during the early days after independence were English educated.

After the implementation of the National Language Policy, a new generation of *Bahasa Malaysia*-educated Malaysians was born. As a result, there seems to be a consensus today that the standard of English in this country has dropped. At present with the rapid internationalization of the Malaysian economy and the rise of globalization, there is greater emphasis on the English language. There is a clear divide between the English and Malay educated populace in terms of proficiency in these respective languages.

### **The Role of and Competence in English**

The English educated generation is now in their early fifties and sixties. They are the mothers, fathers, grandparents and probably the teachers of the *Bahasa Malaysia* educated generation today. As these two generations are living side by side, how would the different language education systems influence their sense of patriotism? Does the use of a national language aid in nation building and help build national unity?

### **Friendship Patterns, Biases and Prejudices**

Santhiram (1999) conducted a study on the friendship patterns among students in some Malaysian secondary schools. The results revealed that there was a high level of polarization among the students and the students were using racial and ethnic distinctions extensively in their relationships. Among the many reasons given, the lack of proficiency in the national language (*Bahasa Malaysia*) was one of the main factors that influenced their choice of friends in schools.

This issue developed because although *Bahasa Malaysia* has become the lingua franca between the Malays and the non-Malays in this multiethnic society, non-Malays in the urban areas often prefer English or their mother tongue to the national language (see David, 2008).

In addition, even though *Bahasa Malaysia* is the official language in the education system and required for entry into the public (government) tertiary institutions, English is the medium of instruction in private universities. Therefore, the non-Malay may learn the national language as the lingua franca but not use it much with non-Malays and even with English educated Malays.

### **Social Mobility and Economic Integration through Proficiency in the Language of the Majority**

Based on the results of a research conducted by Milani (2007) in Sweden, “proficiency in the majority language is an inevitable prerequisite of social mobility and economic integration.” The majority language in the case of Malaysia is the national language (*Bahasa Malaysia*) as more than 60% of the population in Malaysia is Malays. Therefore, given the complexity of the national language ideology in Malaysia, it is unclear if the emphasis on the use of the national language has created exclusionary effects and ideological boundaries between the Malay native

speakers and the non-native speakers. More importantly for the purpose of this research, is the question-will Malaysians become more united and more patriotic by using the national language?

## **This Study**

This study is conducted to compare the impact national symbols like language have had on establishing patriotism and national identity between two different groups of Malaysians (aged >45 and <30).

## **Methods**

### *Sampling*

The study was conducted on two different age groups of Malaysians; aged below 30 years old and above 45 years old. The reason for selecting these two different age groups is because we wanted to compare the impact of the national language policy (NLP) on national identity. The group aged 45 years old and above represents Malaysians who went through the old education system before the implementation of the national language policy while the other group, aged below 30 years old represents Malaysians who have undergone the new education system with the national language as the medium of instruction. These two groups are specifically chosen to mark the differences distinctively.

The data for the group aged below 30 years old were collected from a group of 83 undergraduates from University of Malaya while the data for the group aged 45 years old and above were collected from a group of teachers who are teaching in some primary and secondary schools in different parts of the country. These respondents were randomly selected based with age as the only criteria. The sample size of 83 respondents for each category is not big but based on G Power, the statistical tool for sample size estimation (large effect size = 0.8), is sufficient for an exploratory study.

There were more females (128) than males (38) among the respondents in both age groups as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic Details of N**

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>&lt; 30</b>	<b>&gt; 45</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Female</b>	69	59	128
<b>Male</b>	14	24	38
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
<b>Malay</b>	84		
<b>Chinese</b>	67		
<b>Indian</b>	14		
<b>Others</b>	1		



In terms of ethnicity, 84 of the respondents from both age groups were Malays, 67 were Chinese, 14 were Indians and 1 of other ethnicities. The ratio of ethnicity among the respondents is not crucial for this study as this study compares the two age groups (< 30 and > 45) and these are equal in numbers.

### *Instrumentation*

The questionnaire used for this study was developed with the goal of understanding the impact of the national language towards the formation of a sense of national identity. The questionnaire is divided into five sections; each measuring the different aspects of language used except for the first section which contains questions focussing on demographic information. The second section determines language proficiencies while the third section determines language choices. The fourth section measures language ideology and the fifth section measures the perceptions of the respondents towards the national language policy. In order to have an in-depth understanding on the respondents' views towards language choices and inter-ethnic relations, three open ended questions were included in the last section of the questionnaire. However, the focus of this paper is only on the impact of the national language policy towards national identity and patriotism. The analysis will focus on selected sections of the questionnaire which are deemed relevant to this study.

