Abstract: This article looks at the language planning that has been carried out since Independence in Malaysia for the promotion of Malay, the national language. After a sociolinguistic outline of the country, the different phases language planning is normally divided into are examined in detail, highlighting both the points that have proven to be successful and those that have not. In the second part of the article the problems that have been encountered during language planning and the reasons why Malay has not succeeded in becoming a full-blown national language which even the non-Malays can identify with are examined. Together with the problems, some possible solutions are put forward that may improve the given situation and make Malay a useful and prestigious language also for the non-Malays, who make up more than one third of the total population, and perhaps even internationally.

Keywords: language planning, Malay, Malaysia, national schools, national-type schools

1 Introduction

Malay (Bahasa Melayu) is the most widespread of the Austronesian languages, having official status in Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and, under the name of Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), in Indonesia, besides being spoken in Southern Thailand and some areas in the Southern Philippines as well as in other small communities in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. In total there are more than 200 million speakers of Malay/Indonesian, making it the ninth most spoken language in the world, either as L1 or L2 (Baker and Eversley 2000). This article, however, will only deal with Malay as the official language of Malaysia, where it is spoken as a first or second language by most of its population of about 28 million people. These belong to different ethnic groups: Malays (50.4 percent),

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other Bumiputras (11 percent of the population), Chinese (24.6 percent), Indians, particularly Tamil (7.1 percent), and other unlisted ethnic groups (6.9 percent) (Census 2010). It is mostly the Malays who speak Malay in either standard or dialectal form as their first language, whereas the majority of the members of the other ethnic groups speak Malay as a second language learnt at school and through the media. Language maintenance of the ethnic languages of Malaysia is in fact generally good, even though language shift is slowly taking place towards standard Malay (particularly on the part of the Malays and the indigenous groups of the Peninsula and Eastern Malaysia), Mandarin Chinese (on the part of the Chinese population) and English (Coluzzi 2012).

Even though Malay had been the official language of Malaya together with English even before independence from Great Britain in 1957 (Lee 2009; Asmah Haji Omar 1987), it was only in that year that Malay became the sole official language of the newly formed federation, with English being allowed to be used officially for another ten years while being phased out. The end of the 1950s therefore marks the beginning of language planning to make Malay a modern and viable language; as far as education is concerned, the Education Act of 1961 (revised in 1971) “made Malay the only medium of instruction in national secondary schools” (Azirah Hashim 2009: 39). However, such language planning gained real momentum only with the National Language Act of 1967, revised in 1971. The two largest minority groups of Malaysia (Chinese and Indians) had to content themselves with the opportunity of retaining their languages in the private sphere and in primary education, particularly after the race riots of 1969, after which the New Economic Policy was put forward with the aim of raising the economic and cultural conditions of the Malays. The Sedition Act 1971 even made disputing the status of Malay as the sole official language and advocating Chinese as an official language an offence (Lee 2009: 218).

This article will look at language planning as it has been carried out by the Malaysian government and its agencies, attempting to make some comparisons with neighbouring Southeast Asian countries whenever possible. It is undeniable that the situation of Malaysia is very peculiar, a rather unique case among

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1 The term *bumiputra* ‘sons of the soil’ refers to the ethnic groups considered the original inhabitants of Malaysia. In addition to the Malays, these include the various Dayak tribal groups of Borneo, the Orang Asli (the aboriginals of the peninsula), plus other groups like the Eurasians of Portuguese origin, the Thai of the Northern states, etc.

2 The official name of the country was Federation of Malaya until 1963. When on that year the federation was joined by Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore (which left two years later), the official name changed to Malaysia.

3 There exist, however, Chinese secondary schools as well.
both developed and developing countries; in fact, in Southeast Asia many other
countries have experienced immigration of other ethnic groups coming from
outside, particularly of Chinese, but none to the extent that Malaysia has, mostly
as a consequence of the British policy of importing the large number of workers
needed for its mining and agricultural sectors from Southern China and India.
From many points of view, Malaysia has been able to deal skillfully with such an
internal ethnic diversity, allowing mediation and compromise to be achieved in
many areas. As mentioned earlier, Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, etc.)
and Tamil are widely spoken within the Chinese and Indian communities
respectively, particularly the first, and they retain a high linguistic vitality.

After a general introduction on the sociolinguistic situation of Malaysia, this
article is going to outline the language planning that has been carried out so far
in the country and the results it has produced. The article will go on to try to
assess the extent of success it has achieved, both for the Malays and for the
other ethnic groups inhabiting the country, and to put forward suggestions on
how the given situation could be improved.

2 The linguistic repertoire of Malaysia

Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy in Southeast Asia, with a surface
area of 329,847 square kilometres and 28,334,135 inhabitants (2010 census). It is
geographically divided into two parts: West Malaysia, i.e. the peninsula south of
Thailand, and East Malaysia, i.e. the two states of Sarawak and Sabah on the
northern side of the island of Borneo, placed between West Malaysia and the
Philippines, to the south of the South China Sea. It is a multilingual and multi-
ethnic state, with around 140 different languages being spoken (Ethnologue
online). As mentioned above, the official language in Malaysia is Standard
Malay, while English, the former colonial language, is a de facto second lan-
guage. The position of English is quite strong in Malaysia, with a notable
presence in the linguistic landscape (see Coluzzi 2015) and in many high
domains, including the mass media. English also tends to be the preferred
language of inter-ethnic communication, particularly among educated people
(Asmah Haji Omar 1987, 1992, 2003; Azirah Hashim 2009). The scheme in Table
1 may be seen as representing the linguistic repertoire of Malaysia.

