Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdis20

Articulation of medium of instruction politics in the Malaysian Chinese press

Moses Samuel a, Mahmud Hasan Khan b, Lee Luan Ng c & Kin Wai Cheang d

a Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
b Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, Macquarie Park, NSW, Australia
c Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
d Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia


To cite this article: Moses Samuel, Mahmud Hasan Khan, Lee Luan Ng & Kin Wai Cheang (2012): Articulation of medium of instruction politics in the Malaysian Chinese press, Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, DOI:10.1080/01596306.2012.745731

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2012.745731

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings,
demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Articulation of medium of instruction politics in the Malaysian Chinese press

Moses Samuel*, Mahmud Hasan Khanb, Lee Luan Ngc and Kin Wai Cheangd

aFaculty of Education, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; bDepartment of Linguistics, Macquarie University, Macquarie Park, NSW, Australia; cFaculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; dAsia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

In postcolonial multilingual societies, matters of education are deeply rooted in the discourse of ethnicity. In Malaysia, the interface between ethnicity and education is reflected in recent debates on the choice of medium of instruction (MOI). In 2002, the Malaysian government introduced English as MOI by replacing Malay, the national language, for teaching mathematics and science, at the school level. However, in 2009, the policy was reversed to Malay. This policy initiative has been actively contested in the Malaysian media. Through an analysis of news reports on the controversy published by the Malaysian Chinese newspaper, Nanyang Siang Pao, this paper aims to illustrate how a sizeable ethnic minority is able to position itself vis-à-vis a national policy. To explain the ethno-political construction of MOI debates in the newspaper, we use two concepts, namely, ‘plurality of struggles’ (Laclau, 2006a, 2006b; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) and ‘transmission of the speech of others’ (Bakhtin, 1981). These notions are contextualized in the macro-context of a multi-ethnic polity in which Chinese society, Chinese press and Chinese education are seen to co-construct community interests.

Keywords: language politics; discourse; Malaysia; Chinese press; education policy; ethnicity

Introduction

In postcolonial multilingual societies, matters of education are deeply rooted in the discourse of ethnicity. Several scholars (Brown, 2007; Tollefson & Tsui, 2004) theorizing postcolonial societies have focused on ethnic, social and linguistic groups that have access to political and economic opportunities and those that are disenfranchised. Medium of instruction (MOI) policies may affect access to education, which in turn may create inequalities in a society resulting in political tensions within the society. While MOI debates are inherently political, we wish to extend the arguments of postcolonial scholars by drawing on a discourse analytical perspective built around the concept of articulation (Laclau, 1990, 1996, 2005, 2006a, 2006b) in order to explain how various stakeholders negotiate and discursively construct education in schools.

In this paper, which analyzes media discourse on MOI controversies in Malaysia, a country in Southeast Asia, we argue that MOI policy matters at the national level.

*Corresponding author. Email: mosess@um.edu.my
are invariably articulations by a variety of agents in the state. These articulations are also the discursive manifestation of antagonisms in the given society (Laclau, 1990). Hence, the discourses of education policies in the media, like many other antagonistic discourses, are perhaps perpetually plural or ‘political’, comprising ‘a world of contingent articulations’ (Laclau, 2006a, p. 112). These discourses may be propagated, supported or endorsed by hegemonic agents who are aligned to the official position of the state.

Alternatively, the discourses may be resisted or subverted by other agents against the ‘dominant’ discourse. The Malaysian media offer a platform for understanding the inherent antagonisms in the society on various education issues, including policy debates involving communities in the society. As Pennycook (1996) has argued, policy discourse may involve ‘a range of cultural and political ways of doing and thinking’ (p. 133); hence, analyses of media discourses that draw on multiple voices may provide an understanding of how a variety of agents – politicians, community leaders, educators and stakeholders – articulate, contest and frame national policies. In Malaysia, MOI policy debates are substantively covered in the media. However, the Malaysian media have often been seen as ‘neutered’ by ‘legislation’ and ‘corporate ownership’ (Brown, Ali, & Manan, 2004; Gomez, 1994; Nain, 2002; Sani, 2005). Nevertheless, one can still argue that resistance can be manifested in the Malaysian media, albeit subtly. This paper does not provide an analysis of MOI policies but instead offers insight into the discursive processes of policy articulation in the media.

