



# Bilingualism and Bruneian Identity



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## [ *Abstract* ]

This paper discusses how the concept of “bilingualism” can be used to reflect changes within Bruneian society since the 1940’s. It argues that within the context of a linguistically diverse population, the various indigenous groups of Brunei used to speak their own traditional languages, but eventually learned to speak the language of the politically dominant Malays. The Malay language became a necessary additional language, hence leading to a population which could speak their own languages, alongside the Malay language. But the rise of schools teaching in English in the 1970’s began to sow seeds of a different kind of bilingualism, encouraged by language shift processes among ethnic minority groups.

**Keywords:** Brunei, bilingualism, education, diversity, education

## I . Introduction

Brunei is situated in the north-west of the island of Borneo, with a northern coastline of about 161-km along the South China Sea, and

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surrounded inland by the Malaysian State of Sarawak, dividing it into two. In 2015, the total population of Brunei was 423,000 (World Bank 2015).

The eastern part is the Temburong District, home to the Murut or Lun Bawang community. The western portion consists of Brunei-Muara, Tutong, and Belait districts. The Brunei-Muara District, where the capital Bandar Seri Begawan is located, is the smallest but most populous area among the four districts. This district is significant in terms of being the center of government and commerce. The Tutong District, the third largest, is home to indigenous groups like the Tutong, the Kedayan, Dusun, and Iban. The Belait District, the center of oil and gas industries, about 100 km from the capital, is the traditional home of the Belait community.

Today, well-developed roads link Brunei-Muara, Tutong, and Belait, providing easy access across these districts. Although accessing Temburong is still primarily done through water transport, there is certainly greater movement among people residing in these districts. On the whole, traveling in Brunei has become convenient, a far cry from what it was 60 years ago. In the past, the indigenous communities of each district lived in virtual pockets of homogeneous communities, practicing their own customs and speaking their own languages. Inter-group communication was minimal due to the lack of contact between the groups, which was also caused by the lack of access to each other's communities, resulting in a high degree of "societal monolingualism" of indigenous languages. Bilinguals were not common and regarded as highly "knowledgeable people." This paper traces the evolution of "bilingualism" among the majority Malay people of Brunei as the nation transitioned into a modern state. The paper borrows the concept of "societal bilingualism" introduced by Romaine (1994), and expanded by Sebba below:

'Societal bilingualism' is a broad term used to refer to any kind of bilingualism or multilingualism at a level of social organization beyond the individual or nuclear family. By this definition, almost every country and region of the world has some degree of 'societal bilingualism'. Societal bilingualism by no means implies that every

individual in the society in question is bilingual, or even that a majority are. Rather, there are many different ways in which social groupings, from extended families all the way up to federal nation-states, can be said to have the property of ‘societal bilingualism’ (Sebba 2011).

This paper argues that in Brunei, the ethnic minorities who traditionally spoke their own languages have now adopted the dominant language of Brunei Malay as their first language. As a result, over time, “bilingualism” in Brunei has been redefined from “the ability to speak an ethnic language and Malay” to “the ability to speak Malay and English,” which at the same time reflects the lowering status of ethnic languages and the prestigious status of English.

## II . Sources of Data

This paper draws its discussions and findings from a larger study on the changes to the linguistic diversity of Brunei and analyses the interviews as well as documentary data. The original study by Noor Azam Haji-Othman (2005) adopted a three-stage interview approach involving informants with various ethnic backgrounds from all four districts of Brunei. It also included interviews with the key figures in government who influenced cultural and linguistic practices in the country. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, which allowed a whole range of issues pertaining to language in Brunei to be probed, one of them being bilingualism. The interviews were also complemented by an analysis of official documents, such as *Brunei Annual Report*, Brunei Constitutional Letters, and government circulars.

The main findings of the study suggest that there is a shift from traditional ethnic languages to a “national language” in Brunei that is paralleled with, though not necessarily caused by, a shift from ethnic identity to national identity. This paper focuses on the language shift aspect and its role in the evolution of bilingualism in Brunei, and aims to unravel its cultural and linguistic implications.

