Nationhood and Malaysian identity: a corpus-based approach

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Abstract

In this article we make use of the methodology of corpus linguistics to organize and search the several millions of words contained in the published speeches of Tun Dr. Mahathir as prime minister. Our corpus consists of over 2.5 million words of speeches, roughly half in English and half in Malay, with over 900 English speeches and over 800 Malay speeches. This study concentrates on the Malay speeches, and follows up previous work on Dr. Mahathir's English speeches. The approach is entirely data driven. Instead of making a subjective choice of words to investigate, we begin by identifying key words. We then use the ranked list of key words to investigate the immediate context in which those words occur. By concentrating on key words connected to Malaysian identity, we obtain a remarkable insight into how that identity is presented by Dr. Mahathir.

Keywords: corpus-based approach; Malay; political speech; identity; nationhood; critical discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

This article examines the role of elite discourse in the construction of Malaysian nationhood and identity under the influence of the country's multiethnic makeup, and of globalization. Malays make up the majority of the population, but there are also substantial minorities of Chinese and Indian extraction, and scattered aboriginal communities known collectively as orang asli. The construction of a Malaysian nation has therefore to reconcile deep-seated ethnic and cultural diversity. It has been argued that globalization made national identity less rigid and more fluid, so that societies become "globally connected and culturally intertwined," and multiculturalism will become a more relevant force in the near future. As a multiethnic country in a globalized environment, Malaysia faces not
only the problem of dealing with the influence of Western culture—which is often perceived “to unsettle and de-stabilize local culture, values and identity” (Koh 2006) but also economic and military onslaughts which result in the powerful imposing their will on the weak (Mahathir 2003: 229).

Apart from opinions expressed by foreign commentators on Malaysian identity within a broad regional perspective (Faiz Sathi Abdullah 2004: 125), there are also local researchers who have written on Malaysian identity from different perspectives and taking different approaches (e.g., Shakila Manan 2001; Faiz Sathi Abdullah 2002, 2004; Theodora Lam and Brenda S. A. Yeoh 2004; Desai 2006).

An important event that prompted this study is Tun Mahathir’s national project “Vision 2020,” a charter for socioeconomic growth, national integration, and social community. Through Vision 2020, Tun Mahathir led the nation toward the explicit goal of sustained industrial development by 2020, following a series of policy objectives for economic growth as a means of getting there. Tun Mahathir put forward a relatively consistent, coherent political ideology made up of five core components: nationalism, capitalism, Islam, populism, and authoritarianism (Faiz Sathi Abdullah 2004). Nationalism is a powerful force in Malaysia, but it involves building a new nation out of diverse ethnic groups, and has none of the denigration of the significant Other characteristic of Western nationalism (Said 1978). While the Malaysian government is vociferous in its condemnation of practices ranging from corruption to bad driving, which weaken the national effort, it does not attack foreigners. Malaysia’s Rukunegara ‘National Ideal’ represents not only the challenge of economic development, but the very idealization of national unity: a concept captured in the ideal vision of Bangsa Malaysia, a populist call for a more inclusive nationalism. According to Hilley (2001: 20), Vision 2020 “plays upon constructed symbols of national unity, invoking a vox populi of social belonging and common purpose: Malaysia boleh ‘Malaysia can do it.’”

The starting point for a discourse analytical approach to national identity is to realize that it manifests itself discursively through language and other semiotic systems (e.g., Derichs 1999). In this article, we concentrate on a particular site of identity construction, i.e., the language of a member of the powerful political elite: Tun Mahathir, Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 to October 2003. Despite the Asian financial crisis, Mahathir’s modernization project of the Malaysian nation-state, though still unfinished, has been able to manage quite satisfactorily its competing ethnicities, and to a large extent, deliver the economic goods to Malaysia’s multiethnic citizens.
Anyone familiar with the speeches of Tun Dr. Mahathir will be aware of his strong sense of Malaysian nationhood and identity. Our focus is on the way language is used to construct Malaysian nationhood and identity in the face of multiethnicity and globalization. We examine the linguistic means, in particular the lexical patterns involved in the discursive construction of nationhood and national identity. It is inward-looking, based on a set of common features that bind the members of the nation together (Smith 1991: 14). Outward-looking implies difference. National identity involves not only self-awareness of the group but also awareness of others from whom the nation seeks to differentiate itself. In examining how a national identity is constructed in Mahathir's discourse, Faiz Sathi Abdullah (2004: 128) identified certain recurring themes and set out to “also consider the changing landscape of his political language in terms of the us and them dichotomy….” National identity is in a sense both inward-looking and outward-looking, internally as a discourse of threat rationalization within the country vis-à-vis the 'in-group' and 'out-group' respectively, and externally regarding the perceived threat of the forces of globalization to national security and national identity” (2004: 128).