To provide some background, in 2002, the Malaysian government announced that English would replace Malay, the national language, as a medium of instruction for mathematics and science in schools. The policy is widely known as PPSMI, the Malay acronym for Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris (translated Teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in English). After a 6-year ‘experiment’ with the PPSMI policy, an announcement was made by the government on 9 July 2009 to reverse the 2002 decision with effect from 2011, thus reverting the medium of instruction for mathematics and science to Malay. In this paper, we discuss how the mainstream Malaysian Chinese press articulates the position of the Chinese community regarding the medium of instruction policy reversal in 2009. We focus on a particular ethnic dimension of the debate as portrayed in the Chinese news media.

While the PPSMI policy was launched in 2003, it was debated at length in the Malaysian media between 2002 and 2003. The Chinese position on PPSMI in 2003, when the policy was first implemented, was divided between the Chinese political parties and community leaders (Nanyang, 27 November 2002, 2003). The disagreement with the government policy by some groups in the Chinese community was heavily criticized and labeled as ‘chauvinistic’ by the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (Brown, 2007), while the support of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Chinese political party in the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, could be read in terms of their allegiance to the then prime minister and the ruling coalition. However, in 2009, the shifts in the Chinese position was perhaps mediated by the departure of Prime Minister Mahathir and the results of the 2008 general elections, which saw a weakening of the position of the BN and the rise of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a Chinese-majority opposition party.

In 2003, the contestation was between the use of English and the mother tongue for mathematics and science instruction. With the policy reversal in 2009, the debate
shifted to secondary schools. In the post-2009 scenario, Chinese was restored as the MOI in primary Chinese schools; but the students who moved from primary Chinese schools to national schools now had to study mathematics and science in Malay. Given the scenario, the Chinese community argued for the use of English for mathematics and science in secondary schools. Given the differences in the arguments between 2003 and 2009, the current paper focuses on the policy debates in the Chinese media in 2009. While the 2003 debates focused on the implementation of PPSMI, the 2009 focus was on the policy reversal.

By focusing on the Chinese press, particularly on the news reports published by the Nanyang Siang Pao, a Malaysian Chinese language daily, this paper examines how arguments on medium of instruction are debated in ethno-political terms (Brown, 2005, 2007; Tan & Santhiram, 2010). The ethnicization of policy debates is possible in the country, partly because of the demographics, with a large Chinese minority representing 26% of the population, while the Malays and the bumiputeras (translated ‘Sons of the Soil’) represent 65% of the population. The Indians represent 7%, while other smaller ethnic groups represent 1% of the population. Ethnicization is present in the mainstream political parties. The ruling coalition BN is dominated by the United Malay National Organization (UMNO). The coalition shares power with the MCA and Malaysian Indian Congress (Collins, 2006; Gomez, 2007; Gomez & Jomo, 1999; Lim, Gomez, & Rahman 2009; Shamsul, 1996). The opposition parties are also dominated by ethnic or religious groups, e.g. the Chinese-majority DAP and Malay-majority Pan Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS). Likewise, the mainstream newspapers in the country may also be seen as ethnically aligned as there are Malay, Chinese and Tamil newspapers besides English newspapers, which are owned by different political parties (Nain, 2002; Sani, 2005). Thus, the interface between education, ethnicity and politics is present either implicitly or explicitly in the discourse of the debates on education in Malaysia. In order to understand the nature of arguments in Nanyang, it is important to understand the backgrounds of the medium of instruction debates on Chinese education in Malaysia and the Chinese press in the country.

