

Whither the Portuguese Language? The Language Scenario among the Malaysian Portuguese Community in Malacca

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Abstract

Favourable trade winds and Portugal's expansionistic policies in the 16th century saw the beginnings of a Portuguese presence in what was to become Malaysia. Thus began the arrival of Portuguese immigrants. The flow of Portuguese immigrants, however, declined greatly when the Dutch wrested control of Melaka from the Portuguese in the 17th century. Today, the size of the Portuguese community is approximately 500,000 compared to a population of about 21 million for Malaysia. This paper discusses the role and status of Portuguese vis a vis Malay, Malaysia's national language and English, an important second language. It intends to demonstrate that the aforementioned has led to a losing battle in maintaining Portuguese language and culture within the Portuguese community in Malaysia.

1. Introduction and Background Information

In 1513, Tom Pires was reputed to have said whoever is Lord of Malacca has his hands on the throat of Venice. This is because Malacca, an important commercial and trading entrepot at that time, was the focal point of traders carrying, for example, porcelain and silk from China, various types of exotic and aromatic spices, gold and pepper from India and Indonesia, calico and muslin from Burma and glass, beads, copper and steel from the Arabian peninsula. Indeed, it was all these tales of the riches of the East coupled with a flagging economy in Portugal, expansionist policies and the desire to spread Christianity that lured the Portuguese to Malacca. The beginnings of a marked Portuguese presence in Malaysia, however, began with their colonisation of Malacca on 25 July 1511. They were "lords of Malacca" for 130 years.

Despite this long period of time, the Portuguese language, in Malaysia today is spoken by only a small proportion of citizens, and even then, it has become more of a patois. This paper offers a glimpse to the declining role and status of the Portuguese language among members of the Malaysian Portuguese community today. It does so by conducting a short questionnaire survey, the results of which will be discussed later. Here, I would like to briefly provide relevant background information regarding the role and status of the Portuguese language from a historical as well as a current perspective.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese, Malaysia was dominantly inhabited by the Malays, who, together with the Aborigines, make up the indigenous people of Malaysia. The Malay language was not only the language of administration, but also the language of culture and trade for the Malay archipelago. Thus, its status in this region was considerable. The status of the Portuguese language was also considerable after its selection as the language

of administration replacing Malay. However, the use of Portuguese was not enforced in government. Instead, the Portuguese also considered it important to learn and maintain the use of Malay at various formal and semi-formal levels as a link language with the local population, to trade with neighbouring Malay-speaking countries and also as a vehicle to try and convert the local population to Christianity. Thus, the Malay language did not experience a drastic drop in status. Meanwhile, the status of Portuguese was maintained among the Portuguese by regular classes held mainly at convents and cathedrals.

The next colonial power was the Dutch, who occupied Malaysia beginning 1641. During the whole Dutch era, the considerable roles and status of Portuguese and Malay were relatively maintained among the Malaysian Portuguese community. Indeed, despite Dutch efforts to raise the status of their language by making it the language of government, both Portuguese and Malay were preferred in semi-formal and informal spheres. Portuguese and Malay continued to be used in church services and in other speech situations. The teaching and learning of the Portuguese language to the Portuguese people was also sustained on a regular basis to ensure the continuity of use of the Portuguese language and culture among members of its community. Indeed, the cordial relations between the Portuguese and Malay language led to many borrowings from Malay to Portuguese and vice versa. Kristang, the variety of Portuguese spoken by Malaysians of Portuguese descent today, contains many elements borrowed from Malay, especially in its vocabulary.

The role and status of Portuguese and Malay, however, began to decline during British colonization in the early 1800s. Consequently, the English language was installed as the language of government. The English language eventually came to be regarded as an indispensable requirement for social and political mobility, and concurrently, a language of power, authority and prestige. English-medium schools, compared to non-English medium schools were the most sought after due to the high status of English. These reasons relegated Malay and Portuguese largely to their respective communities as the learning and use of English took precedence. In fact, the role of Malay, outside of the Malay community itself, declined gradually to primarily be a vehicle of communication in informal domains. It was also during this time that the role of Portuguese was said to decline even further among the Portuguese people in favour of English.

Another feature of British colonization which dramatically affected the size and position of the Portuguese community today was the British laissez faire policy which altered the existing population composition in the late 1800s by encouraging thousands of Chinese and Indians immigrants to settle and work in Malaysia. Today, the Chinese and the Indian communities are the two other major ethnic groups after the Malays. Each community also brought with them their own culture and at least 5 or 6 dialects;- to stay in Malaysia.