### III. Key Concepts

Hamers and Blanc (1989) state that “bilingualism” refers to an individual’s ability to communicate using two codes as well as the state of a linguistic community in which two languages are in contact, with the result that two codes can be used in the same interaction and that a number of individuals are bilingual (i.e. “societal bilingualism”). As stated above, central to the discussion is Romaine’s (1994) view on “societal bilingualism” as the marker of the language shift. Romaine argues:

Choices made by individuals on an everyday basis have an effect on the long-term situation of the languages concerned. Language shift generally involves bilingualism ... as a stage on the way to eventual monolingualism in a new language. Typically, a community which was once monolingual becomes bilingual as a result of contact with another (usually socially more powerful) group and becomes transitionally bilingual in the new language until their own language is given up altogether (Romaine 1994: 45-50).

According to Romaine (1994: 45), societal bilingualism must exist at some point to impact the shift in language. Fasold (1984) defines “language shift” as a process where a community gives up a language “completely in favor of another one,” and argues that “language maintenance and shift are the long-term, collective consequences of consistent patterns of language choice” (Fasold 1984).

The balance of power between languages will be affected when a new language enters a monolingual society, and makes it bilingual (Aitchison 1981; Day 1985). When individuals use two or more languages alternately, language contact occurs and the individuals involved become the “locus of the contact” (Weinreich 1968). When a substantial number of individuals in a community become bilingual, the entire community/society could be called “bilingual”—hence “societal bilingualism” (Romaine 1994).

Such societal bilingualism can ultimately lead to a language shift in a society where “one generation is bilingual, but only passes on one of the two languages to the next” (Fasold 1984: 213). Population

mobility in or out of a speech community is equally important in determining the balance of power between languages, as it affects the number of speakers of a specific language and creates a conducive environment for a language shift (Beer & Jacob 1985; Fasold 1984; Fishman 1991; Lieberman 1982). Certainly, increased population mobility caused by modernization of transportation and communication is significant in language shifts (Lieberman 1984). Fishman argues that where “social mobility is widespread, bilingualism is repeatedly skewed in favor of the more powerful language being acquired and used much more frequently than that of the lesser power” (Fishman 1977: 115).

Such changes in language choice and use will have consequences on culture in general and identity expression, in particular. Romaine (1994) views linguistic diversity as a benchmark of cultural diversity: “Language death is symptomatic of cultural death: a way of life disappears with the death of a language. The fortunes of languages are bound with those of its speakers.” Similarly, although Skutnabb-Kangas concedes that “language and culture are not synonymous, nor do they exhibit a one-to-one relationship,” she argues that “it seems doubtful” that linguistic diversity could go and cultural diversity could still remain (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 253-256). In relation to this, Gal (1979: 171) argues that one’s language choice implicitly relates the speaker to social groups associated with each language: “One need not be a member of a social category...to claim that identity...But whatever reasons individuals have for presenting themselves as members of a social category, it is choice of language that symbolizes such membership...” (Gal 1979: 171).

On the national level, although ethnic and cultural identity are often discussed in relation to national identity, and national language can be regarded as the most central symbol of growing nationhood, political entities that represent a homogeneous, monolingual national group are extremely rare (Kotze 2000). Indeed, “a shared national language does not by itself generate or sustain national identity” (Apter 1981: 221, in Blommaert 1996). Nevertheless, if people of a country shared a common language and identity, through nature or nurture, then the possibility of the

emergence of a national identity would be more likely. Wodak, et. al. (1999) argue that identity can be considered as the product of a mutable process, constructed through discourses that are continuously redefined and negotiated within and outside communities. This implies that the members of the communities use their national language, usually an additional language to their first language, as a firm and self-evident identity marker (Wodak et al 1999).