Medium of instruction debates on Chinese education in Malaysia

In Malaysia, there are two parallel educational systems at the school level, i.e. a national school system, which uses Malay as a medium of instruction; and a vernacular school system (also known as national-type schools), which uses either Chinese or Tamil as mediums of instruction. The roots of these systems are historical. Early proposals for a single stream national education system in a 1951 colonial report on education known as the Barnes Report were met by protests by the Chinese community. In that year, another report, the Fenn-Wu report, argued against a single stream on the grounds that that the Chinese community needed assurances that their culture and language would be protected. In the words of the Fenn-Wu report, although

[...] it was only natural that Malaya’s educational policy should be directed consciously and consistently toward [...] an ultimate Malayan nation [...] care must be taken not to prostitute education to political purposes. (Federation of Malaya, 1951, p. 7)
In 1956, a third report to re-evaluate the education system, *The Razak Report*, eventually recommended that vernacular primary schools be permitted to continue but be required to adhere to a common syllabus with the national schools. Thus, since independence, debates over Chinese education in Malaysia have been a field of contestation in Malaysian national discourse (Tan, 1997), the tension being between the need to establish a common national identity through education and the need to ensure the linguistic heritage of minority groups.

A key organization that has been at the forefront of articulating the Chinese case has been *Dong Jiao Zhong* (DJZ), a group of Chinese educationalists from two organizations: the United Chinese Schools Committees’ Association (UCSCA) and the United Chinese School Teachers’ Association (UCSTA). In 2002, when the Malaysian government introduced English as the medium of instruction for mathematics and science in all schools, the DJZ resisted the move seeing it as ‘an attack on their community’s identity’ (Collins, 2006). In a report on PPSMI produced by DJZ, they assessed their stance toward the policy and underscored how the Malay news media singled out the UCSCA and UCSTA for using ethnicity to make their case against the government position (Dong Jiao Zhong, n.d.).

**Chinese press in Malaysia**

The media in Malaysia are aligned ethnically, as is evidenced by the presence of a strong Malay, Chinese and Tamil Press. The ownership of the two main English dailies also indicates ethnic and political biases. *The New Straits Times* is owned by people close to UMNO, the main component in the ruling BN coalition government, while *The Star* is owned by MCA, the Chinese component in the coalition government. Like any coalition, Brown (2005, p. 50) argues, the BN is also ‘far from being a homogenous’ and a ‘united whole’, revealing ‘differing interests and political rivalry between component parties, and sometimes within the parties’. Hence, the ‘control of the media’, he further argues, is ‘not just a matter of imposing the BN’s political discourse on society at large, but is often also the stage for intra-coalition competition and negotiation’ (Brown, 2005, p. 50).

The ownership of *Nanyang Siang Pau*, on the other hand, belongs to Rimbunan Hijau Group whose Chairman Tan Sri Tiong happens to be a member of the Sarawak United Peoples’ Party (SUPP), a Barisan component party in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia; while his brother, Tiong Thai King, is a member of parliament from SUPP. The Rimbunan group owns two other Chinese newspapers, namely, *Ming Pao* and *Sin Chew Daily*. The website of Rimbunan declares that the consolidation of these three groups is aimed at creating a global Chinese language media group, which will emerge as one of the largest Chinese language print media platforms (http://www.rhg.com.my).

The English daily, *The Star*, is often seen as a pro-Chinese newspaper simply because it is owned by MCA. However, when the articulation takes place in the vernacular language, as in the case of *Nanyang*, it may be considered more Chinese-oriented than *The Star*. It may be inferred that, as an English-language daily, *The Star* is mostly read by English-educated Chinese, while the Chinese newspapers are read by more Chinese-educated Malaysian Chinese. It is apparent that the Chinese community in Malaysia contains multiple voices; for instance, in 2001, when MCA bought the shares of a Chinese daily, *Sinchew*, a number of journalists stepped down
fearing their voice would be constrained. However, in 2007, when the newspaper was bought by Rimbunan Group, connected to Barisan component party in Sarawak, SUPP, such attempts were not recorded. Hence, it may appear that the Chinese press in Malaysia is deemed to articulate the position of the Chinese community. In the words of Jeff Ooi, a political blogger, and now a member of the Malaysian parliament:

The Chinese-Malaysian community used to take pride in the ethnic trinity: the Chinese Society; the Chinese Education; and the Chinese Press. They are intertwined, with one enriching the other. Conversely, they also degenerate one another. Should one wither, the other wilts in tow, albeit silently yet organically. (Ooi, 2007, emphasis ours)

Thus, as pointed out by Ooi, the interdependence among these three entities exemplifies the crucial role of Chinese press in articulating the voice of the community in the eyes of the Malaysian Chinese community.