Independence from British rule was achieved on August 31 1957. Linguistically, the newly independent nation needed a common language to unite the diverse mixture of races, cultures and languages. Malay was chosen as the national language to inculcate a sense of national identity and unity among the citizens for 4 main reasons (Asmah,1979:13). First, Malay was the language of the major ethnic group, the Malays. Second, Malay was indigenous to the soil. Third, Malay had been for centuries the medium of most intergroup communications and finally, Malay has been the language of administration in the Malay archipelago long before the coming of any

Western power. Malay was also chosen as the medium of education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. The role of Malay as the language of education began with the phasing out of English as the medium of education gradually; by the early 70s, primary schools were Malay-medium, likewise by the early 80s, for secondary and tertiary institutions. All in all, it took a total of about 26 years. Today Malay is the national and official language and English relegated to an important second language.

During the rise in the status of Malay and English, the role of the Portuguese language was further confined to the Portuguese community, which by the early 60s and 70s had dispersed beyond the state of Malacca. According to prominent Portuguese leaders, these higher roles of English and Malay vis a vis nation-building has led to the declining role of the Portuguese language among the Portuguese community. This is viewed with great concern by community leaders.

The issue of the decline of the Portuguese heritage including language reached its peak in the late 70's and early 80s and periodically in the 90s. This usually involved numerous official and semi-official meetings between members within the community and between their representatives and government officials. Matters arising would normally include the dire status of the Portuguese heritage and then appeals would be made to government officials present to ease this situation. I take one such episode to initiate my discussion on the fate of the Portuguese language in relation to the Malaysian Portuguese community. On August 6 and 11, 1979, a prominent leader of the Malaysian Portuguese community, Bernard Sta Maria, made a statement to members of the Malaysian Portuguese community and local government officials during the launch of the Save the Portuguese Community Committee (SPCC). He said:

" We are not asking much but the right to continue existing as one of the multifarious ethnic communities that constitute our beautiful Malaysian nation. Is that too much to ask? Perhaps we are the most minute of the existing ethnic groups in the country, it would appear we can be dispensed with. Admittedly, we do not decide on who shall govern this country for we do not possess any electoral leverage, but the right to survive, the right to protect one's heritage and the right to hope for the continuance of one's generation are not confined to the major ethnic groups; it is an innate desire of all communities. The right to survive as an ethnic community is jealously guarded by all communities including the Malaysian Portuguese community....." Complaints and appeals have fallen on deaf ears . I know as a community, we do not matter, to those who are entrenched in the seat of power. We are irrelevant because we are a minority and minorities do not carry any weight."

I choose this particular segment of Bernard's Sta Maria's text that day as it demonstrates the deep concern and frustration of the Malaysian Portuguese community about the declining role of their heritage encompassing language, the main focus of this paper, in Malaysia. The text also depicts their feeling that it is their right as citizens to preserve and develop their heritage within the Malaysian context and this to be positively recognized and attended to by the Malaysian government. The implication of the minimal role of the Malaysian government will not be addressed directly in this paper, rather, by investigating the role and status of the Portuguese language, it strives to question whether a decline in the role and status of the Portuguese language warrants government intervention.

2.Results and Interpretation

Just how much the decline in role and status of the Portuguese language among the Portuguese people? Data was gathered from 40 Malaysian Portuguese between the ages of 35 and 79 years. These participants consisted of retired and working professionals in fields such as academia, law, engineering, computer science and businesses. Questionnaires and informal interviews were the major tools of investigation. The questionnaires were divided into 4 sections; Section 1 sought bibliographic detail which would highlight variables that could influence the respondents' responses such as their age, level of education and occupation. The purpose of section 2 was to examine the status of Portuguese among the subjects in relation to English and Malay. Sections 3 and 4 sought the prevailing language attitudes and language use in various domains.

The results in each section are as follows:

SECTION 2-TABLE 1

Table of the subjects' comfortability in Portuguese, English and Malay

	Portuguese	English	Malay
Very good	0	0	0
Good	2.5%	100%	37.5%
Average	25%	0	62.5%
Poor	72.5%	0	0
Very poor	0	0	0

The table indicates that all the respondents refer to English as their dominant language, followed by Malay then Portuguese. The results suggest that Malay is in second place in terms of the level of understanding. The low status of Portuguese here is good cause for alarm. What can be said to be more alarming is that the subjects that indicated their understanding of Portuguese in the good to average range comprised older members between the ages of 65 and 79. This does not bode well for the future of the Portuguese language among the younger generation. Indeed, from the data presented above we can assume that the role and status of the Portuguese language will decline further with the absence of this much older group in the future.

Data such as this on a more comprehensive scale can and should be used to involve government and non-governmental agencies about this diminishing part of the Portuguese heritage and also to gather community support. The latter part could raise some concern; do the rest of Portuguese community at large want this and are willing to contribute to stir the interest and support of others? Some of these questions will be addressed in the next section (tables 2 and 2B).