Based on these theoretical perspectives, we can discuss changes within the “linguistic ecology” of Brunei, through language shift, and in relation to identity shift. Haugen used “the ecology of language” in 1970 to refer to a new ecological study of the interrelations between multiple languages in both the human mind and in multilingual communities. Haugen’s (1972) definition of a language ecology is “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment,” in which environment means “the society that uses a language as one of its codes” rather than the “referential world” (Fill 2001: 3). This study is ecological, in the sense that it focuses on the interrelationships between the indigenous languages of Brunei (more exactly, between the speakers of these languages), and sociohistorical factors such as national history and ideology. The ecological framework proposed by Haugen suits the purpose of this study, particularly as this paper’s emphasis is on the reciprocity/ interrelationship between language and environment, noting that what is needed is not only a description of the social and psychological situation of each language, but also the effect of this situation on the language itself (Haugen 1972: 334).

## VI. Language Shift in Brunei

As mentioned earlier, societal bilingualism involves a language shift to a large degree. Informants in my previous research (see Noor Azam 2005) also recognized the language shift.

*[Informant16] Extract 1*

*... the children of today [don't speak] Bisaya!<sup>1</sup>! They speak Malay, all Malay... they don't know how to speak Bisaya... even my*

*children, none of them speak Bisaya... all of them speak Malay...*

[Informant 26] Extract 2

*Previously the Dusun community mainly used the genuine Dusun language. When they go to school the younger generation now use Malay, so their daily language is Malay... that's the loss, a language loss... if we don't keep our language... [they will] disappear... once the elderly people are gone, even once my generation is gone, the language will disappear.*

The reality of endangered traditional languages revealed in the interviews is similar to what Kershaw (1994) has coined “Terminal Heirs,” which means that the current generation of speakers is the final one before the languages die with them. Many earlier studies have also identified this language shift from traditional ethnic languages to the lingua franca Malay, including Martin (1992, 1996a, 1996b), Poedjosoedarmo (1996), Sercombe (2002), and Kershaw (1994).

If language shift is an indicator of the indigenous people’s shift from their own languages to the mainstream Malay language, it could also be argued that the “societal bilingualism” in Brunei has been redefined. Whereas “multilingualism” in Brunei was identified to include Malay and other minority languages like Kedayan, Belait, Bisaya, Dusun, Tutong, and Murut, today, Malay language dominates the others within the linguistic ecology.

Nothofer (1991) demonstrates that ethnic languages of the Belait, Bisaya, Dusun, Murut, and Tutong communities are not Malay dialects but are in fact separate languages in their own right. The Malay and Kedayan communities are monolingual as they speak Malay only (discounting English and other non-Bruneian languages). This means that the other five ethnic groups are mainly bilingual since they speak at least one more language (their own ethnic language) besides Malay, assuming that every member of the five non-Malay ethnolinguistic groups is brought up speaking their

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1) “Bisaya” refers to one of the seven ethnic groups under the label “Malay race” in Brunei, as well as to the traditional language that they speak. Nothofer (1994) identified the Bisaya and Dusun languages to be of the same family (Dusun-Bisaya) as they are 84% cognate.

traditional languages.

And this is where the effects of language shift processes can be felt the most. An increasing number of ethnic minority children are being raised speaking Malay as their first language, instead of their parents' ethnic language/s. In such cases these children grow up to be members of a non-Malay ethnic group, but have Malay language as their mother tongue.

Language shift from different ethnic languages to the dominant national language, Malay, over the years indicate that "multilingual Brunei" today refers to a homogenized Malay-speaking nation, which also speak English and other languages such as Mandarin and Arabic, but disregards many indigenous languages which are dying.

## **V. The Evolution of Multilingualism and Language Ecology of Brunei**

The following model charts the evolution of multilingualism and linguistic diversity in Brunei within the last 60 years or so in relation to more specific sociohistorical developments in the country:

1) Prior to the 1950's, social contact or interaction between ethnic groups was very limited and the ethnic communities predominantly, if not exclusively, spoke their own language: Tutong people spoke Tutong, and the Brunei Malay and Kedayan groups mostly conversed in their respective dialects of Malay, because they were confined to their ethnic communities. When inter-ethnic contact occurred, Malay was used as the *lingua franca*. Linguistic diversity can therefore be defined by clear separation of these speech communities which were predominantly monolingual. The fragmentation of the indigenous tribes into small isolated groups "has meant much cultural and linguistic diversity for such a small country" (Jones 1994: 9).