Methodology

The data

The data of this study comprised all 53 newsreports on the medium of instruction controversy published by Nanyang Siang Pao [南洋商报] from June to August 2009. The decision on the reversal of policy was made on 9 July 2009. The dataset comprised reports published a month before and after the announcement in order to capture the historical moment when the MOI policy debates reached their peak and to show how the debates before and after the announcement were differently constructed. At the same time, we were interested in the reversal of the policy and not in its implementation as this is covered elsewhere (Brown, 2005, 2007). Most of the reports on the debates were published during this 3-month period from June to August. These news reports in Chinese were translated into English by the researchers involved in this study and validated by Chinese lecturers in the Department of Chinese Language in a Malaysian university.

Analytical tools

This paper aims at understanding how selected media representation of the utterances made by various stakeholders perspectivized the MOI debates. We use the concept of perspectivization not in the strict functional-linguistic sense as conceived by Wodak and Meyer (2009) and Reisigl and Wodak (2009) among others. According to them, in any linguistic act of perspectivization, it is necessary to examine from which point of view nominations, attributions and arguments are used. We did not distinguish between nominations, attributions or arguments but highlighted the key features in the argument, i.e. the phrases used as a discursive construct. This is done in line with Laclau’s definition of discourse, which is not ‘essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role’ (2005, p. 68). It is also necessary to indicate that we read perspectivization as synonymous to articulation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Articulation has been defined by Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 105) as ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is.
modified as a result of the articulatory practice’. In order to perspectivize, the newspaper texts quote strategically, which reflects Bakhtin’s notion of transmission of the speech of others. According to Bakhtin (1981), in everyday discourse, someone’s portrayal of reality is ‘not concerned with forms of representation but only with means of transmission’ (p. 339). In other words, the ‘forms of representation’ are concrete finished discursive products as opposed to ‘means of transmission’ that constitute multiple ways of constructing reality in order to perspectivize. Such attempts to perspectivize can be found in the domain of media discourse, which portrays particular representation(s) of reality (Fowler, 1991) instead of the reality. In so doing, the newspapers texts construct a ‘chain of equivalence’ (Laclau, 2005) among specific social actors and thus signal a sense of distance against political others. This is how they form ‘plurality of struggles’ (Laclau, 2005) to fight a common cause by forming alliances among stakeholders with heterogeneous identities – within the larger sociopolitical sphere where they are located.

Analysis of media representation of the medium of instruction debates

This section presents an analysis of the data, which leads to the discussion of how the articulation of MOI debates can be explained in the context of a multiracial country like Malaysia where political debates are largely framed in ethno-cultural terms.

Press coverage before the policy reversal

The data show that before the decision for policy reversal was made, a number of reports were published to ‘perspectivize’ the debate. Since newspapers do not have legal-administrative authority to speak on and justify a stance toward an issue, they employed the strategy of perspectivization rather than the strategy of legitimization, for example. Perspectivization, in this sense, serves to float or frame an idea while legitimization invests that idea with legal authority (Bernstein, 2005).

The strategy of perspectivization was mostly aimed at constructing arguments for teaching in the mother tongue in the primary school and sustaining ‘cultural integrity’ [wenhua de wanzheng xing] through the maintenance of Chinese identity. A report dated 8 June 2009, for instance, expressed the view that if mathematics and science continued to be taught in English, in a few years’ time students would use English ‘even when saying the sun rises in the east’. The concern raised here is that the statement ‘the sun rises in the east’ is not merely a piece of information; it also constitutes knowledge. The allusion here is that knowledge that involves basic truths should be articulated in one’s mother tongue, because knowledge-formation is not merely an epistemological exercise but also a matter of identity rooted in a specific culture and ethnicity.

In order to perspectivize, the news reports displayed a tendency to use strong emotive words. For instance, on 2 June 2009, barely a month before the announcement, a report headlined ‘Look into mother tongue teaching of mathematics and science problem’ was published. In this report, the Deputy Minister of Education, Wee Ka Siong, who happened to be ethnically Chinese, quoted, Jiao Zhong, the UCSTA that the members of the association were deeply ‘disappointed’ [shen gan shiwang] and were ‘regretful’ [yihan] because of the Education ministry’s
ambivalence in making changes to an ‘inappropriate’ [buheshiyi] education policy. The use of emotive language in the Chinese words cited above may render a partisan reading of the controversy.