2. Methodology

Corpus linguistics is typically associated with grammatical tagging and other kinds of low-level annotation. The argument put forward in this paper is that the techniques of corpus linguistics can also be used for text processing at a very high level, including discourse analysis. The aim is to show how the methodology of corpus linguistics and the analysis of a large corpus can enhance the study of political discourse (see also Kaufer and Hariman 2008). In the first place, corpus-based techniques make new kinds of large-scale text processing possible; as Biber et al. (1994: 169) put it, “... text corpora provide large databases of naturally occurring discourse, enabling empirical analyses of the actual patterns of use in a language, and when coupled with semi-automatic computational tools, the corpus-based approach enables analyses of a scope not otherwise feasible.” Text processing enables us to go beyond counting linguistic details, and raise new questions concerning the interpretation of texts. Hardt-Mautner (1995: 22) argues that “drawing on corpus evidence fundamentally redefines the nature of 'interpretation' as it adds an empirical dimension to introspection. Interpreting texts is ultimately a subjective procedure, but that does not mean it has to be undisciplined. The approach taken in this paper seeks to base the interpretation on an objective analysis.
Our data consists of a corpus of approximately 2.6 million words taken from the political speeches delivered by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed to live audiences at official events during his term as Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981–2003). He speaks in Malay at appropriate domestic events, and in English for international events and for some domestic events, e.g., when addressing a predominantly Chinese audience. At this stage we are able to make a statistical analysis of the general characteristics of the lexis, in order to identify the ideological assumptions that are built into the texts as a matter of “common sense” (Fairclough 1989). This kind of work calls for critical discourse analysis, an approach that crosses the divide between linguistic analysis and social theory. By taking a “critical” view, it does not mean that we set out to find fault or that in identifying ideological assumptions we are revealing some irrational view of the world. On the contrary, our aim is to investigate the meaning of the texts at a fundamental level, and trace the means by which meaning is constructed, not just at points in individual texts, but in the corpus of texts as a whole.

We see this work as a contribution to issue-driven linguistics. At the present time, most mainstream research in linguistics is theory driven; that is, the aim is to make some contribution to linguistic theory as a whole. Of course, any serious research seeks to make some contribution to theory, and theories are appropriately constructed to account for data. Corpus linguistics is by nature data driven; that is, theories are based on the close observation of large amounts of naturally produced data. Issue-driven linguistics takes a further step back to take a broader view of linguistic problems. We start with a significant issue in the real world, and select large amounts of relevant data which throw light on the real-world problem. The theoretical position we subsequently adopt is based on real data, and makes a contribution to a real-world problem. This work has the advantage that there can be no question of the importance of the speeches of Tun Dr. Mahathir, or of the importance of his use of language in assessing his role as prime minister.

3. Malaysian nationhood

Malaysian nationhood is a subject for open-ended speculation, and our study is necessarily restricted to Tun Dr. Mahathir’s own perception of it. There are two sources of information about Malaysian nationhood, namely explicit policy statements and indications implicit in the texts. Explicit policy statements include Vision 2020, the long-term vision that seeks to achieve developed status for Malaysia by the year 2020.
The central theme is how Malaysia can become a fully developed nation, a goal that cannot be achieved "until we have finally overcome ... nine central strategic challenges." We is used here to include all the Malaysian people regardless of religion or ethnicity, etc. Statements are presented as factual assertions using the simple present tense to introduce the nine challenges. The first challenge is to establish a united Malaysian nation. The other challenges are to create a society which is psychologically liberated, secure, and developed (2); mature and democratic (3); fully moral and ethical (4); mature, liberal, and tolerant (5); scientific and progressive (6); caring (7); economically just (8); and prosperous (9).

