Linguistic ideology and practice: Language, literacy and communication in a localized workplace context in relation to the globalized

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ABSTRACT

Linguistic ideologies that operate in the Malaysian workplace have been fuelled by previous and current language policies that have upheld the sovereignty of Malay, the national language while seeking to strengthen the use of English with regard to its perceived role as the language of global economic competitiveness. The dominant ideology in the Malaysian workplace is the role of English as a determinant of economic success. However, while competence in an idealized 'standard' English is highly valued for employability, the localized variety, Malaysian English (ME), Malay, and other local languages all contribute to literacy practices in the Malaysian workplace. The disconnect between ideology and practice has implications for student employment and consequences for the linguistic and cultural diversity of the workforce. A longitudinal and holistic perspective of the problem is presented by reporting on interview and observation-based research carried out at different points in time separated by slightly more than a decade, firstly at a finance company and later at its restructured entity, a commercial bank. Trainers from both entities reported that they valued job-related workplace competency more than English language ability despite the prevailing linguistic ideology. The study indicates that competitiveness in the globalized economy depends ultimately on education in a range of critical skills and strategies as workplace competencies rather than on linguistic abilities as individual skills.

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1. Introduction and background

The linguistic ideologies critiqued in this paper hinge on the normative status of English in the private sectors of commerce and industry in Malaysia. Formed in 1963 and located in South East Asia, Malaysia comprises the 11 states of the former federation of Malaya (Peninsular or Western Malaysia now) and the two East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, across the South China Sea. Although English is highly valued for employability[1] in the related sectors of corporate business, banking and finance, Malay, as *Bahasa Malaysia* the national language, has emerged as the competing code. As the national and majority language, it is the main medium of instruction in public universities and 'national' schools, and is central to nation-building and the national identity project. However, there is a sustained demand for Chinese school education which is vocalized by the national Chinese education movement, Dong Zong, and more newspapers are published

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[1] According to the results of a survey conducted by one of the largest employment agencies in Malaysia, JobStreet, 91% of employers said that English is the language of business communication.

in Chinese than in any other language. They also have the highest per capita readership, and one, even has the largest weekday circulation. Yet, the traditional dominance of the Chinese 'dialects' in local business enterprise has waned somewhat. This is the sociolinguistic consequence of the combined effects of the national educational policy with Malay as the main medium of instruction, and the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1971 (succeeded by the National Development Policy of 1991) which aimed at reconstituting the demographic composition of the Malaysian workplace to reflect national ethnic population ratios as part of a national affirmative action plan after race riots in 1969.

The integration of elements from a variety of languages and alternation between competing ones is normal linguistic behaviour for almost all Malaysians. Besides Malay, the indigenous languages of the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, and the non-native Chinese and Indian languages, English is pervasive as a localized variety at many levels of interaction and within particular domains (Baskaran, 1994; Federici, 2010; Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2001; Morais, 2001; Rajadurai, 2004, 2007; Soo, 1990; Ting, 2010).

The influence of the other languages is evident in the verbal repertoires of Malaysian speakers of English. These include Malay inclusive of colloquial and Bazaar Malay (*Bahasa Pasar*), code switching or CS into Malay and English, and into other languages or vernaculars, and the code mixing or CM of English and Malay, and of other languages or vernaculars. The evolution of Malaysian English (ME henceforth) as the localized variety corresponds to the first three of the five phases of Schneider's Dynamic Model of Postcolonial Englishes (2007), namely those of foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativization, endonormative stabilization and differentiation. The first two phases began with the coming of the British to Malaya in 1786 to its independence from British rule in 1957. Although there are no precise dates for the transition from phase 1 to 2, the second was marked by a stable endonormative colonial orientation with the ever-increasing demand for English language education. English became deeply rooted even after independence in 1957 in the third phase marked by "structural nativization on all levels of language organization" (2007: 151) and ME became the familiar, unmarked code. As a code célèbre of popular culture, colloquial ME or CME (Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2001) enjoys covert prestige and is capitalized in innovative ways by the media, in advertising, and marketing. However, being referred to as *Manglish* in common parlance, which evokes the 'mangling' of English into 'poor', 'broken' English, or euphemistically as *rojak* (salad), or 'mixed-up' English, tends to undermine ME's status as a fully fledged variety with sub-varieties.

The starting point of the research this paper reports is a large scale ethnographic study of language choice and communication in two large business organizations in the nineties (Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2001) that identified ME as a functional model of interaction in the Malaysian business context. It departed from previous studies of ME that had relied on the now questionable Post-Creole continuum (see Benson, 1990) and identified three sub-varieties, namely, Educated Malaysian English (EME), Colloquial Malaysian English (CME) and 'Broken' Malaysian English or Pidgin, spoken in ethnically distinctive ways as "ethnolects" (Nair-Venugopal, 2000, 2001) within the model.

Notwithstanding its prevalence, ME has no legitimacy in the public domain and does not derive any mainstream pedagogical support as an appropriate language model. Additionally there is no common term of reference for Malaysian English as the local variety. It has been referred to variously as MyE, ME, and MEng (cf. other acknowledged Asian varieties of English such as *Hinglish*, *Shinglish* and *Taglish*). The educated sub-variety (EME) is the variety used by most English educated Malaysians while standardized English is the English valued for employability in those domains in which English functions as the main language of work. The dominant linguistic ideology of standardized English disadvantages speakers of ME despite workplace competence and impinges on language, literacy and communication in these workplace contexts.

2. Understanding language, literacy and communication in the workplace

2.1. Language and literacy in the globalized workplace

Literacy has traditionally been associated with language ability or the ability to read and write and has been a gauge of human civilization. Yet its traditional meaning is far from innocuous because it situates it in the individual person, rather than in society and "obscures the multiple ways in which literacy interrelates with the workings of power" as Gee (2008: 31) argues. Literacy as linguistic accomplishment has also been challenged in various socio-cultural contexts of economic disadvantage (Bernstein, 1971; Edwards, 1979; Heath, 1983; Labov, 1972), and even situated as "emancipatory" within a revolutionary political context (Freire, 1970). UNESCO's definition of it as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts", involving "a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (2004) points to its evolution. This evolution has implication for the workplace because of the role of language in it and some of the traditional assumptions about literacy centre on language.

For instance, in the field of literacy learning, the 'skills based' versus 'whole language' debate has been the most contentious (Mills, 2005) in relation to the other dominant polarites of 'print-based literacy' versus 'multiliteracies' (and the 'cultural heritage' versus 'critical literacy' polarities). Meaning can not only be represented as *multiliteracies* (New London Group, 2000), but also as *multimodalities* (Jewett & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2000; Kress & Leeuwen, 2002), and literacies can go beyond those based on print technologies to information and communication technologies. Such literacies constitute the heart of the *new literacies* (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004) which require and rely on new forms of strategic knowledge and competence. In a world redefined by the new technologies of information and communication (Castells,