It is not an easy task to assess the level of prestige that a language enjoys,
also considering that different languages may enjoy different degrees of prestige
among different individuals and ethnic groups. Based on my own research and
observations, however, I have attempted to rank these languages according to
the prestige they seem to enjoy among the majority of their speakers (from more
to less). The most prestigious varieties also tend to be the ones that enjoy more
official support. Arguably, English has been placed in the first position, even
though Standard Malay enjoys quite high prestige and shares many high
domains with English, apart from being used widely in low domains among
the Malays. Malay is also used as a language of inter-ethnic communication, but
normally only when one of the speakers is Malay and is not fluent in English
(Asmah Haji Omar 2003: 74, 121, 164). Education is mostly in Malay, although
most Chinese and Indians attend National-type Chinese and Tamil schools,
where Malay is only taught as a subject. Mandarin Chinese also enjoys high
prestige in spite of lacking official recognition as a language of Malaysia. Arabic
is spoken by few people, but it retains a high level of prestige among the
majority Muslim community due to its religious significance. The remaining
languages occupy the low position in a diglossic relationship with English,
Standard Malay and Chinese (as far as the Chinese dialects are concerned) and
are used mostly in non-official/family settings. In Malaysia the phenomenon of

4 This is a simplification: in reality we can talk of at least two varieties of English, one close to
the British/American standard and another one more localized, born in contact with Malay,
Chinese and Tamil, often referred to as Manglish. The same consideration applies to Malay: in
addition to standard Malay and Malay dialects proper, some more colloquial forms of standard
Malay are in common use in informal situations, whereas Bazaar Malay, a form of pidginized
Malay which was quite widespread in the past, is now disappearing.

### Table 1: The Malaysian linguistic repertoire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Practical and symbolic functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>inter-ethnic communication, modernity, economic opportunities, foreigners/tourism^4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Malay</td>
<td>inter-ethnic communication, nationalism, economic opportunities, Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin Chinese</td>
<td>communication within the Chinese community, identity for the Chinese, economic opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>communication within the Tamil community, identity for the Tamils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other minority languages,</td>
<td>communication within the ethnic group, local identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>including other Indian languages, Cantonese, Hokkien and the languages of the Dayaks and Orang Asli</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Malay and Chinese</td>
<td>local communication and identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
code-mixing and code-switching between a speaker’s first languages and English and/or Malay is widespread (Asmah Haji Omar 1992).

The large size of the Tamil and particularly Chinese communities and the use of Tamil and Mandarin in primary education are probably the main reasons that account for the vitality of their languages, even though the high prestige Mandarin enjoys is another important factor. As far as the vitality of the languages of smaller ethno-linguistic groups is concerned, whereas some do seem to be able to retain their ancestral language relatively well (even though the languages they speak seem to be heavily influenced by the Malay lexicon (see Coluzzi et al. 2013; Coluzzi et al. 2017), others are more or less rapidly switching to Malay, Mandarin (the Chinese speaking other Chinese dialects) or English (see for example Low et al. 2010; Wang and Chong 2011; David 2001, 2006). In this case, too, endogamy, a sizable community, close-knit social networks and historical presence seem to be important factors of ethno-linguistic vitality (see Coluzzi 2009).

3 Language planning

As stated above, Malay is the sole official language in Malaysia. This is stated in article 152(1) of the Constitution proclaimed in 1957. The same article, however, goes on to say that at an unofficial level, other languages can be used and learned as well:

1. The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in such script as Parliament may by law provide:
   Provided that-

   (a) no person shall be prohibited or prevented from using (otherwise than for official purposes), or from teaching or learning, any other language; and
   (b) nothing in this Clause shall prejudice the right of the Federal Government or of any State Government to preserve and sustain the use and study of the language of any other community in the Federation.

Clause 2 of the same article specified that English would continue to be co-official for another ten years, the time deemed necessary to phase it out from all official usages. English, however, kept its co-official status in the states of Sabah and Sarawak for much longer, in the first from 1963 until 1973 and in the second from 1963 until 1985, i.e. respectively 10 and 22 years after joining the Federation. In spite of the establishment of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka

5 On the 18th November 2015 it was announced that English would again be co-official in Sarawak.
[institute of language and literature], the main language planning agency in
the country, one year before Independence, during the first 10 years after
Independence, i.e. while English retained its status as co-official language,
the general situation for Malay and the languages of the other communities did
not change much from pre-Independence time; however, in 1967 Malay started
to be used extensively in official domains. One dramatic event, though, was to
indirectly push the position and status of Malay: the ethnic riots of 13th May
1969. One of their likely causes, in fact, had been the frustration of some
sections of the Malay population, who felt outdone by the other communities,
particularly by the more entrepreneurial Chinese minority, part of whom was
not willing to accept Malay as the sole official language. At that point some
strong measures were deemed necessary to improve the economic conditions
and status of the Malay majority, including their language, in order to prevent
the repetition of the racial attritions that had led to the 1969 riots – the
Education Act was revised, the New Economic Policy put forward, which
among other things established positive discrimination measures for the
Malay group, and the contentious Sedition Act revamped. As far as
Malay was concerned, probably the most important move was the gradual
conversion of all English schools to National schools, where Malay would
be the sole language of instruction, and the imposition of a common syllabus
for all schools, where the Malay language would be a compulsory subject
requiring a pass.

Since the beginning of the 1990s the strict language policy that had
characterized the 1970s and 1980s has loosened up, and the space for
languages other than Malay has gradually increased, particularly for English
(Gill 2005; Azirah Hashim 2009; Lee 2009; Zuraidah Mohd Don 2014). This is
due to several factors, among which are the “privatisation of education and
media services, increasing global economic competition [...], an amplified
multicultural discourse and the rise of China as an economic power”
(Lee 2009: 223).

The main agencies and institutions that have been carrying out language
planning for Malay are the already mentioned Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka
and Radio Television Malaysia, in addition to the Ministry of Education and
other media. An important role has also been taken by the Majlis Bahasa
Brunei-Malaysia-Indonesia (until 1985 known as Majlis Bahasa Malaysia-
Indonesia), a regional agency established in 1972 whose purpose has been
to carry out corpus planning for the countries where Malay/Indonesian is
official in collaboration with the national institutions devoted to language
planning.
3.1 Corpus planning

A lot of efforts and energy were put into corpus planning for Malay by the agencies mentioned above. Even though codification of the language had already started earlier (the first complete grammar of modern Malay published in Malaysia, *Pelita Bahasa Melayu*, compiled by Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad, better known as Za’ba, came out in three volumes in 1941),\(^6\) starting from Independence the two aspects of corpus planning known as graphization and modernization (Cooper 1989) became the main targets of language planning efforts. Various grammars and dictionaries were published, among which was the first monolingual dictionary *Kamus Dewan*, published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1970 (Asmah Haji Omar 2004: 129). With regards to graphization, a momentous step was the establishment of a common graphic system based on the Latin script for Malaysia and Indonesia in 1972, adopted by Singapore and Brunei as well. Since the Islamization of the region which had begun around the twelfth century, *Jawi*, a modified Arabic script,\(^7\) had been the graphic system used to write Malay.\(^8\) Even if graphic systems based on the Latin script have been in existence since the first colonization of Malacca by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, it is with the arrival of the British at the end of the eighteenth century that Rumi, which was how this graphic system came to be known, started to spread. Even though various versions of Rumi were used over the years, they were all based on the English spelling conventions.\(^9\) The Language Act of 1963 clearly states that “the script of the national language shall be the Rumi script”, even though a proviso was added in 1971 specifying that even if Rumi was the official script, “the Jawi script is not prohibited for use” (Asmah Haji Omar 1979: 66). Rumi was chosen over Jawi for different reasons.

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6 However, a Malay grammar had already been published in London in 1927 compiled by Sir R. O. Winstedt, an English orientalist and colonial administrator.

7 Some Arabic letters representing sounds that do not exist in Malay are only used for Arabic loans, whereas for the six sounds that are not found in Arabic Jawi makes use of diacritic dots. Nowadays it is mainly used in Malaysia and Indonesia in religious contexts (Islam), but can be seen in the linguistic landscape of more conservative areas in Malaysia, particularly the northern states, and is official in Brunei, where it is learnt in primary school.

8 The various scripts that have been employed for Malay clearly reflect the cultural, religious and economic influences that the region has received. Even before Jawi, in fact, scripts derived from the Southern Indian Pallava script were in use, even though these may have been limited to some areas and some groups only (Asmah Haji Omar 1979: 65).

9 The first of these systems, and the one on which successive systems were based (apart from the systems known as Kongres and Malindo, which were never actually used), was the Wilkinson System, created in 1904 (Asmah Haji Omar 1979: 70).
On the one hand the intended spread of Malay among the non-Malay population required an easy script people would be familiar with. On the other Rumi, as a script coming from the West and used for writing English among other prestigious languages, was seen as a symbol of modernity and progress, which were what the newly-formed country was aiming at (Asmah Haji Omar 1979: 66 – 67), rather like the choice made by Atatürk at the beginning of the twentieth century in Turkey to replace the Arabic with the Latin script. The common writing system, the one that is currently used in all Malay/Indonesian speaking countries, known in Malaysia as Sistem Ejaan Rumi Baharu Bahasa Malaysia [the new Rumi spelling for Malaysia], has distanced itself from the conventions of both the English and the Dutch languages to become simpler on the one hand and more autonomous on the other (see Asmah Haji Omar 1979). As a matter of fact, two graphemes underwent the biggest changes: “c” replaced the former “ch”, whereas “sy” replaced “sh”. Indonesian spelling had to undergo more changes.