The questionnaire was piloted to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument. Reliability is a central concept in measurement and it basically refers to consistency; internal consistency and consistency over time (Punch 1998). Validity helps to determine the appropriateness of the instrument. It is concerned with the extent to which the instrument measures what it was designed to measure (Wiersma 1991).

A total of 20 students from both age groups were involved in the pilot test. However, not all 20 questionnaires were completed. Only 17 completed questionnaires were used for the reliability and validity test. All the statements in the questionnaire were checked to ensure each statement in the questionnaire was understood by the respondents.

Following the comments from the respondents, some of the words used in the instructions as well as sentences were improved. For example, 'any one language' was changed to 'no preferred language', 'first language' was changed to 'mother tongue', 'please tick ONLY ONE answer for each question' as opposed to 'please tick your answer' and 'bazaar' was further defined as 'simple language and *bahasa pasar*'. This was to ensure greater clarity and specificity and to help the respondents understand and interpret the statements accurately.

### *Data Collection*



The edited questionnaires were administered in classrooms for the group of respondents aged below 30 years old. The researchers explained the voluntary nature of the participation and assured them of the confidentiality of the information provided. As for the group of respondents aged above 45 years old, the questionnaires were distributed to them through their respective headmasters and headmistresses. The completed questionnaires were then returned.

## **Results**

National identity can be easily defined as an individual's sense of belonging to his nation while patriotism denotes having positive and supportive attitudes to a nation by individuals or groups. Therefore, national identity and patriotism will be used interchangeably in this study.

A frequency test was conducted to identify the sense of patriotism among the respondents. The results indicated that 74.1% of the respondents rated their sense of patriotism as good and very good. This result remains valid when a comparative analysis was conducted between the two different age groups (72.3% for the < 30 years old and 75.9% for the > 45 years old).

With regards to perceptions of the National Language Policy (NLPol), respondents from aged 30 and below were more agreeable and receptive to the NLPol (74.7%) as compared to the respondents aged 45 and above (55.4%). Based on the results of Pearson chi square ( $p = 0.032$ ), this difference in perception between the younger and older group was significant. This result was further supported when a t-test analysis was conducted to compare the mean values. The mean value is higher for the younger group as compared to the older group. There was a significant difference in these mean values; for the younger group ( $M = 13.19$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ) and the older group [ $M = 12.31$ ,  $SD = 2.84$ ;  $t(164) = 2.16$ ,  $p = .033$ ]. This suggests that the younger group were more receptive towards the NLPol as compared to the older group. This is not surprising because the NLPol was not fully implemented when the older generation was in schools.

The impact of the national language policy on different age groups can be determined based on the differing levels of proficiency in the national language (*Bahasa Malaysia*). The results in Table 2 indicate that 55.4% of the respondents from the 30 years old and below age category have very good proficiency in spoken *Bahasa Malaysia* as compared to only 32.5% from the older age group. Based on the results of Pearson chi square ( $p = 0.008$ ), this difference is very significant. This suggests that the use of the NLPol in Malaysia has been successful in improving the spoken proficiency in Malay.

The results in Table 2 also indicate that the written proficiency in *Bahasa Malaysia* is higher among the younger generation (50.6%) as compared to the older generation (32.5%). From the results obtained, it is evident that the NLPol has had a greater impact on the younger generation (aged 30 and below) as compared to the older generation (45 and above).

**Table 2: Spoken and Written Proficiency in *Bahasa Malaysia***

Age Group	Spoken Proficiency	Written Proficiency
	Very Good	Very Good
< 30 years old	55.4%	50.6%
> 45 years old	32.5%	32.5%

The correlation analysis results in Table 3 indicate that there is a strong relationship between proficiency in the national language and sense of patriotism. There is a very strong relationship between those who are proficient in the spoken [ $r = .364$ ,  $n = 83$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ] and written [ $r = .378$ ,  $n = 83$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ] national language (*Bahasa Malaysia*) with a sense of patriotism among those aged below 30 years old. As for the older group (above 45 years old), a sense of patriotism was only positively correlated with proficiency in the spoken [ $r = .242$ ,  $n = 83$ ,  $p < 0.029$ ] national language and not the written national language.