TABLE 2

Question	Agree	Disagree
1. It is difficult to	100%	0

maintain Portuguese in Malaysia		
2. Portuguese people need to know Malay and English, but not Portuguese	80%	20%
3. English will take you further than Portuguese	90%	10%
4. Malay will take you further than Portuguese	95%	5%
5. The Portuguese speak too much English	100%	0
6. The Portuguese speak too much Malay	37.5%	63.5%
7. The Portuguese should work tirelessly to maintain the Portuguese language	27.5%	72.5%
8. Ability to speak Portuguese is of no advantage in Malaysia	90%	10%
9. Portuguese should be offered as a subject in schools	15%	85%
10. The Malaysian government is not interested in maintaining the Portuguese language and culture	80%	20%

Table 2B

Question	AGREE	DISAGREE
11. You think the government feels that Portuguese will not benefit Malaysia	92.5%	5%
12. Malay was the best choice as the national language	95%	5%

13. Malay is the most important language to know	100%	0
14. Due to Malay, the role of other languages have declined	90%	10%
15. Knowing English is more important than knowing Portuguese	87.5%	12.5%
16. The government does not care about the Portuguese heritage	87.5%	12.5%
17. I prefer to speak Malay than Portuguese	90%	10%
18. I prefer to speak English than Portuguese	90%	10%
19. I understand English better than Portuguese	90%	10%
20. Most of my friends speak Portuguese	5%	95%
21. Portuguese is widely used in my family	2.5%	97.5%

The purpose of having the section above (Tables 2 and 2B) was to further define the roles of the Portuguese, Malay and English language for the Malaysian Portuguese people. The results are troubling in two ways; first they support previous indications that the role of Portuguese has indeed declined among the Malaysian Portuguese community (please see questions 1, 2, 3 and 5). Second, the results also strongly suggest that the majority of the subjects do not even deem it important to learn or to know Portuguese due to the role and status of English and Malay (please see questions 1, 3, 15, 17 and 18). This, coupled with the data suggested earlier in Table 1 of the declining role of Portuguese among younger members also does not bode well for the continuing use of Portuguese in Malaysia.

3. Other Observations

The question as to whether the Malaysian Portuguese should work tirelessly to maintain the Portuguese language was not in favour of the majority (question 7). Again, as in section 1, the subjects who agreed with this

statement came from those above the age of 65 years. The implications of all this, however, is that if the majority of the Malaysian Portuguese Community in Malaysia feel the same as the 72% did on this study, i.e. the minimal need to maintain the Portuguese heritage, then efforts are likely to dwindle in the coming years to realize Bernard Sta Maria's vision of the continuing role of the Malaysian Portuguese language and culture in Malaysia. With regards to generation, it also seems highly likely that the younger generation's interest in preserving Portuguese language and culture will be minimal.

The results to the question of whether the Portuguese language should be offered as a subject in schools (as an elective, most likely) adds to the pessimism of the Malaysian Portuguese Community's mobilization efforts to spread the Portuguese language. If successful pressure is exerted on the relevant authorities to achieve this aim (alongside with cultural activities, for example), the maintenance of the Portuguese heritage will be more promising as once this happens, government or private funding for other learning activities may be easier to get. However, this study indicates that 80 % of the respondents do not think Portuguese should be offered in schools. Informal interviews with 10 of the subjects in this category said the reason is they see no point in them and their children being burdened with another language in schools, and that knowing English and Malay well is more important as a ticket to social and economic mobility. Again, the 15% who agreed that Portuguese should be offered in schools fell into the 65-79 age range. The implications of all this is again troubling as to the future of the Portuguese language among the younger members of the Malaysian Portuguese Community.

The purpose of having 3 questions (numbers 10, 11, and 16) inquiring about what they think is the attitude of the government towards their community was to view this aspect in some thoroughness. The responses indicate that the majority feels the government is not interested in helping the Portuguese community to preserve their language and culture, indeed it does not care about the fate of the Portuguese language and feels that the Portuguese language will not benefit Malaysia. In my opinion, while I appreciate and respect their views, I disagree that the government is not interested nor cares about the fate of the Portuguese language. Rather, the government's attitude may seem to be such because the Malaysian Portuguese Community have just not been successful in getting the government's attention given all the other priorities it has. Certainly, the question of Portuguese not benefiting Malaysia is probably true in the global sense; Portugal and other Portuguese-speaking countries are not major trading partners with Malaysia unlike, for example, Japan or China where, currently, the learning of Japanese and Mandarin is encouraged for economic and political reasons. Thus, at the moment, Portuguese does not benefit Malaysia this way. Unfortunately, the data (please see questions 13 and 15) also indicates that some members of the Malaysian Portuguese Community also feel that knowing Portuguese will not benefit them in Malaysia due to their perception that it is more advantageous to acquire both Malay and English.