As far as pronunciation is concerned, attempts at standardization were carried out as well, but these raised a lot of criticism, and nowadays two main norms are followed in Malaysia, the “Northern” (which is also similar to the one in use in Borneo), based on the pronunciation common in Kedah, Perlis and Penang, and the “Southern” one, based on the Johor-Riau dialect (Asmah Haji Omar 1991: 417). Probably because it is the pronunciation used by Radio Television Malaysia and the one most commonly heard in the capital (and perhaps partly because it differs more from Indonesian pronunciation), the latter seems to have gained more prestige and to be more widespread, particularly among young people.

With regards to modernization, i.e. the coinage of new words and styles that would enable Malay to become a modern language capable of expressing any kind of idea in an autonomous way, a huge amount of work was carried out by the DBP, universities and other bodies. Initially the tendency was more “purist”, tending to differentiation and autonomy from the former colonial language. Many technical terms were coined on the basis of Malay, Arabic and Sanskrit roots rather than English. For example biology, which is now biologi, was first given the term kajihayat, analisis was cerakin, antropologi was kajimanusia, karnivor was maging, etc. The terms that were taken from English, on the other hand, underwent substantial transformations so that they could fit into the Malay phonological system; for example oxygen, nowadays spelt as oksigen,

10 The writing system used in Indonesia before the common spelling became official was based on the spelling conventions of Dutch.
was previously spelt as *oksijan* (Asmah Haji Omar 2004: 129). By 1967 as many as 70,000 new terms had been coined in connection with government, agriculture, engineering, economics, commerce, telecommunication, linguistics, medicine, etc. (Alisjahbana 1976: 47), and by the mid-1980s, after the publication of *Daftar Ejaan Rumi* by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1981, the number of new words had increased to about half a million (Gill 2005: 249).

In 1975 the General Guidelines for the Formation of Terms in Malay was published, a joint effort of the Majlis Bahasa Malaysia-Indonesia, whose rules have been the basis for the coinage of new words ever since. Among other things, these guidelines made loan words from English more easily recognizable, with a spelling that was closer to the original word, even though that implied a different pronunciation (see for example *oksigen* above) (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka 1992).

If any criticism can be raised at all towards these corpus planning efforts, that would be in relation to the collaboration between the Malaysian and Indonesian governments and language planning agencies. In fact, in spite of the important General Guides just referred to, a tendency can be noted for both countries to coin and use neologisms in an independent way, without any visible efforts to try to adopt common terms even in everyday use. One example of this may suffice. I was recently travelling to Kalimantan (Indonesia) and noticed that some of the words appearing both inside the aircraft and at Jakarta and Banjarmasin’s airports were quite different from their equivalents in Malaysia. I noted down a few that can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Example of terminology in Malaysia and Indonesia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Indonesia</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Airport</td>
<td><em>bandar udara</em></td>
<td><em>lapangan terbang</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departures</td>
<td><em>keberangkatan</em></td>
<td><em>perlepasan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrivals</td>
<td><em>kedatangan</em></td>
<td><em>ketibaan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilets</td>
<td><em>kamar kecil</em></td>
<td><em>tandas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men/women</td>
<td><em>pria/wanita</em></td>
<td><em>lelaki/perempuan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fasten your seat belts</td>
<td><em>kenakan sabuk pengaman</em></td>
<td><em>pasangkan tali keledar keselamatan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seat</td>
<td><em>kursi</em></td>
<td><em>tempat duduk</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the Indonesian versions can still be understood by Malay speakers, but some may not. As a matter of fact, the lexical differences between Malay and Indonesian are greater than, for example, between British and American English. Asmah Haji Omar, for example, carried out an intelligibility test among her students of Malay linguistics in 1998:
There were 81 of them, comprising Malays, Chinese and Indians. [ ... ] I used two texts, each of the length of about 300 words, taken from two different Indonesian newspapers. For each text, the respondents were asked to mark the items that appeared to them as odd, unintelligible or unusual in terms of spelling, meaning, word-form, and style. The result showed that the odd, unintelligible and unusual items consisted 30% of the totality of the two texts. (Asmah Haji Omar 2003: 65–66)

Because of this tendency towards differentiation and autonomy (efforts of an Ausbau nature) of the Malaysian and Indonesian varieties, readership tends to be restricted to the national borders of each country. Publishing books and printed matter becomes much easier and cheaper if the number of their users is higher; however, because of the aforementioned and other reasons of a more sociopolitical nature few Indonesian books and periodicals find their way into Malaysia and vice versa. This, I believe, is one of the reasons that accounts for the dearth of Malay books in Malaysia (see following section).