The news report also foregrounded the information that the PPSMI policy was characterized as ‘conservative’ [baoshou] and part of a ‘narrow-minded old framework’ [xiaai de jiu kuangkuang] by the CSTA. The reference to the ‘narrowminded old framework’ may allude to Malaysia’s British colonial legacy of using English as a medium of instruction, which was endorsed by the status quo (hence ‘conservative’).

Furthermore, the policy was identified as creating an environment of ‘unfair treatment’ [Bu huo gongping duidai] toward the Chinese community. Given the bleak picture of the imposed policy, the fight for the development of Chinese education in Malaysia was deemed by the newspaper as ‘reasonable’ [Heqingheli]. The report concludes that:

In a situation where the government does not carry out their expected duty on developing the vernacular schools equally, we could only continue to fight ‘till the end, until Chinese Education can receive a fair and reasonable status. (Zhengfu meiyou luxing ta bixu gongping fazhan ge yuanliu xuexiao de zeren, zai zhe qingkuang xia, women zhihao jixu zhengqu, jianchi daodi, yizhi dao hua jiao huo de gongping heli di diwei.) (Nanyang, 2 June 2009)

In order to support the Chinese language struggle and to denigrate the policy, the newspaper used quotes from non-Chinese political leaders to buttress the Chinese position, even to the extent of using an Islamist source. In doing so, the newspaper establishes a chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2005) among apparently discordant actors. One example is a quote from a leader of the Islamist party, PAS, which claims that the education minister Muhyiddin Yasin was ‘brutally murdering’ [残害] the country’s ‘future leaders’ [Weilai zhurenweng] through the PPSMI policy (Nanyang, 7 June 2009).

Besides, embedding the views of PAS leaders, the newspaper also referred to prominent national figures. The former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was reported regretting the abolishment of PPSMI [Wo zhi neng shuo sheng duibuqi]. An economic justification for the implementation of PPSMI provided by the former Prime Minister, was also cited:

If in the future the children can’t get a job, or go for further studies, the situation will be worse. (Yinwei ruo rihou, haiizi men zhao bu dao gongzuo huo wufa jixu shenzao, qingkuang jiang hu de geng dao.) (Nanyang, 8 June 2009)

Mahathir Mohamad, who spearheaded the PPSMI policy in 2002, was quoted here to perspectivize the arguments for secondary school and not the primary school. In the bulk of the data, it is obvious that the Chinese community is represented to support mother tongue education for primary education but English for secondary education (see the discussion below on the arguments provided by the opposition leader and the political party within the coalition government that represent the Chinese community in Malaysia). Hence, the policy of English as a medium of instruction is both denigrated and celebrated for different reasons for different levels of education (i.e. primary or secondary education).
While fighting for mother tongue education, Chinese community leaders, cited in the press, could not be seen overtly fighting only for the Chinese community in the country. To bolster their claims, they did not sideline Malay or even deny its status as national language (Nanyang, 8 June 2009). It was also politically expedient that the arguments for Chinese as a mother tongue were not pushed to the extent that the Chinese press could be labeled as chauvinistic while advocating for the mother tongue argument. In 2002, when the policy was implemented, the Chinese community strongly opposed the move and was labeled as being chauvinistic. Besides, in the late 1980s, several dissidents in the country, including a number of Chinese educationalists, were also accused of ethnic chauvinism and were arrested under the Internal Security Act (Brown, 2005). Hence, in this instance, instead of making a case for the preservation of the Chinese identity, the arguments for the mother tongue were framed in terms of the needs of a plural society:

In order to be in-line with the needs of a multiracial society and nation, the policy should ensure fair treatment of the growth of mother tongue education for each race. (Yi fuhe duoyuan zhongzu shehui guojia de xuqiu ji gongping duidai ge zuqun muyu jiaoyu.) (Nanyang, 8 June 2009)

In the anticipation of the government not changing the policy, Dong Jiao Zhong advocated ‘working together with other ethnic organizations’ (Jiang hui lianhe qita zuqun zuzhi) to discuss the appropriate actions to be taken against this policy (Nanyang, 5 July 2009). Hence, in order to further the cause of mother tongue education, affiliations with other ethnic organizations such as GAPENA (a Malay-dominant writers’ organization) is emphasized.