2) By the 1950's ethnic groups who had previously been



recorded in government reports as non-Malay speakers, were now being labelled as “Malay-speaking”. Rapid development of national roads began in the 1950’s along the coastal line, connecting the capital city and the furthestmost district, Belait. This led to the mobility, migration, and dispersal of many local residents, and increased inter-ethnic contact and mixed marriages or inter-ethnic marriage.

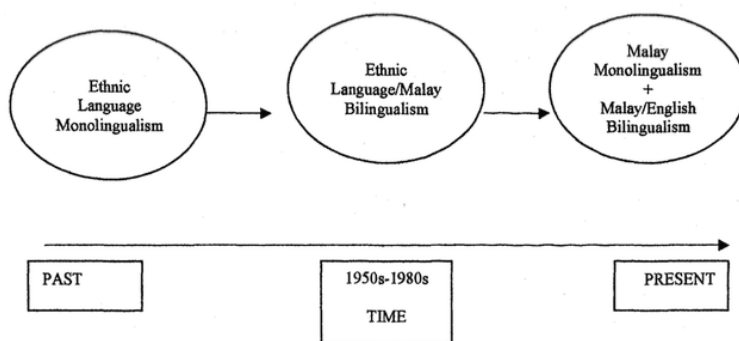


Figure 1: Change in Brunei's linguistic ecology (Source: Noor Azam 2005).

3) According to Jones, contact between ethnic groups was minimal prior to the development of roads in the 1950’s. As contact increased, the need to communicate between different tribes forced people to use a shared language (Jones 1994: 9). Prior to the introduction of bilingual education system in 1985, Malay stream education had increased the chances of students from different ethnic backgrounds to interact with each other in the Malay language. The dominant status of Malay was reinforced in public schools as a common tool of communication and as a source of national pride. The change in Brunei’s language ecology in the 1960’s can be summarized as follows: Bilingualism in an indigenous language and Malay increased, while monolingualism in traditional languages evidently decreased.

The preference for the Malay language in the 1970’s and 1980’s increased along with the belief among ethnic parents that bringing up their children in Malay would prepare them well for schools. Therefore, competency in the Malay language became more important,

especially for those who frequently moved or migrated across the country. When people from minority communities enter mainstream society, their needs and desires for social integration and communication became greater and necessary. This was also reinforced by the increased use of Malay as a medium of instruction in the schools. While there was still a large number of those who could speak both an ethnic language and Malay now, they belonged mainly in the older age group. The linguistic scene at that time certainly saw large-scale shifts from ethnic languages to the Malay language, and as a result, there was a large increase in the number of monolingual Malay-speakers.

4) In the 1980's, there was a greater emphasis on English with the implementation of the *Dwibahasa* (bilingual) education system in the newly-independent nation. Being fluent in English in Brunei is generally perceived to be the symbol of high social status and good education, even more than being fluent in Malay. This can be attributed to the impact of the large number of graduates returning from British universities at a time when Brunei still had no university. During this period, a bilingual Bruneian could be defined as a Malay-English speaker, as ethnic language tradition was rapidly disappearing among the younger generation. In contrast, Malay-English bilingualism has been institutionalized successfully through public school education (Jones 1994: 9), where English was "valorized" (Noor Azam 2012).

5) Nowadays, it is generally difficult to find those aged below 15 to be fluent in their ethnic languages, although many would claim to have receptive abilities in their ethnic language and remain loyal to their language tradition. Noor Azam (2005) identified a shift to Malay (and to English), particularly, though not exclusively, among interethnic families from mixed-marriage parentage.

In view of the discussion above, the following trends may be discerned:

- Bilinguals who speak Malay and English outnumbering Malay monolinguals.
- Bilingual speakers of an indigenous language and Malay are

decreasing in number.

- Monolingual speakers of indigenous languages have virtually disappeared.
- Bruneians who grow up with speaking English as their first-language on the other hand are on the increase.