The data also supports earlier indications of the declining role of Portuguese among the Malaysian Portuguese Community (see questions 20 and 21), this time in the family and friendship domain. The family domain is regarded as a place to instill in future generations the importance of one's language and culture. The friendship domain, on the other hand, is an important sphere where the versatility of languages can be tested and developed. Here, it appears that in both these domains, Portuguese plays a minimal role. The implications of this on the growth and development of the Portuguese

language in the future is again troubling to say the least.

The next section deals with the investigation of the language attitudes of the subjects towards English, Malay and Portuguese.

SECTION 3 (TABLE 1)

	English	Portuguese	Malay
Modern	90%	0	10%
Weak	0	100%	0
Important	37.5%	0	62.5%
Warm	37.5%	62.5%	0
Scientific	75%	0	25%
Friendly	70%	30%	0
Lively	80%	20%	0
Cold	22.5%	0	77.5%
Unfriendly	10%	0	90%
Strong	85%		15%
Unscientific	0	92.5%	7.5%
Not Important	12.5%	70%	17.5%
Useless	12.5%	80%	7.5%
Dull	0	20%	80%
Old-fashioned	0	95%	5%
Easy	90%	0	10%
Beautiful	27.5%	72.5%	0
Musical	90%	10%	0

Section 3 shows the language attitudes of the respondents in relation to 3 languages; Portuguese, English and Malay. English rates the highest in the following categories; it's modern, scientific, friendly, lively, strong, easy, and musical. Portuguese rates highest in the warm, rich, and beautiful category, but is considered unscientific, unimportant, useless and old-fashioned. Malay is important but cold, unfriendly, and dull. Overall, the response towards English is positive-this supports earlier trends of their favourable attitude towards the English language. The response towards Portuguese is interesting in the sense that they regard Portuguese positively on an emotional and aesthetic level but negatively in terms of function and usefulness. Results from this table again as in previous tables, supports earlier trends of the growing importance of English for the Portuguese and the need to know Malay despite having negative language attitudes towards it and the diminishing role of Portuguese. Indeed, the implications of the results suggest that the prospect of the Portuguese language being maintained seems more doubtful in the future.

The next section investigates the subjects' language use with other members of the Malaysian Portuguese community.

SECTION 4-TABLE 1

Participant	English	Malay
Mother	#	
Father	#	
Brothers	#	
Sisters	#	
Aunts	#	
Uncles	#	
Male friends	#	
Female friends	#	
Teachers	#	
When angry	#	
Being affectionate	#	
With superiors at work	#	
With colleagues at work	#	
Discussing religion	#	
With male strangers	#	
With female strangers	#	
Writing formal letters	#	#
Writing informal letters	#	#

The results from this section further indicate the declining role of Portuguese among the Malaysian Portuguese today in the domains listed above. The respondents did not choose the Portuguese language for any of the domains above. English was preferred in all the domains regardless of age, except when writing formal and informal letters where Malay was also their language choice. Malay is the language of correspondence with those in the government service. These letters are not personal in nature, rather requesting information or seeking clarification, for example. Hence, Malay would be the norm. The use of English would probably be with people in the private sector where the use of English or Malay in formal letters is accepted.

It is interesting to note the use of Malay in informal letters, too, instead of a chance to use Portuguese. Compared to earlier discussions where age was a relevant factor, the subjects choosing Malay came from the 35 to 40 age group. Hence, gauging from earlier results, they would be more inclined to use Malay as an additional language after English should they need arises. Here, in all probability, the use of Malay is code-mixed with English, marking informality. Also, given all the discussion above, we can reasonably assume that even if code-mixing occurs, English would be the dominant code.

Certainly, it would seem in all likelihood that English is the first language for many Malaysian Portuguese today, unfortunately at the expense of Portuguese.

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored the role and status of the Portuguese language among the Malaysian Portuguese. The results indicate that the declining role of Portuguese among the Malaysian Portuguese Community must be attended to, as in my observation, the support of other organizations is more solid if there is a positive response from the great majority of the Portuguese people regarding the preservation of their heritage. A dismal view of the Portuguese language among the Malaysian Portuguese Community as reflected by this study will prove useful to imply that the survival of the heritage has suffered due to a lack of attention from the relevant authorities, but at the same time the lack of commitment such as shown by the majority of the Malaysian Portuguese Community in this study is cause for great concern. In view of this, I suspect the cry for the preservation of the heritage of one of Malaysia's oldest communities will end with the Portuguese themselves. And as a person who exalts the existence of diversity in many forms, I wait with sadness and resignation.

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