

English language Reform and the Process of Democratic Change

JAMES CAMPBELL
Deakin University/ Universiti Sains Malaysia
jamesca@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

Malaysian society has and is undergoing considerable social, political, economic and educational change. Scholars point to the forces of globalization and the needs to be able to meet the challenges of globalization as the central driver of language policy. Commentators, academics and many in the general public have focused on the need for Malaysia to adapt to globalization and the importance of English to this process given the needs and characteristic of the knowledge economy. However, there appears to be less recognition of the way such a change in Malaysian language policy needs to be engaged in a dynamically shifting knowledge society and developing public sphere. Language is a *social* act and the debate over language and its place and role in society is therefore a debate over the nature and quality of *social* interaction. Debate over language is thus inherently political. Due to the growth and development of an interactive and engaged public sphere and knowledge society in Malaysia, there is a need to approach to the idea of engaging English that grasps the plurality and complexity of its role in the world. The political approach to engaging English in Malaysia needs to engage democratic deliberation in a society that is increasingly fragmented but also showing signs of developing an active public sphere not beholden to top down authority. Disagreement over language and the way the debate is theorized hides from view the possibility of points of consensus on the issue of English language and Malaysian education. Establishing overlapping consensus through public deliberation and consultation is a necessary precondition to effective language policy in contemporary Malaysia. Failure to understand this only leads to policy paralysis.

Key Words: Public sphere; recognition; overlapping consensus; language policy

Introduction

Recent discussions and disagreements over the role of English in Malaysian society have centered on the lightning rod policy of teaching Maths and Science in Primary schools in English. The reversal of this policy from 2012-2014 has revealed deep and significant disagreement over language policy in Malaysia. For advocates of English in Malaysia, the pragmatic, instrumental, nationalist and internationalist necessity for English language competency are the critical arguments for English language proficiency (Fishman, 1968; Asmah, 1996). Since language is a social act, then the politics of language, the debate over language and its place and role in society is a debate over the nature and quality of social interaction. In short, such a debate is inherently political. Malaysian society has and is undergoing considerable social, political, economic and educational change (Case, 1991; Mandal, 2000; Baskaran, 2002; Department, 2002; Lee, 2003; Ridge, 2004; Bank, 2007). Scholars point to the forces of globalization and the needs to be able to meet the challenges of globalization as the central driver of language policy (Zawawi Ibrahim, 2004). Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed is arguably the most articulate exponent of this view. He argues that because of the importance of technology and science as critical components of advancing to the knowledge economy within current globalization, Malaysia has little choice but to promote English language and in the areas where there is most need *vis a vis* the knowledge economy (New Perspectives Quarterly, 1997; Beeson, 2000).

Yet, this disagreement over language and the way the debate is theorized hides from view the possibility of points of consensus on the issue of English language and Malaysian education. While commentators, academics and many in the general public have focused on the need for Malaysia to adapt to globalization and the importance of English to this process given the needs and characteristic of the knowledge economy, there appears to be less recognition of the way such a change in Malaysian language policy needs to be engaged in a dynamically shifting knowledge society and developing public sphere.

The basic thesis of the paper is as follows:

1. Language is an expressive medium that encompasses and articulates cultural identity, belonging and self respect. Language and its meaning for people are deeply connected to a sense of dignity, self worth and identity. In this sense all debates about language are deeply political and imprecated with power and the ability to confer or challenge self respect dignity and identity. While politics is decried as the problem to be overcome in the English language debate, the contention of this paper is precisely the opposite. Politics is not an impediment to language reform; rather politics is a necessary precondition to successful language reform. Properly understood politics is the framework and process through which change and reform can occur. All debates about change and reform in a society are necessarily political. It is the quality of the way politics is framed and articulated that characterizes the way a debate is engaged, not the political nature of the debate as such.
2. To fully grasp the possibilities of successfully moving forward the English language issue in Malaysian society also entails a theorization of how politics in the Malaysian polity is in fact changing and transforming due to globalization and how the nature of this transformation reconstitutes and articulates the way that supporters of English instruction in Malaysian schooling must advance their claims.
3. The idea that the meaning and significance of language reform is simply a problem of instrumental change from the top down to effect a fuller integration with objective global needs is a flawed approach. Such is the rational logic of language debate within the global context of instrumental rationality and neo-liberalism. However top down instrumentalist policy advocacy as a way to advance Malaysia's engagement with globalization and engagement with the knowledge economy fails to account for how globalization and the spread of the knowledge society in Malaysia is reconstituting Malaysian society and affecting how public policy must be advanced.
4. The way to advance English language reform must ultimately rest on a renewed commitment to reaching an overlapping consensus in Rawlsian terms. Such a consensus requires policy makers

to genuinely consult and recognize the complex views of their constituents.