### 3.2 Status planning

Status planning refers to the efforts carried out to give prestige to a language and to extend the domains in which it is going to be used. Have these two main aims been achieved in Malaysia? Definitely Malay is now being used in domains, particularly official domains, that were almost exclusively the realm of English until Independence: public administration, the daily press, books, including school books, etc. However, 60 years after independence Malay is still hardly used in low domains by non-Bumiputras (unless in cases of interaction with Malays who cannot speak English)\(^\text{11}\) and ranks second to English in many high domains like business, entertainment (films) and particularly books, whereas in other domains such as the judicial system, the daily press, radio and television it has to compete with English and/or the languages of the other two largest ethnic communities (see Asmah Haji Omar 2004). As far as Malay’s status is concerned, even though its prestige has definitely risen since the 1960s, many Malaysians still do not consider it a very useful and prestigious language, in many cases opting for English. For example, the survey on language use and attitudes carried out by Coluzzi (2012) among a sample of 86 students of the University of Malaya at the beginning of 2011 showed that as many as 44 of them ranked

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\(^{11}\) Interestingly enough, the only states in Malaysia where Malay is used extensively among the non-Malays as well are Sabah and Sarawak, where the Malays are a minority. There Malay has succeeded in becoming the lingua franca (together with English) among the various Dayak groups who speak different languages.
English first as the most important language, whereas Malay came third with only 4 students ranking it first. Those four students were all Malay, but they were also only a fourth of the total number of Malay respondents (4 out of 16) (Coluzzi 2012: 8). As far as the use of Malay in e-mail/texting is concerned, Coluzzi’s survey shows that English is the preferred language even when the addressee belongs to the same ethnic group (Coluzzi 2012: 10). Even Asmah Haji Omar (2003) has pointed out the higher prestige English enjoys. English is also the first language of a small group of Malaysians, mostly Eurasians, ethnic Chinese and Indian. In Coluzzi’s survey, for example, 10 students out of 86 declared that their first language is English. Of these, two (out of 16) were Malay (Coluzzi 2012: 8). Malay is really useful only to obtain a state-related job, which is mainly the privilege of Bumiputras. Culturally, there is not much in Malay that may attract the non-Bumiputras. On television, for instance, there are very few programmes in Malay that are aimed at all ethnic groups; most of the programmes in Malay in fact specifically target the Malay majority, whether they are soap operas, music or religious programmes. In fact, the productions that are intended for all ethnic groups, like some pop music programmes, tend to be in English. As far as books and magazines are concerned, the situation is even more worrying. The great majority of books available in any bookstore in Malaysia (apart from specialized ones on Islam, for example) are in English, whereas books in Malay comprise only a tiny minority. Among these only a handful of translations of literary masterpieces and interesting non-fiction works from other languages can be found, most of the available books being on Malay issues, Islam and love novels, not really what may appeal to members of the other ethnic groups. In this respect Asmah Haji Omar had already noted (2003) that:

In terms of reading materials the DBP, being the biggest publishing house for and the most important propagator of Malay, has not done enough in the production of books for the general public, children and academia. Translation of foreign books has only been confined to translation from English. (Asmah Haji Omar 2003: 82)

As S. Takdir Alisjahbana has remarked (1976):

A well-developed language with sufficient books and other reading materials for the use in universities and other modern institutions are as infrastructure of the process of modernization at least as important as roads, irrigation and electricity for economic development. (S. Takdir Alisjahbana 1976: 118)

Another sign that highlights the relatively low prestige of the language is that few foreigners want or need to learn it, and even those who do will find only a handful of Malay courses and books available, and almost all of them for beginners. The interest foreigners show towards a language is a sign of the
prestige it enjoys, and it can even help to fortify the status of the language in the
country where it is spoken. If a foreigner wants to learn Malay well and get an
official certificate, he/she will probably be better off in Indonesia, a country
which seems to have been more successful in its status planning activities,
having managed to make Malay/Indonesian a real national language with
which all ethnic groups identify.

In spite of its official name – in 1969 the name of the language was changed
from Bahasa Melayu [Malay language] to Bahasa Malaysia [the language of
Malaysia] – Malay has not really succeeded in becoming the language of
Malaysia, the lingua franca of the whole population and a symbol of identity
for all. It is a well-known fact that there are still a large number of non-
Bumiputras, particularly Chinese, who do not feel any attachment to Malay
and try to avoid using it (Asmah Haji Omar 1987: 75). Status planning then
seems to have failed in raising the prestige of the national language to levels
similar to that most national languages in the world enjoy. It seems to me that
the main obstacles to Malay acquiring the full status of the national language of
Malaysia are three: its relatively low prestige among the non-Bumiputras,
coupled with the persistent identification of Malay with Malay ethnicity and
Islam, the predominance and prestige of English, and the positive discrimina-
tion that the State grants to Bumiputras, particularly to the Malays, and the
consequent widespread feelings of being discriminated against that many non-
Bumiputras have (see also Lim et al. 2009). All this will be discussed in depth in
the final section.

3.3 Acquisition planning

Whereas the purpose of status planning is to increase the number of domains
where the language is used, the aim of acquisition planning is to increase the
number of speakers. From this perspective, Malay language planning has been
quite successful, as nearly all Malaysians now, excluding a small percentage of
elders, can speak, understand, write and read the language, even though the
proficiency of some of them may not be very high. This is certainly because of
lack of opportunities to use it (particularly in areas with a low percentage of
Malay residents), but mostly because of the perceived low usefulness and
prestige of the language (especially in the work and cultural fields) and because
of the identification of the language with Malay ethnicity and Islam (see Asmah
Haji Omar 1987: 75).