One does not have to be a linguist to interpret the statements that present these challenges. It is not hard to see that the concept of a "fully developed nation" is defined by "Asian values" (Hilley 2001: 6).

In the text of Vision 2020, Mahathir explicitly includes unity, social belonging, and common goal. Mahathir makes clear what he means by a united Malaysian nation: a nation with "a sense of common and shared destiny." He uses positive lexical items to define a united Malaysian nation as "a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony, full and fair partnership." Such statements reflect a more inclusive type of communal ideology allowing greater cultural diversity, "a new type of nationalist project for a new global environment." Two comments are perhaps relevant here. First, integration can be taken for granted in Western countries, but in Malaysia, the bringing together of diverse ethnic groups across the South China Sea from the Malayan peninsula to North Borneo is itself a remarkable achievement.

Secondly, the resulting diversity within unity is an important characteristic of Malaysian nationalism, which contrasts with the situation in Indonesia, which can better be described as unity imposed on diversity. The diverse Malaysian identities are reflected in the way young Malaysians perceive their own identity. In analyzing the preliminary survey data collected, Faiz Sathi Abdullah (2002) shows that although 65% of a sample of 135 multiethnic university students felt close to Malaysia, only 20% identified themselves primarily as Malaysian rather than according to their ethnic group as Malay, Chinese, or Indian.

Matters of identity and nationalism (or "nationhood") are not logical or scientific facts, but follow deeply felt beliefs that are regarded as self-evident "common sense" (cf. Fairclough 1989). In this paper we use the term ideology to refer to a network of self-evident truths of this kind, and when referring to Mahathir's ideology, we are specifically concerned with identity and nationhood.

More than any other Malaysian prime minister, Tun Mahathir is a politician whose rhetoric was shaped by the discourse of economy and
development. Thus it is not surprising that the concept of nation is closely
associated with economics. The main goal is sustainable economic
growth, and national unity is a means to achieve that goal, while territo-
rial and ethnic integration are in turn necessary to achieve national unity.
This transition from a dominant ethnicizing discourse to a more demo-
cratic discourse is in line with Vision 2020, which is a shared vision of
prosperity representing not only the challenge of economic development
but the very idealization of national unity, a concept epitomized in
Bangsa Malaysia 'a Malaysian nation' (Hilley 2001). According to the
national English-language newspaper The Star (11 September 1995), to
realize the goal of Bangsa Malaysia, the people must accept each other
as they are, regardless of race and religion, be able to identify themselves
with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia, and accept the constitution.
In his attempt to achieve economic maturity and newly industrialized
country (NIC) status, "Mahathir has sought to galvanize the public
imagination through ideas of a shared prosperity" (Hilley 2001: 4).
Loyalty to the country and the constitution, and speaking the national
language are all to be expected; but mutual acceptance implies a kind of
unity that tolerates diversity within itself. This identity, manifest in the
concept of "unity in diversity," has engendered in Malaysians the will to
survive as a nation-state as well as the strength to defend it in the face of
threats and danger. Malaysia's national identity is being represented as a
reality through a positive discourse of the population working toward a
socially and culturally harmonious society.

This image of a fully developed nation is expressed in the construction
of globalizing symbols such as the Petronas Twin Towers, the futuristic-
looking Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Cyberjaya (Malaysia's ver-
sion of Silicon Valley), and the Multi-Media Super Corridor, designed
as an agglomeration of high-tech enterprises, research and development
centers, and a multimedia university. These mega projects epitomize the
Mahathir-led Malaysian nation-state's political will and capacity to syn-
ergize with the new knowledge-based economy and the new technologies
of globalization. An indirect outcome of all these is the inculation into
its citizens, especially the younger generation, of a new Malaysian con-
sciousness that transcends ethnic identity, and the pride of being a Malay-
sian who is also a proactive member of a global community.

4. Using corpus evidence

When using evidence from a corpus, it is essential in the first place to have
a corpus which is truly representative of the population of which it is a