On the eve of the announcement (8 July 2009), Nanyang quoted the minister of education, saying that the decision on PPSMI will be made soon. He assured the public that ‘the results do not have a political motive in it’ (Jieguo jiang bu han zhengzhi dongji). The overt denial of a political motive can be linked to the warnings by successive ministers of education that the medium of instruction issue can be politicized (Nanyang, 2 April 2009; Nanyang, 12 April 2009). The claim that the new decision was apolitical may be read as a rhetorical ploy to de-ideologize the controversy. The paradox here is that most of the claims for de-ideologizing may also be interpreted as acts of ideological formation.

**Press coverage after the policy reversal**

The abolishment of PPSMI was announced on 8 July 2009, and it was reported in the newspapers on the 9 July 2009. Hence, a number of news reports were published on that day. Most of these reports were framed in judgmental terms. One of the reports quotes the education minister stating:

PPSMI policy didn’t fail, only the process was slow and that it couldn’t reach the expected goals. (shixing de yingwen jiao shuli zhengce bing meiyou shibai, zhishi jinzhan huanman, meiyou dazhi yuqi de mubiao.) (Nanyang, 9 July 2009)

In contrast to the hedges used by the minister in his evaluation of the policy, the newspaper portrayed his deputy adopting a stronger line, stating: ‘PPSMI policy has
failed’. Besides, it ‘couldn’t achieve its goal in the expected time’ (Zhe xiang zhenge wu fa qu de ru qi xiao guo). The deputy minister added, if the policy had continued, the government would have needed to spend a further RM40 million a year, thus, providing an economic justification for scrapping the policy.

In terms of secondary school arguments, post policy-reversal news reports seemed to perspectivize and evaluate the medium of instruction debates for secondary schools. While perspectivization involved shaping the debate in a specific direction, evaluation involved discussing the pros and cons of the policy. A news report dated 10 July 2009 perspectivized the deputy education minister predicting that many organizations would fight to continue using English to teach mathematics and science in secondary schools. The deputy minister speculated that the new policy may potentially create a state of mental confusion (Maodun de xintai) because the learners would go through multiple mediums of instruction through their school career, starting with the mother tongue in the primary school, moving to the national language in the secondary school (i.e. Malay), and English at the tertiary level.

While perspectivizing the issue, news reports referred to multiple positions – for and against the policy – while evaluating, the reports relied largely on opposition sources. For instance, the DAP parliamentary leader Lim Kit Siang was quoted as arguing that the Cabinet should have cancelled the ‘unprofessional decisions immediately’ and let parents choose the medium of instruction for their children in primary and secondary schools. The opposition leader was against the policy of using the national language, Bahasa Malaysia to teach mathematics and science in the secondary school to prevent Malaysian students, in his words, from becoming ‘lab rats’ or guinea pigs of a ‘half-boiled education experiment’ (Bansheng shu jiaoyu shi yan xia de bai laoshu) (Nanyang, 10 July 2009). Lim also characterized policy makers who ran the experiments (i.e. Ministers in the Cabinet and the Ministers in Education) as: ‘irresponsible’ (Bu fu zeren), ‘unprofessional’ (Bu zhuanye), ‘brainless’ (Wu nao), ‘careless’ (Cuxin) and ‘crazy’ (Fengkuang). In yet another report published on the same day, Lim criticized the cabinet for being hasty to abolish PPSMI. He proposed that the Cabinet should amend the policy immediately, adopt the proposal of Parents Action Group on Education (PAGE) and allow schools to choose the medium of instruction in secondary schools.