Nowadays there are two types of primary state schools in Malaysia:
National schools and National-type schools. In the first ones the language of
instruction is Malay and English is taught as a second language, whereas in the second the language of instruction is Mandarin Chinese or Tamil according to the schools, while both Malay and English are taught as subjects. As for secondary education, in addition to National schools, National-type schools are available only for Chinese, which means that students who attended Tamil primary schools and even a number of those who attended Chinese schools have to continue their education in secondary National schools. In National-type secondary schools, however, Chinese is only limited to one subject. This system replaced the former one where each ethnic group had their own vernacular schools teaching in their own language and following different syllabuses, and with English schools attended by all ethnic groups, but mostly by well-off urban Chinese and Indian children. As far as higher education is concerned, the main language of instruction in public universities is Malay, even though in several faculties English is used as well. However, there are now various private universities whose language of instruction is mostly English.

For students belonging to minority groups there is another opportunity in National schools. They can learn their own heritage language for a few hours per week thanks to the POL (pupils’ own language) provision – providing that there are at least 15 students requesting it and teachers are available, classes of Mandarin and Tamil, and even other minority languages like Iban and Kadazandusun in Borneo, can be opened. The problem with POL, however, is that there may not be enough students or available teachers and the amount of teaching hours is low (3 periods of 45 minutes each a week) (see Asmah Haji Omar 2003: 113); in addition, the fact that these classes are extracurricular with no compulsory exams to be passed makes them to be perceived as of little use.

Even though this education system has proven to be effective for the maintenance of the largest minority languages, it has only been partially helpful in raising the prestige of Malay among non-Bumiputras, and it has not helped Malay students to improve their linguistic and cultural knowledge of their fellow citizens belonging to other ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{12} The great majority may just know a handful of words in the other languages (apart from Malay, which everybody is expected to know), and many even struggle to pronounce correctly the names of their Chinese or Indian fellow countrymen.

\textsuperscript{12} Not considering the relatively small number of those who have attended Chinese schools, which has given them the opportunity to come into contact and to become knowledgeable in Chinese language and culture.
4 Discussion

In spite of the good results obtained in the areas of corpus and, to an extent, acquisition planning, the crucial area of status planning seems to have failed in making Malay a full-blown national language used in all domains and mastered and cherished by the whole population. In the section on status planning the reasons behind this relative failure have been already pointed out. These are first of all the high prestige of English, secondly the relatively low prestige and usefulness of Malay particularly among non-Bumiputras, who cannot help perceiving it as closely related to Malay ethnicity, culture and religion, and thirdly the feeling of frustration and injustice that the positive discrimination provisions for Malays have created.

Let us now look at these three reasons in detail.

4.1 The high prestige of English

English has by now become the international language, the language of progress and social and economic advancement *par excellence*. This is true all over the world, but even more in countries where this language plays a special role for having been official in the past. And when English is so deeply rooted, well known and useful as it is in Malaysia, it is objectively difficult to rival it, as many situations all around the world have shown us. In spite of the official language policy of the State, in Malaysia it is possible to survive and even thrive with only a basic knowledge of Malay. For instance, there are thousands of foreigners living in Malaysia who can easily get by without knowing any Malay at all. This would not be possible in countries like Italy or Japan. In fact, most Malaysians can speak English, even if many do not speak it fluently. Also, as observed before, a large number of newspapers and magazines, TV programmes including the news and most of the books available in the country are in English. In addition to this, mastery of English is an indispensable prerequisite to getting any good job in the private sector. It seems to me that not much can be done to counteract this, other than offering a much larger number of high quality cultural products in Malay, as already noted, or offering more job opportunities to non-Malays in state-related jobs where Malay is the dominant language.

4.2 The relatively low prestige and lack of neutrality of Malay

As noted in the section on status planning, Malay is not felt as attractive by many non-Bumiputras. People feel drawn to languages that can offer economic and cultural opportunities, i.e. languages that can improve their speakers’ material,
cultural and spiritual life. This is the reason why most non-Malays and even some Malays prefer to learn and identify with English rather than Malay (see also Azirah Hashim 2009). But there is another important reason why many non-Bumiputras reject Malay: Malay is not perceived as a neutral language for everybody, a feature that any national language should possess. In spite of its present official name (Bahasa Malaysia), Malay is still perceived as the language of the Malays and of their religion, Islam, and, beyond the politicians’ rhetoric, this is reiterated by almost anything that is related to the language (see Suryadinata 1997; Asmah Haji Omar 1987: 75, 2003: 150). As already noted, the majority of books that can be found in Malay are love stories, on Malay issues or Islam, and this religion is often present in Malay productions on television. Books, magazines and television programmes in Malay targeting all ethnic groups in Malaysia are few and far between, and in the same way as members of different ethnic groups, particularly young people, tend not to mingle on a daily basis, they are hardly ever seen together in television programmes, too. There are drama series for Malays with an all-Malay cast and drama series in Chinese (mainly Mandarin and Cantonese) with an all-Chinese cast and very few drama series where all ethnic groups appear together. My personal impression is that each ethnic group is suspicious of the other and fears assimilation, which is not surprising considering such ethnic and religious polarization.