The Critical Role of Recognition

Globalization and the contemporary disruptions of modernity fissure through Malaysian public policy and language debate in challenging and diverse ways. Contemporary forms of recognition and cultural authority are destabilized by global flows, information and cultural change. The cultural hegemonies and settlements of a consociational pluralist polity are increasingly challenged by the needs of the global knowledge economy, interactive networks, information flows and the challenges of linguistic imperialism manifesting through the global spread of English and its attendant power in the realms of the economy and the cyber world (Nunan, 2003; Maznah Mohamad, 2005; Mauzy, 2006; Harrison and Thomas, 2009; Loh, 2009). The changing way in which recognition and demands for recognition manifest in network society and the growing internationalization and ascendancy of global English is now a significant aspect in contemporary Malaysian discourse (Crystal, 1998).

The need to express and have respected, one's identity has been theorised by Charles Taylor as "the politics of recognition" (Taylor and Gutmann 1992; Gutmann and Taylor, 1994; Fraser, 1995; Fraser, 1996; Robertson and Dale, 2008). According to Taylor, recognition, the act and process of being recognized and validated is critical demand of contemporary humanity in the current era. Recognition is a necessary aspect of respect and hence of human dignity. The failure to be recognized in society is a failure to be accorded basic respect and dignity. Misrecognition, the casting of aspersions on our identity and the refusal to take people seriously resulting in negative stereotyping of individuals or communities is a sure sign of lack of essential respect. The problems of misrecognition and exclusion are crucially articulated through language.

In a society increasingly characterized by interconnectivity, networking, ICT, global dialogue and the growth of civil society, mutual recognition is an essential aspect of a functioning communicative knowledge - based society. The practice of unreflexive top down

expressions of authority in public policy presumed dominance and exclusion (Bates, 1975). However contemporary globalization which increasingly entails policy reflexivity and the knowledge society increasingly privilege communicative discourse that is dialogical and learner oriented. Recognizing difference through inclusion and communicative engagement is critical to a society increasingly characterized by lateral forms of interaction and boundary crossing (network society). In the Malaysian case, the politics of cultural recognition and identity are central and crucial aspects of the contemporary path to development and modernization (Saravanamuttu, 2001; Canagarajah, 2002; Zawawi Ibrahim, 2004).

Language is a critical conduit through which peoples' identities are recognised and respected. How language reform is enacted is also of critical import in understanding the extent to which citizens feel their voices have been recognised and respected. For many opponents of the way English is promoted in the Malaysian debate, the move towards English in Maths and Science was a Trojan horse for the eventual decline and displacement of vernacular languages as well as the national language (Ngugi, 1981; Kachru, 1998; Mandal, 2000; Alis Puteh, 2006; Fouzia Abdullah, 2009). Language after all is an expressive medium. It enables and legitimates the expression of cultural identity. While certain critics of English may have an overly one dimensional and oversimplified view of English as simply a vehicle for hegemony *per se*, the fact that language is so important for people as a way in which they feel recognised and are conferred dignity means that the politics of language, if it is to be inclusive and democratic needs to be framed within a practice of deliberative recognition and engagement (Manin, et al. 1987; Knight and Johnson, 1994; Warren, 1996; Macedo, 1999; Triadafilopoulos, 1999; Kahane, 2000; Urbinati, 2000; Phillipson, 2009). This point shall be elaborated later in the paper. Suffice to say, understanding that the *process* by which a government engages the problem of language is also critical to the quality of recognition and ownership people feel with such a policy. **Being recognized in a society** presumes the existence of a society and the existence of inter-subjective dialogue and processes of inclusive deliberation (Manin, et. al., 1987; Knight and Johnson, 1994; Macedo, 1999; Urbinati, 2000; Fung, 2003).

Multiple and contending hegemonies: society as an intersection of contending and diverse discourses.