A shift was evident in that Lim’s arguments for the primary school were aligned to DJZ that denounced PPSMI, i.e. the use of English. However, for the secondary school, he aligned himself with PAGE for PPSMI. PAGE is an urban-Malay organization that pushed the agenda for English as a choice of medium of instruction. By aligning himself with PAGE, following the logic of ‘chain of equivalence’ (Laclau, 2005), Lim was in effect distancing himself from Malay nationalistic groups like GAPENA that could be seen as aligned with DJZ for mother tongue education. GAPENA was only relevant as an ally when mother tongue arguments were being constructed, but in the secondary school, such a coalition was not possible, one of the reasons being that groups like GAPENA the line between mother tongue and national language overlaps. However, for DJZ, Chinese as mother tongue was not a candidate for the national language in Malaysia. Thus, by fighting for mother tongue in the primary school and English in the secondary school, the Chinese community appeared to bypass the official construction of Malaysian identity that saw the national language as a marker of identity. By forming multiple alliances at different stages, Lim managed to articulate his stand in
the PPSMI debates. This signalled an important facet of Laclausuesque notion of ‘chain of equivalence’ that such chains were not permanent fixtures but could be redefined at different stages in the plurality of struggles.

Like Lim, the Chinese political party MCA also pushed for English in Secondary Schools. A report published on 19 July 2009 quoted Ong Tee Keat, the MCA president, as claiming:

I will continue to push (Jixu tuidong) and actively work to contact various associations and the people in the field of education, including the Chinese Education Associations, and parents, because we need to be fair in solving this issue. (Women xu gongping chuli zhe keti.) (Nanyang, 19 July 2009)

This was a community-specific articulation made by a component party in the ruling coalition, which appeared not to give outright support to the position of the government. The MCA’s divergent position vis-à-vis the ruling coalition was supported by a populist argument regarding the reversal, which was that students would suffer if there was a change in policy.

**The rationale for a new policy**

When the education minister made the decision for the reversal of PPSMI, he referred to the same argument that the majority of the students, especially from rural Malaysia would suffer if the policy continued. The newspaper cited the Minister stating that:

[…] only when PPSMI was implemented did we realize that the students in rural areas cannot cope; thus, causing the gap between rural and urban students to become wider and wider. (Yingwen jiaoxue, dang tuixing hou cai faxian, xiangcun diqu de xuesheng wufa yingfu, daozhi xiangcun xuesheng yu chengshi xuesheng zhi jian de shuiping honggou yue lai yue da.) (Nanyang, 19 July 2009)

The minister suggested that the policy was a good experiment, which showed that education was not dominated by the Government but by the people (Zhe shi hen hao de shiyan, xianshi jiaoyu bingfei shi zhengfu de juedui quanli, er shi renmin de). The use of the people within the discourse of the minister often co-occurred with sacrifice as in sacrificial lambs. For instance:

If the government didn’t abolish PPSMI policy in time, tens of thousands of students might become an item of sacrifice under this education policy. (Ruguo zhengfu meiyou jishi feichu yingwen jiao shuli zhengce, shu yi wan ji de xuesheng jiang chengwei zhe xiang jiaoyu zhengce de xishengpin.) (Nanyang, 19 July 2009)

The minister argued that a huge number of students, approximately 50,000, enrolling each year in the primary and secondary schools would be victims of the policy resulting in increased dropout rate in schools. As such, he did not have an alternative but to change the policy. In his words, ‘It’s only after serious investigation that the government has made the decision to abolish PPSMI’.

Muhyiddin linked his arguments with the dictum of the present Prime Minister, especially, to the slogan of ‘People First’ implying that the present government works
in the people’s interests. The data show that signifiers like ‘the people’ were used by the opposition as well as the government. On occasion, the people were replaced by parents or students. Still, the arguments were framed in populist terms in order to garner the support of the masses.

Discussion: ‘Plurality of struggles’ and ‘transmission of the speech of others’

The articulation or perspectivization of MOI debates in the Chinese press in Malaysia can be explained by using two concepts, namely, ‘plurality of struggles’ (Laclau, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) and ‘transmission of the speech of others’ (Bakhtin, 1981). Plurality of struggles may occur during a crisis where ‘symbolic unity’ is established among diverse political forces acting spontaneously against a dominant position reflecting a pragmatic choice for the moment. This is seen in the struggle over the MOI debate in Malaysia. Here, we find two fundamentally opposed political agents, like the Chinese organization DJZ and the Malay-based organization, GAPENA, fighting for the ‘same cause’, i.e. the right to use mother tongue as MOI; thus, establishing a symbolic unity. Likewise, the Chinese press quotes the Islamist party PAS and Chinese-dominated DAP collaborating with PAGE, an urban Malay-dominated activist group, which favors English. Thus, the plurality of struggle emerges as a pragmatic political choice when individual actors are not strong enough independently to mobilize broad-based public sentiment in a multi-ethnic polity.