In order to succeed, status planning has to stimulate people to want to learn and use the language which is the object of the promotion efforts, and identity with it so that it may become part of their identity. Quite contrary to this, too often the attitude of official institutions in Malaysia has been over-authoritarian, forcing people to learn Malay rather than making it attractive to them. It seems to me that one of the reasons Chinese minorities in other Southeast Asian countries have integrated so much better is the fact that the official language is made to appear more neutral and inclusive in these other countries. In Thailand and the Philippines, for example, many Chinese Thais and Filipinos have developed double identities as Thais or Filipinos and Chinese, being proud to be Thai or Filipino citizens belonging to the Chinese minority (Suryadinata 1997; Chan and Tong 1993).

4.3 Positive action towards the Malays

This seems to be a central issue. As long as any ethnic group feels discriminated against, it will be difficult for that ethnic group to want to identify with the culture and language of the group that is perceived as privileged. Obviously the New Economic Policy and positive discrimination policies were important in that
historical moment to readdress the economic differences that existed between the Malays and the other main ethnic groups (see, for example, Maznah Mohamad 2009), but now they have become more counter-productive than productive. At this point in time, many feel that people in hardship should get help and be offered opportunities in work, education, etc. irrespective of their ethnic background. It is true that there are still many poor Malays, but there are also poor Indians and Chinese, who also deserve some support and opportunities, e.g. to be able to get a job as civil servants. As Edmund Terence Gomez has remarked (2009: 170): “While affirmative action has appreciably improved the economic position of the Bumiputera, the policy should ideally have moved towards removing the ethnic criterion during the allocations of resources.” Unfortunately positive discrimination for the Malays is at present being used as a political ploy to attract Malay votes. In Edmund Terence Gomez’s words (2009: 170), “Affirmative action has proven to be an indispensable avenue through which UMNO [United Malays National Organization, the biggest party in Malaysia currently in power] has managed to secure Malay support”.

Malaysian society is now as divided along ethnic lines as ever, as has been noted again and again (see for example Lee 2009; David 2010; David and Yee 2010; Yee and Wong 2010). According to the results of research carried out by Jayum (2006):

> Children of the post-independence era simply do not mix as well as their parents and grandparents did or do. Neither do the former understand or care enough to understand each other as compared to their parents or grandparents. It can be concluded that, ethnic relations are deteriorating instead of improving despite the many measures to improve ethnic relations promoted by each successive government since the late 1960s. (Jayum [2006], in David and Yee [2010: 185])

Yet, such artificially driven division does not need to be there, as competition and conflict between ethnic groups can be kept to a minimum. In fact, “ethnic groups may enter a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship based, for instance, on the exploitation of two specialized and noncompetitive niches in the same market” (Van den Berghe [1978], in Chan and Tong [1993: 145]). A common lingua franca felt as inclusive and neutral by everybody would also contribute to peaceful pluralism and integration.

Malay was chosen to be the national language of Malaysia. English could have been chosen instead, as it was in many other former British colonies, because of its prestige, development (very little language planning would have been needed) and “neutral” quality, “neutral” with respect to the various ethnic groups in the country, that is. It is, for example, one of the four official languages of Singapore, together with Mandarin, Tamil and Malay, the latter
enjoying the status of national language despite only being spoken on a daily basis by about 10 percent of the population (David et al. 2009). English is, however, the only language of inter-ethnic communication in Singapore and this seems to have led to better results than in Malaysia as far as the forging of a common national identity is concerned.

In spite of the aforementioned advantages, English as an official language would have kept Malay, the main historical language of the country, an underdeveloped “low” variety as it was during colonial times, and would have made it harder for Malays to raise their social and economic status. However, now that Malay is a viable developed language and the national language of Malaysia, all efforts should be made to make it everybody’s language, whether first or second. It would be an important element in the creation of a real Malaysian identity, not a Malay one for everybody. This could help the various ethnic groups to get closer to each other. However, forcing people is not the right way, as the present situation clearly shows. The approach to language planning should always be soft, flexible and open minded. It should be based on the idea that people should not be forced but rather convinced through some form of reward, whether in the economic or cultural fields, and through the principle of “give and take”. The latter is very important. If non-Bumiputras have to master Malay, Malays also should learn Chinese and Tamil, at least some basics. The latter (and all other minority languages) could become co-official languages, not national languages, but official minority languages like Catalan, Galician and Basque in Spain, or Welsh, Irish and Gaelic in the United Kingdom. Through the study of the language, understanding each other’s cultures would become so much simpler and effective – it is a well-known fact that the only way out of intolerance is cognitive competency, the only way to overcome the present racial divisions. As Yee Mei Tien and Wong Poh Sim (2010: 206) have rightly remarked, “Very often prejudices at the cognitive level arise from lack of knowledge of the other and false perceptions that were enhanced by cultural and racial stereotypes”. In addition, knowing a language like Chinese would be a great economic asset for the Malays, too. Making Malay everybody’s language (and an important international language as well) could only be achieved if it was made to be perceived as neutral both in an ethnic and religious sense:

Religion and ethnicity tend to be divisive social categories of social identity such that continuous reinforcement of ethnic and religious differences would lead to deterioration of ethnic relations. (Ratnasingam 2010: 30)

13 In relation to Chinese, Asmah Haji Omar has written that “The other races, and in particular the Malays, should learn to speak the Chinese language” (1987: 63).
Making Malay everybody’s language would also require, among other things, producing high quality publications covering all subjects available to everybody, including translations from other languages (see Asmah Haji Omar 2003: 201). As far as religion is concerned, there should be books on Islam as well as books on Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity in Malay. This is actually a reality in Indonesia, where most of the books in bookstores are in Indonesian, and all areas of knowledge are covered, from literature to science and religion. Considering the importance of the mass media in modern society, Malaysians should be able to enjoy high-quality programmes on different topics in Malay. Writing on Malay films and television series, Asmah Haji Omar (2003) has affirmed:

The sophisticated Malaysians are hoping for creations that suit their levels of knowledge and intellectuality. The productions in Malay as seen on the Malaysian TV channels are no doubt entertaining, but on a different level of intellectuality. [...] Those who have the choice will not hesitate to choose something that they find more entertaining in another language medium. (Asmah Haji Omar 2003: 201)

It is also important that more films and soap operas are offered in Malay with a mixed cast of actors belonging to different ethnic groups. That would be an important message for Malaysians, i.e. that Malays, Chinese and Indians share the same citizenship and can live together. All this, obviously, does not mean that these programmes should replace those already existing in Malay, Chinese and Tamil. Language diversity is very important (see Coluzzi 2011: 34–35). On the contrary, programmes in minority languages like Iban or Kadazandusun should also be produced. In a multilingual society everybody should be able to master English and Malay and retain their ethnic languages. Even the present system of National and National-type schools could be retained, but at least efforts should be made to have all ethnic groups share the same premises, so that on top of their school curriculum, they could meet for sport and recreational activities, for example. This has already been proposed in the form of sekolah wawasan [vision schools], but has been carried out in only five schools in the whole country so far (Zuraidah Mohd Don 2014: 126), again on account of fear of encroaching and perceived negative influences on the part of all ethnic groups. Apart from reinforcing the knowledge of Malay among Chinese and Indian students, this would have another very important effect:

Young people should be given opportunities for extended interactions with members of all ethnic groups such that this experience would force them to discard stereotypical understandings and instead forge new understandings based on knowledge acquired through personal observation and experience. (Ratnasingam 2010: 31–32)

And if one day consensus could be reached on implementing a common national school system, this “should accommodate the varying preferences of all
the different ethnic groups” (Azirah Hashim 2009: 48). More specifically, “a dual medium of instruction and teaching of Chinese and Tamil as electives [which] will lead to students being at least bilingual. Fluency in at least three languages can be achieved or at least attempted” (Azirah Hashim 2009: 49). Or, as a multi-ethnic student group called Anak Muda Harapan Malaysia has recently proposed in an open letter addressed to the Prime Minister of Malaysia and federal lawmakers, a single-stream education system should be implemented, provided that “the quality of national schools should be improved and a trilingual policy should be made compulsory for all students” (Malay Mail online 2015).  

5 Conclusions

The suggestions made here are based on comparative analysis with multilingual situations in other countries, and may not necessarily suit the Malaysian case. As stated at the beginning, Malaysia is a unique case from many points of view, with more than one third of the total population being considered non-native to the soil, and such a situation requires a great amount of tact and sensibility. However, it is quite clear that the present situation is making too many people dissatisfied and Malay a language of secondary importance. As explained in the previous section, the key to making Malay attractive is to make it prestigious and useful (see Coluzzi 2007) on the one hand, and neutral on the other. In addition to this, an “exchange” policy should be implemented whereby the Government should show its willingness to consider some degree of official status to and a genuine interest in the minority languages and cultures found in the country, an aspect of which could be official provisions being implemented to have Chinese and/or Tamil (and other minority languages like Iban and Kadazandusun in Borneo) as subjects in all schools. At the same time the Government should strive to replace the present preferential treatment based on ethnicity with a system based on actual economic needs. This would be far more effective both to improve people’s life and the prestige of Malay than the rhetoric of “1Malaysia”15 which Malaysians are blasted with incessantly via all media.

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14 Among other things, this group has also demanded an end to pro-Bumiputra policies.
15 1Malaysia (pronounced “Satu Malaysia”) is a logo and the name of a promotional campaign launched by the present Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak of the centre-right party UMNO with the official aim of emphasizing ethnic harmony, national unity, and efficient governance. However many, particularly non-Bumiputras, feel that it is only a hoax to attract non-Malays’ consensus without jeopardizing the support granted by many Malays to the governing coalition in exchange for the special privileges they are entitled to as Bumiputras.
References