The English language debate in Malaysia represents and is occurring within a shifting and developing idea of the public sphere, ideas of community, nation and the politics of recognition (Zawawi Ibrahim, 2004; Weiss, 2006). The essential characteristic of the contemporary debate is that the contending interests within Malaysian society, empowered by the growth of ICT and new social movements are increasingly helping to define the limitations of government policy with regards to language reform as a result of globalization (Asmah, 1994; Haque, 2003; Gill, 2005; Alis Puteh, 2006). Part of the historical irony involved, is that the very success of Malaysian development has now produced discursive and practical limitations on reform to Malaysian language policy.

To understand the way politics in Malaysia has changed and shifted, and how this relates to the way an effective engagement with the English language issue must be addressed, requires a close understanding of the changing nature of Malaysian society and how we understand its political culture and the nature of the Malaysian public sphere. Any attempt at reaching consensus or points of consensus in language issues requires a critical and nuanced understanding of the contending and dynamically shifting nature of the Malaysian public sphere. **The development of the public sphere and the increased participation by Malaysians in it transforms the idea of *politics* in Malaysia (Milner, 1991).**

The argument over English often places politics as somehow the problem to be overcome in Malaysian linguistic debate. Challenged by the needs of the global economy, so the argument goes, Malaysians need to move the English debate away from politics, towards pragmatic and reasonable outcomes. This kind of argument is both reductionist and misleading. **Since language is a social act then the politics of language, the debate over language and its place and role in society is a debate over the nature and quality of social interaction.** In short such a debate is inherently political. However, there is more to the issue than

this simple observation. The transformation of politics in Malaysia, due to the growth of the public sphere and the increasing confidence of Malaysians to articulate their voice within a transformative albeit still developing public sphere suggests the possibility that the action of politics within such a developing public sphere may in fact help meld the unity in Malaysian society that critics have lamented is so lacking. On the other hand sceptics of the position argued in this paper may view this expansion of participation in the public realm as a potential threat to unity and impediment to reform or advancement (Milner, 1991). Either way, politics is central to language issues.(Chandra Muzaffar, 2009)

The changing face of the Malaysian polity: rethinking how to advance reform

Malaysia is a pluralistic society (Milne, 1967; Abraham, 1997). Traditionally scholars viewed Malaysia as a pluralistic society where diverse groups stood side by side with little real integration or genuine sympathy for each other or deep loyalty to the idea of a common nation and community. The argument that Malaysia represents a kind of consociational (Lijphart, 1969) ‘cease fire’ between ethnic and religious groups with no real or genuine sense of national identity that is not imposed top - down through a mixture of force and pragmatic consent implicitly influences debates about power, cultural identity and language in Malaysia (Abraham, 1997; Case, 2001). One way of viewing this social understanding or contract that characterizes Malaysian language policy was through appreciating the tensions between pluralism in society and the need for stability and unity. Malaysian social theorist Loh outlines how Malaysian politics has historically been characterized by ethnicism. Ethnicism according to Loh (2002) ‘set limits on democracy in Malaysia initially’.

According to Zawawi Ibrahim (2004) ethnicism is a product of the effects of colonialism upon pluralism. In other words, pluralism *per se* is not the cause of ethnicism in the Malaysian polity. It is the over-determining effect of colonialism upon preexisting pluralism and the way pluralism was managed, manipulated and transformed in Malaysia which has led to ethnicism. Critics of ethnic politics in Malaysia see it as an offshoot or a result of colonialism and the oppressive divide and

rule mentality that characterized the British colonial administration. Language politics in Malaysia have by inference been articulated through the prism of ethnicism. However, ethnicism is not the only form of discourse in the Malaysian polity. According to some analysts, political, economic, and social changes in Malaysia have led to a fracturing of consensus within ethnic groups and a growing sense of genuine and substantive 'Malaysian' consciousness (Ridge, 2004). This Malaysian consciousness has characterized an important shift to a participatory democratic strain within Malaysian society. Loh captures this phenomenon in the following:

Malaysian politics has also been undergoing change. While ethnicism remains a salient aspect of Malaysian politics, it is no longer correct to think that ethnicism is the beginning and the end of Malaysian politics. Rather, due to the rapid transformation of Malaysia's economy and society, a new discourse and practice of participatory politics has gained ground, especially among the urban middle class. It follows that the various ethnic groups in Malaysia are nowadays very fragmented. They do not share a common set of leaders and a single set of goals. Each community is ridden with competing sets of leaders while there are those within each community who are out to make more profits at the expense of the lower classes, often of their own races. There is also much evidence of factionalism within the ethnic-based parties – Team A versus Team B, Young Turks versus Old Guards, Menu A versus Menu B, state-based groupings, etc. (Loh, 2009: 33).