Some may argue that, in Malaysia language, hegemony has always been fought in terms of the Malay language, which GAPENA supports. They argue that the PPSMI policy in this context was actually a deviation from Malay language hegemony, and in fact, DJZ and GAPENA were coming from different positions. While DJZ and GAPENA may come from different positions, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 55) postulated that such alliances reflect ‘circumstantial unity […] constituted around interests which are in the end strictly incompatible’. Thus, the question arises on the nature of the symbolic unity between the groups. Our contention is that the symbolic unity between the divergent groups is merely a strategic choice. DJZ and GAPENA were strategically and symbolically united because they both supported the mother tongue argument; in reality, however, this meant that DJZ supported the use of Mandarin as MOI, while GAPENA was in support of Malay as MOI. Thus, PPSMI was a deviation not from Malay language hegemony but from the primacy of the mother tongue as MOI.

The other notion, ‘transmission of the speech of others’, is used as a device when the actors involved in the articulation deem themselves politically incorrect to fight the battle singlehandedly. The notion of ‘transmission of the speech of others’ should be distinguished from the notion of plurality of struggles. While plurality of struggles presupposes a common political platform, transmission of the speech of others involves the actual practice of articulation for the actors who are connected by the plurality of their struggles. Bakhtin (1981) who used the notion of transmission of the speech of others noted that every ‘speaking person’ uses the speech of others to ‘re-conceptualize’ and ‘reframe’; however, certain ‘semantic changes’ may occur during ‘contextualized framing’ (pp. 52–53). Thus, in the case of the MOI controversy, the deputy minister of education quoted the Chinese organization DJZ to speak for the Chinese community. This articulation could be interpreted as a
position not officially endorsed by the government; however, because the deputy education minister happened to be a member of the MCA, the Chinese component party in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, he was able to cite DJZ to articulate the demands of the Chinese community.

The other examples of transmission of the speech of others found in the data include the Islamist party being quoted by the Chinese press to demonize the Minister of Education by citing him as ‘murdering future citizens’ through the MOI policy. In addition, to make the case for teaching mathematics and science in English at secondary level, the Chinese press quotes the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad for support. This practice of selective quoting allows the press to transmit the speech of others in order to articulate the interests of the Chinese community.

Chinese society, the Chinese press and Chinese education, as Ooi (2007) has argued, form an organic entity that collectively co-constructs the community. Moreover, the data analyzed shows how the notion of transmission of the speech of others offers insight into how this organic entity specifically utilizes the speech of ‘others’, i.e. non-Chinese others, to buttress their claims.

Conclusion
Our findings challenge the claim by postcolonial scholars working in the area of MOI policy that it is the ethno-linguistic actors or communities with power who determine MOI policies (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004), and hence also, the educational opportunities and inequalities that accrue from them. We suggest that less powerful groups or agents are also able to negotiate a stance by forming a chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2005) across diverse groups to challenge the existing order of discourse.

Further, we have argued that the ‘symbolic unity’ implicit in the chain of equivalence is a pragmatic choice that often deems open debate on issues like ethnicity as politically controversial. Hence, MOI policy debates in Malaysia, although they tend to be ethnicized at their roots (Brown, 2005), cannot be expressed as such, given the political realities. There is thus the tendency to couch controversial arguments by citing multi-ethnic actors and positions, so that they become politically acceptable in the context of a plural society.

References


Nanyang Siang Pau (2002, November 27). *Ba hua tuan bu jie shou ti dai fang an*. [The eight Chinese organizations did not accept the proposed alternative solution.]

Nanyang Siang Pau (2003, March 18). *Wei fan yuan you jiao xue yuan ze*. [It contradicts the original educational principles.]

Nanyang Siang Pau (2009, June 8). *Ruo ying wen jiao shu li bei qu xiao: wo zi neng shuo sheng duo bu qi*. [Teaching Mathematics and Science in English: ‘I can only say sorry.’]


