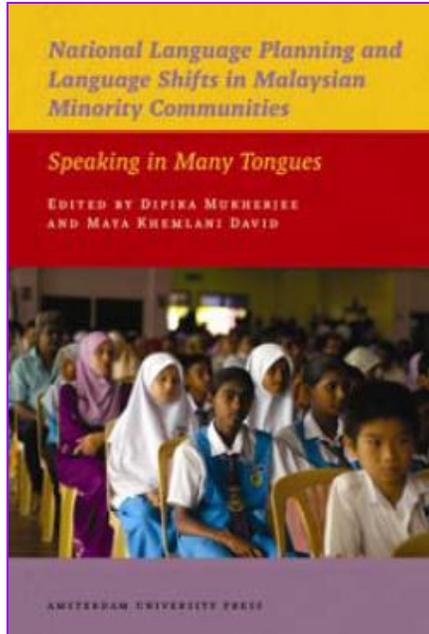


National Language Planning and Language Shifts in Malaysian Minority Communities



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The number of languages spoken throughout the world is estimated to be 6,000. Next to that, available data indicate that the number of bilingual or multilingual persons in the world exceeds that of those who are monolingual. Language is one the one hand a(n economic) resource; on the other hand it is the symbol and vehicle of group identity, too. Due to this factor it is not surprising that language policies are usually highly politicised and charged.

Malaysia, a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-confessional country, which acquired its independence relatively recently (in 1957), national language planning and the given responses to them by the different ethnic groups form a complex web of interactions that simultaneously shape the processes of nation-building, integration into the global economic system, identity preservation or assimilation, etc.

The country has a population of 26.64 million; it is comprised of three major ethnic groups: 1) Bumiputera (Malays and other indigenous groups) 65.1%, 2) Chinese 26.0%, and 3) Indians 7.7%. Within each of these three major ethnic groups a variety of languages and dialects are spoken. Overall at least a hundred languages are spoken. Historically, during the colonial era, English played a dominant role, and despite the efforts since independence to unite the country through the language of the major ethnic group — Bahasa Melayu — English is still indispensable.

National Language Planning and Language Shifts in Malaysian Minority Communities — Speaking in Many Tongues — is the 5th edited volume in the *International Institute for Asian Studies* (IIAS) publications series. The two editors, Dipika Mukherjee (Professor 211 at Shanghai International Studies University, China)

and Maya Khemlani David (Honorary Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Linguists, UK) collected field-research papers that examine the language shift among the different minority ethnic groups in Malaysia. The main ethnic group — Malay — is thus indirectly researched. They introduce the volume with a brief overview of the (history of) language policy in Malaysia including basic background information on the ethnic and linguistic landscape of the country. They convey already in the introductory chapter the main conclusion concerning Malaysia; namely that the aim of achieving national unity via language has not succeeded at the grassroots level, as observed from the people's use of the language. The trend towards language shift is fairly clear-cut: the Muslim minority communities, irrespective of their ethnic background are shifting to the Malay language, while all other minority communities towards English.

The main body of the book (the following ten chapters) is then devoted to the results of the field-work performed among ten different ethnic minority groups in Malaysia, like different Indian, Chinese communities, Filipino, Javanese communities, etc. Each paper introduces the topic well, providing reasonable background information on the ethnic minority in question, thus facilitating a good understanding of the research results. Reading through the book the results of the empirical research make obvious the trends highlighted in the introductory chapter. The only minor point here is to mention is the relatively small sampling in certain cases. On the other hand this does not seem to pose a serious problem, because the aim of this research is to provide a qualitative picture and in several cases the ethnic minority in question was researched for the first time.

The final, concluding chapter places the results presented in the volume within a broader framework, that of (inter)national politics. The trends depicted by the empirical research are then plotted against the continuously changing national language policies and the dynamics of English and Bahasa Melayu is elaborated.

All in all, this is a very important and a highly enjoyable book. It is enjoyable, despite the high density of statistical and empirical data, because it tells the stories of real people in real life settings. And it is profound, both for policy-makers and interested alike, because it provides a snapshot of a complex issue in a complex country, which is aiming to become a fully developed nation by 2020. As the majority of people in the world is multilingual and is living in a multilingual environment, it can be said that this book 'speaks' to the greater part of the world. Let us hope that in the foreseeable future it will 'speak' to an even greater part of the world!