In other words, ethnicism, rooted in the colonial mentality and plural reality of Malaysian society is now tempered by the growth of participatory democratic practices linked to a substantively Malaysian consciousness. This consciousness and the practices of participation and cross sectoral participation and debate are still however tenuous. Traditional forms of mobilization in Malaysian society based upon ethnic categories still possess considerable power and even movements which ostensibly reveal a non ethnic potential, revert back to ethnic foci due to the structural power of ethnic based politics in Malaysia. As Brown

(2007) argues, ethnicity may indeed be a constructed phenomenon but deconstructing it is far from easy in the Malaysian context. The politics of ethnicity (ethnicism) and the politics of a broader public sphere based on cross sectoral participation, engagement and dialogue stand in marked contrast and tension within Malaysian society (this is so despite that fact that some of the public social movements and civil society organizations are ethnically based and can accentuate not ameliorate tensions. In this sense civil society organizations as such are not necessarily an unalloyed good). Loh argues:

Ethnicity remains a very salient aspect of Malaysian politics. However, whereas ethnicism previously dominated the discourse and practice of Malaysian politics and posed limits on democracy, it no longer does so to the same predictable extent. Recent developments, especially those that occurred since 1998, suggest that a new discourse and practice of participatory democracy has gained ground among Malaysians and particularly among Malays. (Loh, 2003:93).

One way of theorising the way identity discourse is framed in Malaysian society is through the insights of Shamsul (2001:365) who argues that identity formation in Malaysia takes place in a two step process. Firstly there is “authority defined social reality” which is defined by people in power in a particular social structure. Secondly there is the “every-day defined” social reality which occurs in everyday interactions and associations in Malaysia. Arguably, authority defined social reality in Malaysia has drawn upon the power of the state and critical interests to reinforce and articulate Malaysian political disputes within an ethnicist paradigm. Whereas, notwithstanding the sometimes divisive role some civil society groups can play, the everyday associations and changing ways in which Malaysians are articulating and creating a Malaysian public sphere of cross sectoral dialogue stands in some contrast. Despite the obvious limitations to the thesis of this paper, a reasonable argument can be made that the growth and articulation of a Malaysian public sphere based on dialogue and a desire to move out of ethnicist silo-like mentalities is driven and aided by the growth and development of Malaysian civil society (Mundy and Murphy, 2001; Pye, 2001; Saravanamuttu, 2001; Azeem Fazwan and Ahmad Farouk, 2004; Weiss, 2006).

The growth of social movements and forms of public interest discussion spaces such as blogs and the expansion of non governmental organizations and civil society have all contributed to a bottom - up movement that not only challenges top - down authoritarian politics but also helps to form and articulate forms of cross sectoral dialogue in Malaysian society (Loh, 2003). In this sense one of the characteristics of globalization is that it aids the spread of English through Malaysian society (and this has consequences for cultural identity), but also potentially helps challenge ethnicism and authoritarian top down culture (Block, 2004). Hence, the impact of globalization is contradictory and often paradoxical. The development of middle class public participation, the spread of blogs, the growth and involvement of non governmental organizations and the general growth of a Malaysian civil society that shows (at least in some cases) relative independence from the state when combined with some very real elements of dialogue and engagement across ethnic groups in Malaysia is of real significance to understanding social and political change (Weiss and Saliha Hassan 2002; Weiss 2006). As pointed out above, these forms of discursive change are by no means uniform and the politics of ethnicism is still powerful and articulate in Malaysian society, yet the growth of an inter-subjective public sphere and discourse of ‘Malaysianess’ that is driven bottom up from the grassroots social milieu has resulted in a cultural shift that necessitates policy makers to engage dialogically with social issues rather than rely on the traditional authoritarian methods.

Compounding ethnicism and democratic discourse in Malaysia, a third, basic discourse which to some extent has over-determined both ethnicism and the discourse of a growing participatory public sphere has arisen which is now tempering the democratic project. This discourse is known as developmentalism. According to Loh (2002: 21) the ‘politics of developmentalism occurred during the 1990’s, a period characterized by economic liberalization that promoted double digit economic growth rates.’. The key to the discourse of developmentalism lies in its privatised and commercialised discourse. Developmentalism is the discourse of neo-liberal individualism and consumer mentality. It entails a retreat from public engagement in the service of individual gratification tied to consumption and individualised identity. The retreat from public discourse to an instrumental and individualistic discourse

which is concomitant with the needs of business and associated with globalisation has also influenced the way the English language debate is framed.