**Table 3: Correlation between Spoken and Written Proficiency in *Bahasa Malaysia* and Sense of Patriotism**

			Spoken Proficiency	Written Proficiency
< 30 years old	How do you rate your sense of patriotism?	Pearson Correlation	.364**	.378**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000
		N	83	83
> 45 years old	How do you rate your sense of patriotism?	Pearson Correlation	.242*	.112
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.029	.318
		N	83	83

\* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\* Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

In order to identify if there is a relationship between the impact of NLPol and the sense of patriotism between the two different age groups, a correlation analysis was conducted. The results in Table 4 indicate that there is a positive correlation between the two variables (impact of NLPol and sense of patriotism) [ $r = .279$ ,  $n = 83$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ], with high impact of NLPol

associated with a strong sense of patriotism among the younger generation (< 30 years old). On the other hand, there is no correlation between the impact of NLPol and sense of patriotism [ $r = .161$ ,  $n = 83$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ] among the older generation (> 45 years old). As the earlier results have shown that the younger generation was more agreeable and receptive to the NLPol as compared to the older generation and the correlation results also revealed a positive relationship between the impact of NLPol and sense of patriotism among the younger generation. This suggests that the use of the national language or NLPol have impacted positively on the formation of national identity and patriotism among Malaysians.

**Table 4: Correlation between the Perceptions of National Language Policy and Sense of Patriotism**

			How do you rate your sense of patriotism?	Perceptions of NLP
< 30 years old	How do you rate your sense of patriotism?	Pearson Correlation	1	.279*
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.011
		N	83	83
> 45 years old	How do you rate your sense of patriotism?	Pearson Correlation	1	.161
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.147
		N	83	83

\* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the use of national language has had an impact on the formation of a national identity among Malaysians. Although the results indicate that both the younger (72.3%) and older (75.9%) respondents are patriotic and have a good sense of national identity, the impact of the NLPol on patriotism is stronger among the younger respondents. They were more exposed to the use of the national language because the national language was used as the medium of instruction and it was compulsory to learn it from the age of seven.

In addition, the lingua franca in school for the younger group was also the national language because many teachers who taught the younger group were proficient in the national language. The role and status of English were radically reduced, from being the medium of instruction in the education system during colonial times English was relegated to being taught in schools as a second language.

In fact, in rural areas where there was almost no environmental exposure to the language, English was virtually a foreign language (see David, 2004). In contrast, the older group (above 45 years old) did not go through a fully Malay education system. The subjects taught in schools especially in the urban areas were mostly in English. English was the preferred language because the teachers who taught the older generation were mostly English educated and lacked proficiency in the national language. This is because *Bahasa Malaysia* was made the national language only after independence. This explains why the respondents aged below 30 (74.7%)

were more agreeable and receptive to the NLPol as compared to the respondents aged 45 and above (55.4%).

The main rationale for having a national language policy in Malaysia is to promote national unity through the use of a national language among the multi ethnic groups. It is believed that there is an intimate relation between language and national identity. According to Jaffe (2001:271), 'Language is understood as an expression of communal spirit and the uniformity of language is important not for efficient communication ... but as proof that the speaking subject is authentic member of the nation.' The results of this study also reveal that the national language policy in Malaysia has created an impact on the formation of national identity and sense of patriotism.

The impact of NLPol towards fellow Malaysians were revealed by the respondents' proficiency in the national language. It is clear that the younger group of respondents were more proficient in both spoken (55.4%) and written (50.6%) *Bahasa Malaysia* as compared to the older generation. Their proficiency in the national language was also associated with their sense of patriotism. This suggests that proficiency in the national language has a relationship with a sense of national identity or patriotism. Although the older group was less proficient in the national language there was also a relationship between their spoken proficiency and their sense of patriotism.

## Conclusion

Fishman, Fergusson and Jyotirindra (1968) stated that "...language is one of its markers of symbolic unity and identity" (ibid.). A national language helps in instilling a sense of national identity and national unity. This study although limited to this sample shows that for this group of Malaysian respondents the national language has played an important role in creating a sense of national identity and patriotism. The different results obtained in relation to the impact of the National Language Policy on national identity between the younger and the older generation clearly supports this.

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Maya Khemlani David, Ph.D.  
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics  
University of Malaya  
50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
[mayadavid@yahoo.com](mailto:mayadavid@yahoo.com)

Wendy Yee Mei Tien, Ph.D.  
Section for Co-Curricular Activities,  
Elective Courses by Other Faculties and TITAS (SKET)  
University of Malaya  
50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
[wenyee2000@yahoo.com](mailto:wenyee2000@yahoo.com)