## VI. Discussion

The link between language and identity shift in Brunei has been termed by Martin (2002) as “linguistic and cultural redefinition,” and by Maxwell (1980: 189-197) as “shifts in semantic classification” of indigenous Brunei ethnic groups. Braighlinn (1992: 19) specifically highlights the consolidation of “a single national identity, born of convergence on a dominant Malay culture” in Brunei. In this regard, Noor Azam (2005) reported that Bruneians already see signs of merging of identities among the new generation of Bruneians, and that language shift processes are denotative of a parallel shift in identity too. If a parallel is to be made, a shift from ethnic languages to Malay can be reflected in a shift of emphasis from ethnic identities to a national “pan-Bruneian” identity that supersedes individual or communal ethnic identities, thus de-emphasizing ethnic differences.

Braighlinn (1992: 20), Gunn (1997), and Kershaw (2001: 124) have commonly suggested that identity shifts in Brunei are the result of deliberate political pressures or even inventions to create national identity. Noor Azam’s (2005) study does not have adequate evidence to support or refute this contention, but it has shown the close link between the emergence of a “Pan-Bruneian” identity that coincides with the emergence of a “pan-Brunei Malay” language. There is a declining importance of overt expression of ethnic identity, while there is a greater emphasis on national identity instead (identity as a Bruneian citizen).

The emergence of this new “national” identity saw its beginnings in Nation-building and national-identity building trends in Southeast Asia leading up to the 1970’s. These movements aimed to create a homogeneous national identity, because “diversity” was seen to be

inextricably bound up with political instability (Bourdieu 1994). Nation-building through identity-formation involves individuals being trained to subsume cultural, social and ethnic identities to a broader and more general “national identity,” usually through the educational system (Bourdieu 1994: 7). This view is supported by Wodak who argues that “the state shapes those forms of perception, of categorisation, of interpretation and of memory which serves as a basis for a more or less deliberate orchestration of the habitus which forms the basis for a kind of ‘national common sense’, through the school and the educational system” (Wodak 2009: 29).

When Brunei achieved its independence in 1984 and declared that it “shall forever be a sovereign, democratic and independent Malay Muslim Monarchy,” Brunei national identity was redefined by the attachment and/or acknowledgement of its people to a dominant Malay culture, the Muslim faith, and loyalty to the Monarch. The mantra “Malay Islamic Monarchy” became a homogenizing force through the educational system. The ability to speak Malay, the major language, “most closely delineates status gradations in profoundly hierarchical and status-ridden society” (Gunn 1997). This process of creating a national identity, including through language, can be seen to constitute what Anderson calls “official nationalism” which he defined as “the willed merger of dynastic empire and nation... a phenomenon that emanated from the state and serving the interests of the state first and foremost” (Anderson 2006: 85).

## **VII. Conclusion**

Language shift, as shown above, has implications not just on linguistic diversity, but also on cultural diversity, or more specifically, in the diversity of identities. Whereas common facility in Malay language is perceived as an important marker of “Bruneian-ness,” differences in ethnic identity are becoming less important. With modernization and greater integration among the ethnic groups of Brunei, the diverse languages and identities are concurrently converging, and a common language and national identity are emerging in turn.

Whereas in the past, monolingual speakers of ethnic languages

were still common, greater socialization and integrative processes over the recent decades have changed the linguistic acquisition trends in Brunei. Language shift processes have been the main contributor to this change in the language ecology, the redefinition of the notion of “a multilingual population” in Brunei, as well as to the reduction of linguistic and cultural diversity in Brunei. With particular reference to indigenous language speakers, those who were once linguistically diverse have steadily been incorporated into a “homogeneous” and “monolingual” national Malay speech community. It is interesting to see that only 60 years ago, Brunei’s population as a whole was actually more multilingual than it is today. Previously, the Bruneian bilingual person was able to speak a traditional ethnic language as their first language and Malay as an additional language. Today, being a bilingual person most likely means one who speaks Malay as first language and English as second language.

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Received: Apr. 16, 2016; Reviewed: Oct. 16, 2016; Accepted: Dec. 1, 2016