Arguably the process of cultural commercialisation underway in Malaysia is tied distinctly to the spread of English. This commercialisation that occurs in everyday life from television shows through to promotions for tourism ‘de-emotionalises’ the discourse of language in Malaysia (Chang 2005). The commercial aspect of English in Malaysia appears to be concomitant with the commercialisation of the culture and privatization of freedom described as, “pursuit of ones own freedom, individual achievement and expression of one’s own identity”(Loh, 2002:21). Critics of commercialised culture in Malaysia argue that commercialization and globalization are in fact changing the nature of the national language from within (Sew, 2007; Zeenath, 2007).

Consequences for analysis

If it is the case that the English language debate must be understood against a backdrop of ethnicism, democratic discourse and possessively individualistic developmentalism, what are the consequences for analysis? Two essential issues arise. Firstly, the complex amalgam of reasons for rejecting the most recent teaching of Maths and Science in English, for example cannot be simply reduced to the concept of nationalist opposition in Malaysian society anymore than the support of such programs be reduced to pragmatic acquiescence. Tupas captures the sentiment in the following observation:

Language ideological debates, for example on national languages and media of instruction ... tend to reduce the complexity of issues into simplistic claims: English is the language of globalization, science and technology, and social mobility; while the national languages help maintain our various national heritages and identities, English must take first priority in education and society because this is the way to move ahead. The issues of languages in society and education are very complex ...but anyone who is “critical” of English is deemed either blind to the unfolding marvels

of globalization, or is deemed to be against the teaching or learning of English in all its forms.(Tupas, 2008:6)

Brown's analysis of the complex way in which identities are formed in both vertical and horizontal relationships is also apposite to this point(Brown, 2005a; Brown, 2005b). The responses to the Maths and Science in English debate in Malaysian society reveals the complex way in which responses to this issue were based on a critical amalgam of class, ethnic, urban/rural, educational and participatory influences that defy simple characterization as either nationalist or pragmatic (Pillai, 2007). Given the argument above with regards to ensuring that language policy truly engages and represents a politics of cultural and social recognition and respect, as against a politics of over reductive binaries and hegemony, how do we avoid a discursive approach to language policy that reifies tensions in a society at the expense of grasping interconnectedness, plurality of viewpoints and fluidity? One of the implicit problems with reductive binaries is they also tend to preclude any way of establishing points of consensus since the pluralities of positions and nuances of objections that may be rooted in criticisms' over technique, strategy or implementation are reduced to acceptance or rejection (for example in such a discursive framing of the issue you are either for or against English, a nationalist or a pragmatist).

Significant arguments with respect to the unintended consequences of the teaching of Maths and Science in English are not reducible to nationalist considerations *per se* but rather are examples of legitimate concerns over the social justice implications of the policy. The problem of qualified teachers who can teach Science and Mathematics in English is one such issue (Ridge, 2004). Another issue is the problem of teaching students difficult subjects not in their mother tongue and the possible inequalities that may result from this (Hazita Azman, 2004; Nor Hashimah et. al., 2008). Finally the way English is used in day to day communication between ethnic groups in Malaysia differs between ethnic groups and along rural urban and class axis (David, 2007). Tan (2006:1) points out for example that, 'Malaysian adolescents, especially those living in urban areas, engage in various forms of writing in English that include the school essay, SMS phone texting, online chat, blogs, notes and poems.' If this is correct, then the ease

with which students can switch to English in subjects such as Science and Maths may correlate with student's placement on relational axis' of class, urbanicity and ethnicity and access to ICT technology (Chan and Tan, 2006). Recognizing this problem is not necessarily an issue of nationalism, rather it is motivated by concerns over social justice and educational inclusion.

The essential problem with advocating English in Malaysia is not that its proponents are wrong in their assertion regarding the importance of English within current globalization and the needs of the knowledge economy. Rather the problem is two fold. Firstly, as argued above the policy of teaching Maths and Science in English in Primary schools runs up against several important practical problems and equity considerations that cannot be glossed over by reference to globalization. Secondly, the way the decision to change to English language instruction was made led to significant problems. While the broad policy aim of improving English so as to be able to engage globalization and the needs of the knowledge economy were arguably well grounded, the specific way the policy was formulated and implemented left much to be desired. In short, Malaysian public policy on English in Science and Maths ran afoul of a constituency that insisted on cultural and linguistic recognition, was concerned with social justice and insisted on having a say about these issues.

