Centralizing and peripheralizing of the Malay language in Singapore’s language policy

Yurni Said-Sirhan
National University of Singapore, Singapore

Language policy is instrumental in distributing access to linguistic capital through the allocation of economic value to the languages concerned. Although Malay is constitutionally Singapore’s national language, it cannot compete in terms of its current economic value with English, which is Singapore’s working language, and Mandarin, which is not only the ethnically-assigned mother tongue for the Singaporean Chinese, but also a language that enables them to tap into China’s expanding economy (Wee 2003: 217). While the discourse for learning Mandarin now utilizes political economic motivations, the predominant discourse for promoting the Malay language still largely centres around the notion of ‘pride’ (Heller & Duchêne 2012) within the Malay community, and more recently, its relevance in a globalized world, displaying tensions concerning the supposed equal status accorded to the three ethnically-assigned mother tongues in Singapore’s Constitution, as well as Singapore’s commitment to meritocracy. Through a discourse analysis of the annual Malay Language Month’s online publicity, as well as online discussions on the campaign, where stances alternate between notions of ‘pride’ and ‘relevance’, I demonstrate how ideologies about English and Malay manifested in the metadiscourse reveals the anxieties concerning the global relevance of the Malay language and its economic value vis-à-vis the other official languages of Singapore. Situating this metadiscourse against the broader rhetoric of Singapore’s preferred brand of bilingualism, the notion of ‘pride’, while central to ethnonilingual identity construction, still remains peripheral to being economically viable in the new economy. This perhaps explains why promoting the language among younger bilingual Malays is perceived to be an uphill struggle.

Keywords: peripheralizing, language ideologies, pride.