The Mechanism of Dual Discourse Systems in a Multilingual Society: A Citizen Raciolinguistic Perspective

Wong Mun Wui

The School of Foreign Languages, Nanfang College - Guangzhou, 882 Wenquan Avenue, Conghua District, Guangzhou, China.

Kemo Badiane

The School of Foreign Languages, Nanfang College - Guangzhou, 882 Wenquan Avenue, Conghua District, Guangzhou, China.

Abstract: After the retreat of British colonial rule, newly independent Malaysia faced the challenge of constructing a national identity in a multiracial and multilingual society. While the state promotes Malay language and Islam as central to national unity, Malaysia is also sustained by a deep history of multilingual practice. This tension gives rise to a dual discourse system: one discourse emphasizes Malay dominance and monolingual nationalism, while the other sustains pluralism and multilingualism. The dual discourse system intertwines in various contexts to serve the authority and the purpose of population management. This paper examines how these dual discourses operate simultaneously in Malaysian society, both uniting and dividing citizens. Drawing on a raciolinguistic perspective combined with citizen sociolinguistics, data from songs, online debates, media commentaries, and everyday conversations were collected and analysed. The findings show that Malaysians navigate these dual discourses with awareness and flexibility, while politicians strategically exploit racialized language ideologies for power and legitimacy. The study argues that the dual discourse system is not merely a contradiction but a mechanism that enables nation-building under postcolonial conditions. By situating Malaysia within raciolinguistic scholarship, this article highlights how colonial racial language ideology structure and hierarchy model evolve, reproduce, reprogram in the governing system, and contested in multilingual Southeast Asia.

Keywords: raciolinguistics, citizen sociolinguistics, multilingualism, language ideology, race

1.   Introduction

The development of modern Malaysia cannot be understood without recognizing its inherently multiracial, multi-religious, and multi-cultural composition.

Yet, the prevailing postcolonial ideology that every independent nation must possess a singular national language persists, even within such a linguistically diverse society. In the aftermath of independence, the state emphasized the replacement of the colonial language with a national one, framing linguistic unity as the foundation of national cohesion. Schools were programmed with promoting the national language, while a centralized education system sought to inseminate a shared sense of nationalism. As Herder (cited in Mishra and Tan, in Tan & Mishra [eds.], 2021) famously declared, "one people, one fatherland, one language". However, Mishra and Tan (2021) challenge the assumption that a homogeneous, monolingual nationalism is a prerequisite for nationhood—an assumption that poses serious challenges for multilingual, postcolonial societies. Can the Herderian ideal of a monolingual nation be sustained in a linguistically plural country, such as Malaysia? How does Malaysia attempt to articulate a unified national voice while preserving multilingual realities?

Within the Herderian framework, the national language is seen as the cognitive and cultural matrix through which individuals and societies perceive themselves. By using the shared language, similar opinions and thoughts would be developed as the interlocutors live and experience their lives in a particular environment or situations for a given period of time. Not only does a shared language facilitate communication, but also constructs collective identity and belonging. Through habitual use, the recognized national language fosters shared worldviews and social cohesion—an ideology of language that reinforces national solidarity. From this perspective, the national language becomes a symbolic instrument of unification and a vehicle for nationalism, whereas, multilingualism has often been framed as the antithesis of national coherence, imagined as a source of racial tension, social fragmentation, and potential disorder. Such binaries, however, obscure the complex negotiations that underpin the lived experience of linguistic diversity.

How, then, does multilingualism endure under the ideology of "one language, one nation"? Are multilingualism and the pursuit of linguistic homogeneity necessarily contradictory? How do these seemingly opposing logics coexist within Malaysia's sociolinguistic ecology, and what roles do they play in shaping the nation? These dual discourses are not merely linguistic—they are historically and ideologically grounded systems of meaning. A raciolinguistic perspective allows us to interrogate how these discourses mediate identity, power, and belonging, given that racialized language ideologies remain central to social recognition and hierarchy. Racial discourse shapes individuals' adaptation to their environments and their negotiation of identity within society. While identities are multiple and dynamic, social and political structures often channel them toward particular alignments. When raciolinguistic analysis is combined with citizen sociolinguistics, processes of racial negotiation become visible: interlocutors' acceptance, resistance, or reinterpretation of dominant discourses reveals how nationalism is discursively constructed and contested. This intersectional framework enables a deeper understanding of how monolingual and multilingual ideologies interact in the broader project of nation-building.