Authoritarian consociationalism, which according to some analysts characterises the Malaysian states approach to public policy, is in such a complex environment which is no longer able to deliver the kinds of certainties and assurance in public policy development that it once did. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the way the decision to teach Science and Mathematics in English was made. The way that Malaysian policy was made without recourse to understanding other significant changes that have occurred in Malaysian society was a sign of old fashioned authoritarian attitudes seeking top down change in an issue that warranted far more effort at inclusion and consensus building. The need to consult and build consensus now necessitates a different, more engaged, and more deliberative approach to the language debate than has hitherto been the case.

The effects and impact of globalization and the knowledge economy are clearly understood in the Malaysian economic context. However,

what is less well understood is how the processes of globalization, democratic social change and network society are challenging the old hierarchical top - down ways of doing public policy in Malaysia. With respect to the importance of English to economic advancement, engaging this issue needs a far more nuanced response than a simple top - down fiat. In part this is because the process of change which reformers are trying to make Malaysia address through their language policies have also changed the lay out and architecture of Malaysian democracy and society. Put simply, the processes of globalization and social change that advocates of English point to as necessitating the need for English, in fact produce conditions where the business as usual politics and top - down approach of the Malaysian elite to policy implementation is no longer as tenable. While it may be too extreme to argue that, “growing public concerns about the government’s compliance with democratic rules are undermining the legitimacy of the regime” (Heufers, 2002:42), it is none the less accurate to point out that the current effect of globalization, liquid modernity, mobility, network society and the spread of civic consciousness and the advance of the democratic public sphere has made the task of public policy (in this case the issue of the place of English in the Malaysian society), far more complex.

The suddenness of the Science and Maths policy change, its top down mode and the evident lack of consultation with the university sector or the broader community were quintessential examples of the kind of decision making process that characterise consociational elite, top - down democracy in Malaysia. A practical example of how the policy implementation exemplified this top down discourse is cited by (Gill,2005:250) who points out that, the decision was ‘made without discussion with the universities’. Indeed as Gill points out, “In the Malaysian case, the decisions made about language and the nation are ‘top-down’ for they are ‘policies that come from people of power and authority to make decisions for a certain group, without consulting the end-users of the language’” (Gill, 2005: 243). This kind of decision - making process which characterises top - down forms of social and political power is less functionally effective in contemporary Malaysia. It should also be noted that such top - down policy formulation runs significant risks through a failure to consult experts and the community.

The ethos of such a top - down attitude is captured in the following quote from former Prime Minister Mahathir:

We do not want to be involved in an academic exercise. You know how it is; when the Government decides and writes a paper on it, people will study the paper and criticise the paper and give their own ideas and all that and we will be bogged down by academic discussions and not doing things and we want things done. So we minimise reasoning and polemics as much as possible.(Gill, 2006: 89).

The essential problem that Malaysian policy makers face is that the very forces of globalization, interconnectivity, civic consciousness and reframed notions of the public mean that traditional politics is now no longer as effective in driving social and political change. If as supporters of English language education in Malaysian schools, argue, globalization and the changing and dynamically changing nature of the landscape that Malaysian society finds itself in, necessitates proficiency in English language, the very same forces and changes occurring to and in Malaysian society necessitate a shift in the way the Malaysian government engages the English language debate. While ethnic consciousness still manifests in Malaysian language debates in sometimes troubling ways, the insight of Loh's observations regarding the spread of democratic consciousness as well as consumerist individualistic consciousness entails a shift in how Malaysians perceive political authority and how authority in public policy is exercised. Not only is there a growing sense of *publicness* in Malaysia which effects the way *politics* and policy is exercised but Malaysian public policy is moving rapidly towards creating a knowledge society which is itself also having a significant *cultural* effect on Malaysian society (Reich, 2001; Hargreaves, 2002). A knowledge society is characterized by interaction, dialogue, learning, debate and dialogue, growth and bottom up innovation and engagement with change. Hence, the growth of the public sphere entails a change in the idea of the political in Malaysia, while the growth of the knowledge society entails a change in the cultural characteristics of Malaysian society. Each of these changes impacts on how a community is governed, and how policy must be communicated and formulated.

