Reading
the Malay World

edited by
Rick Hosking, Susan Hosking,
Noritah Omar and Washima Che Dan

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natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, 43.7 x 86.0 cm (irreg)
Gift of Mr Charles P. Mountford 1960
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The Malay community in Singapore comprises about 432,500 people, in a population of nearly 3,000,000. Though a minority, the Malays have moved in tandem with mainstream Singaporeans, sharing their problems as well as progress, while retaining most of their Malay heritage.

The Malay language assumed a position of importance in Singapore during early 1960s. Malay was selected as the national language when Singapore became independent in 1965. The dominance of the language in Malay homes and social networks until recently remained unrivalled. However, in recent years, the status and importance of Malay have declined. This is due to changes in the social, political and economic life of the Malays which, in turn, have brought about changes with respect to the status, functions and, to some extent, the structure of the language. The Malay community, realizing the futility of efforts to reverse the trend, accepted the situation and the Malay language now assumes third position in importance in Singapore after English and Mandarin.

In Singapore, English has been designated the role of official working language because it is the purported lingua franca of the multilingual society. Although it is the language of former colonial rule, the use of English has been defended as a necessity since the early years of Singapore’s independence. Amin Nadzimah and Rosli Talif (1997) state that ‘with modernisation, international recognition, and desire for progress, the English language seems to be the logical language of choice’. The English language is chosen primarily on the basis of its ‘utility and actual use in the domains of science and technology’. Its value is purely instrumental as it enables a nation to participate in and to advance technologically, and so achieve global status and mobility.

It was the motivation to be ‘higher up on the social ladder’ and also to be successful in the corporate world that led parents to educate their children.
Malay: Singaporean

comprises about 432,500 people, in a shove a minority, the Malays have moved ans, sharing their problems as well as Malay heritage.

English at the expense of Malay. Mastery of English is not only viewed as a sign of intellectual development but also as a means of improving communication. The road to techno-economic and educational advancement which Singapore has chosen requires access to important knowledge, power and status conferred by mastery of the English language. This is a point underscored in a statement presented by the first Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, in 1970 and reinforced by the present Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, who stipulates that Singapore can now hope to ‘compete on a more equal footing with the advanced nations’.

Today, English has been accepted as an important tool in the social and professional life of Singaporeans. Since English remains the dominant language of business communication, it has become an important language to be acquired by all Singaporeans.

The Malay language now assumes third place after English and Mandarin. Designated the role of official working lingua franca of the multilingual society, colonial rule, the use of English has been y years of Singapore’s independence. Aim of the English language seems to be the logical us in science and technology. Its value is ion to participate in and to advance technostatus and mobility.

Communication between Singaporeans does not consist of a simple straightforward use of a standard language. The issue of bilingualism is very pertinent in the Singaporean context and needs particular attention.

By etymology, the word bilingualism means two languages. It has been defined in many different ways ranging from the total, simultaneous and alternating mastery of two languages to some degree of knowledge of a second language. Sociolinguists such as Hamers and Blanc (1989) define bilinguality as the psychological state of an individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication, while Romaine (1994: 56) defines bilingualism as ‘acquiring competence in more than one language’.

In other words, language users do have access to the use of both the native language and some variety of English. Romaine further acknowledges that the bilingual individual’s skill may not be the same for both languages, but can differ in the lexical, syntactic, stylistic, phonological and semantic levels. Romaine’s definition is adopted for the purpose of this essay since bilingual Malays in Singapore are most likely to be proficient in one language only.

Further, bilingualism has also been said to be the equal ability to communicate in two languages but with the possibility of greater skills in one language. A bilingual person, as such, is one who has mastered two linguistic systems, and
is able to switch rapidly and effortlessly from one linguistic system to another as circumstances change. According to Jariah Mohd Jan, "Being bilingual encourages ... the ability to communicate and interact with a wide range of people and allows one to gain access to knowledge sources thus bringing social, cognitive, and economic advantages to a person."6

There are a large proportion of bilingual individuals in Singapore and the social environment is such that various languages are used in daily communication. As such, the opportunity to master two or three languages has always been promoted in the education system. The immediate effect of promoting English has meant that all Singaporean Malays have had to undergo their education in English as their first language (level) while learning Malay formally at second language level, that is, as a school subject.

Most Malays use Malay more for social and cultural purposes. According to Kamisah Abdullah (1994), the domain of the Malay language has been relegated and restricted to family, neighbourhood and religious domains only. Malay parents speak Malay to their children and as such, it is the predominant language in the Malay household. However, statistics from the 1990 Census reveal that the position of the Malay language in the homes declined from 99.4% in 1957 to 94.3% in 1990 because it had been increasingly challenged by English. In addition, the popularity among Malays of an English education is reflected in the Census data.

In many respects, socio-economic forces in a rapidly developing nation have had a profound effect on language maintenance and language shift in the Malay community. There is a perception that the standard of Malay spoken by the younger generation of Malays has declined. The younger generation has also ceased to see the importance of their mother tongue. Furthermore, groups of Malay elites and professionals have demonstrated their high level of proficiency in English and it is not expected that everyone should be a balanced and effectively bilingual at the highest level.

Non-English speaking Malay home environments produce children with poor proficiency in English. This in turn contributes significantly to poor performance in major public examinations which are primarily conducted in English. In contrast, children with English educated parents are more likely to speak fluent English.

The clearest indication of the future spread or rather shift in the use of English in the home is found in the 1990 Census figures indicating that Malays were beginning to realise the importance of English for job opportunities for their children, unlike the Chinese who could easily find support from Chinese businesses.
This collection of essays is the culmination of a symposium on the representation of Malays and Malay culture in Singaporean and Malaysian literature in English held in 2004 in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The symposium, with the theme 'Reading the Malay World through Singaporean and Malaysian Texts in English' brought together experts from the fields of literature, language and linguistics to spotlight the ways in which Malays and Malay culture are captured in the literary imagination of Singaporean and Malaysian writers writing in English. The symposium highlighted how Malays and Malay culture are imagined and promoted through literature, and also explored Malayness from linguistic and cultural perspectives.

Issues of concern addressed here include the construction of the Malays in Singaporean and Malaysian literature in English within orientalist or colonialist discourses of the East, the influence of English on the ways that Malays and Malay culture are represented, how Malay identity is defined, and the positioning of the Malays in literary imaginations and social realities.