Examples of knowledge society growth in Malaysia include and are encompassed by the growth and expansion of the public sphere civil society and ICT based dissemination of information. The growth in blogs in Malaysia is a critical sign of the growth and depth of the knowledge society and its democratizing modes of action (Ruzy Suliza Hashim, 2007). Arguably, some of the most interesting, provocative and engaging debates on English language reform in Malaysia also occurred in the blogosphere where top - down authority is replaced by network interaction, publicness and rapidity of dialogue and creative interaction (this is so despite government attempts to curb the blogosphere)(Latiffah Pawanteh, 2006; Johnson, 2009). In this sense, the Malaysian grassroots shift to knowledge society and growth of the public sphere is characterised by a “a tendentially more democratic kind of society in that it is based on new possibilities for inclusion”(Delanty, 2003:73).

While there are strong impediments to radical democratization that globalization can bring in the Malaysian example, the growing sense in the debate over English of the importance of civic involvement, public debate and consultation indicates that the forces of globalization and democratic change that have occurred in Malaysian society are having an effect on how effective public policy can be advanced successfully. Changes in the way Malaysians constitute themselves in relation to state authority and how it is exercised are brought about by the advance of the knowledge society and the public sphere. While the advance of the knowledge society and the public sphere is uneven and tempered by the old politics of ethnicism and the contradictory nature of state power in conditions of globalization (Khattab, 2006), there is nonetheless a growing awareness that communication, knowledge dialogue participation and consultation are critical for effective Malaysian policy making in the new era.

Public Sphere, diversity and overlapping consensus

Given the analysis above, there appears to be a *missing middle* in the analysis of the problem of how to advance English in Malaysian society. Neither theories of cultural and linguistic imperialism, nor theories of linguistic pragmatism appear to address how Malaysian society can

engage the issue of how to advance English in an effective way. While both kinds of approaches discuss the political needs and nature of the English language debate, neither appears to provide a theory of political philosophy that is congruent with moving the debate forward. Theories of linguistic imperialism have a tendency of oversimplifying English as an extension of Anglo-American capitalism *per se* and establish an over simplified dichotomy between imperialism and nationalist resistance to imperialism as the basis for understanding language debate (Block, 2004). Curiously the nationalist pragmatist dichotomy evidences a similar reductive and top down logic that is both reductive and misleading. Tupas (2008: 8) recognises the basic problem when he argues that according to the nationalist pragmatist divide “[e]ither we became pragmatic, embraced English and globalization; or we became nationalists, embraced our local languages, and became isolated from the rest of the world”. Instead what is needed is an approach to the idea of engaging English that grasps the plurality and complexity of its role in the world while at the same time recognising the importance of cultural recognition and respect. This needs to be compounded by a political approach in Malaysia that both corresponds to the needs of democratic deliberation in a society, and a developing active public sphere not beholden to top - down authority. Such a complex socio-cultural-political landscape entails a need to find a way to promote consensus on English that is truly internalised by Malaysians, and not merely a top - down imposition of ideological hegemony and power.

If we take a look at the way the issue of English language debate is structured, one of the key observations is the failure to reach agreement on the place of English despite seemingly overwhelming recognition of the need for English in Malaysia’s development and education system. This failure is itself in need of theoretical understanding. Analyzing the failure to achieve agreement in terms of parochial motivations, chauvinism or hypocrisy on the part of those whom we disagree with does not cast light on the issue. **The kind of decision making processes** characterised through top down forms of social and political power is understandable as a characteristic of Malaysia’s rapid economic development and social stability through the process of industrialization. Such a process is less functionally effective in ushering in a knowledge society in contemporary Malaysia. While the analysis of the effects

and impact of globalization and the knowledge economy has merit with respect to the importance of English to economic advancement engaging, this issue needs a far more nuanced response than a simple top down fiat given the needs for cultural recognition and grasping cultural change.

As argued in this paper, the past twenty or so years have witnessed the development and growth of global and local civil society and strong networking between Malaysian civil society and global civil society. The growth of ICT, the power of international media, and the steady yet significant expansion of grassroots forms of democratic interaction from blogging through to social movements in Malaysia have begun to give depth and thickness to the Malaysian public sphere in ways that challenge the once sure notions of top - down authority. The political shifts and development of a democratic public sphere in Malaysia evidenced through social movements, blogging and the growth of civil society are all signs of a growing rearticulation of politics and growth of a public sphere. While Malaysian development is tempered by reversals and continuation of ethnicist interventions, the essential nature of political and social change is nonetheless continuing. While the effects and impacts of civil society, blogging, social movements and growing confidence of civil society are uneven, it seems clear that Malaysian society is undergoing change.

The politics of recognition and mutual respect as well as the politics of challenging hegemony need to be understood with reference to these changes. The thesis of this paper is that a failure to grapple with the need to engage debate on the issue of language in an inclusive and non binary fashion led inevitably to the public failure of the policy. One of the salient points with respect to the recent debate was the way in which many people framed the issues in simplistic binaries. This is done despite the fact that a reasonably solid plurality at least in principle supports English being taught in schools despite specific disagreement on how and in which subjects this should be done (Adib Zalkapli, 2009). In other words, much of the analysis of the recent/ current debate used oversimplified categories such as nationalist and pragmatist to misunderstand, misrepresent and misrecognise the actual views of a significant plurality of Malaysian society.

Within such a pluralist and fragmented society, with a nascent public sphere, the form of democratic agreement building to advance language reform must be based upon sound philosophical principle. The principle that suggests itself most strongly given the complexity and plurality within Malaysian society is that of *overlapping consensus*. This principle is drawn from the political philosophy of Rawls (1996). It differs from two alternatives in democratic discourse. The first is the principle of consensus articulated as a result of undistorted communication. This principle found in the work of Habermas (1989) is not applicable in a pluralistic society such as Malaysia because it presumes a unified public sphere and does not take into account that not all disagreements are amenable to discursive rationality. In other words, pluralistic and fragmented societies entail the continued existence of disagreement, even in the best of circumstances. Secondly, overlapping consensus is not simply a continuation of a *modus vivendi* or agreement to disagree such as the kind that characterises consociational consensus.

Rather, overlapping consensus seeks to find points of agreement based on real understanding, but also on a recognition that not everyone can get all they want. Overlapping consensus can only occur in conditions where inter-subjective dialogue, mutual respect and trust permeate the society. Silo - like mentality where stereotyping of groups and quick reductions of motivations to the worst possible interpretations only accentuates the power of extremes in the society and ensures that social friction and political standoffs continue. In such a situation, the problem of trust recognition and deliberative dialogue to achieve overlapping consensus on points of agreement become the pre-eminent issues in language reform.

In other words, the social capital of trust, mutual respect and recognition have become more, not less important, in Malaysian reform due to the shifting nature of Malaysian civil society, the growth of the public sphere, and the pressures of globalization. It appears, therefore, that the answer to how to achieve overlapping consensus (characterized not as complete consensus on all things or as agreement to acquiesce to the powerful in an argument) relies upon the fundamental practice of trust, mutual recognition, and respect that only democratic engagement and dialogue can foster. Language reform in such an analysis in the Malaysian context is therefore not in essence a technical, pragmatic

or instrumental issue. Rather, it is deeply political and its success or otherwise lies in the ability of Malaysian society to continue to move forward the boundaries of civic and civil discourse.

The accommodations and thin forms of allegiance to inter-subjective norms which characterise the colonial heritage of consociational democracy and its *modus vivendi* based ultimately on a top - down policy culture are not enough to tie a community to the necessary reforms and changes that globalization and the growth of the public sphere increasingly call for. The success of Malaysian development in advancing stability and growth now needs a new method of social decision making based upon deliberation, social inclusion recognition and mutual trust.

Conclusion

Language reform in Malaysia is now the problem of forming an overlapping consensus built around mutual recognition and deliberation. Such an overlapping consensus will constantly be challenged by the habits and methods of the past authoritarian and segmented mindset. Overcoming this mindset and the authoritarian method that is its signature style is the only way that agreement on language can be made and espoused by the majority of Malaysians. To grasp this essential point is to understand how advancing towards language reform for a knowledge economy, necessitates a knowledge society, one built on mutual recognition, cultural respect and trust. Such a project, difficult as it is, is the path for reform within current globalization, network society and the needs of both cultural recognition and respect and linguistic engagement with the broader world.

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Biodata of author

James Campbell is a lecturer in education at Deakin University Australia. He is also working on collaborative research with University Sains Malaysia on their APEX program. James has two PhD's - in Education studying the history of ideas and in Politics studying school choice and political philosophy. His broad interests are in educational theory, social theory and political theory. He is particularly interested in the intersections of politics, social change and education. James work focus on the problems and critique of neo-liberalism, democratic social change and educational justice. His current interests are in Malaysian social reform educational change and globalization.