The multilingual discourse in Malaysia has deep historical and ecological roots. Beyond political or economic factors, the linguistic ecology of the Malay Archipelago has long fostered diversity. When the Portuguese chronicler Tomé Pires visited the region in the early sixteenth century, he noticed that "83 languages were spoken in the city" and that "Melayo...was not only the language of trade in Eastern Asia, but also the native language of the Malaios of Malacca" (Skott, 2017). His observations testify to the long-standing multiplicity of languages, ethnicities, and religions in Malaccan society. This Malaccan Mercantile Model exemplified precolonial multilingualism in practice: Malacca functioned as an international trading port with a plural legal and commercial infrastructure that facilitated transnational exchange. To enable communication, a lingua franca—Bazaar Malay—emerged and spread widely. As

Ansaldo (2009) observes that a shared trade language can coexist productively alongside multiple vernaculars, demonstrating that linguistic unity doesn't need to erase linguistic diversity.

This study therefore aims to trace the origins and evolution of two dominant discourses in Malaysia's linguistic landscape: the ideology of monolingual nationalism and the practice of multilingual coexistence. More importantly, it seeks to hypothesize the mechanisms through which these discourses interact in shaping the postcolonial national language ideology and the construction of Malaysia's national identity following British withdrawal. The central challenges faced by this newly independent nation were—and remain—how to assemble a multiracial, multilingual, and religiously diverse society into a cohesive political community, and how to persuade this plural population to accept Malay political dominance, uphold the constitutional status of Malay as the national language, and respect Islam as the national religion.

This paper therefore raises three interrelated questions:

1. How do dual discourse systems (Malay dominance vs. multilingual pluralism) operate in Malaysian society?
2. How do citizens negotiate and contest these discourses in everyday practice?
3. What colonial legacies shape the persistence of these racialized language ideologies?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to raciolinguistics in two ways. First, it theorizes the dual discourse system as a mechanism of nation-building in postcolonial multilingual contexts. Second, it extends raciolinguistic inquiry beyond the Global North, situating Southeast Asia as a critical site for examining how race and language intersect in everyday life.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on Malay dominance discourse, multilingualism studies. Section 3 outlines the methodology which covers the theoretical frameworks from raciolinguistics and citizen sociolinguistics. It also displays the data sources and the analytical strategies conducted in the next section. Section 4 presents the data and analysis across four domains: popular culture, digital discourses, political rhetoric, and education policy. It also discusses the implications of these findings for raciolinguistic theory and nation-building. Section 5 concludes with reflections on colonial continuities and avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review: Contesting Discourses of Malay Dominance and Pluralism

Following the establishment of the Malayan government in 1957, two distinctive yet intertwined discourses emerged in public and academic debates. The first celebrated the plural and diverse nature of Malaysian society, envisioning a nation built on coexistence and intercultural exchange. The second, in contrast, emphasized the political and cultural centrality of the Malays as the indigenous people of the Malay World (Alam Melayu), asserting their legitimate authority as rooted in historical continuity and civilizational heritage. Both narratives appear persuasive when viewed through the lens of historical evidence; yet, each demands critical re-examination through a raciolinguistic perspective—one that foregrounds how race, language ideology, and identity have been co-constituted in Malaysia's nation-building project.

To trace these epistemic genealogies, this study engages with key scholarship on Malay racial identity, the evolution of Malaysian nationhood, and postcolonial racial formation. Among the most influential thinkers, Milner (2011) advances a civilizational reading of the Malay World, legitimizing Malay political dominance within its historical and cultural context. His work offers valuable insight into the intellectual formation of Malay-centric nationalism. In contrast, Ansaldo (2009), focusing on pidgin and creole formation in Monsoon Asia, highlights the region's deep-rooted multilingualism as a counterpoint to

homogenizing national ideologies. Meanwhile, Rustam A. Sani (2008) and Kua (2008) provide critical local perspectives that both complement and challenge these frameworks, situating Malay identity within Malaysia's postcolonial racial hierarchy.

2.1 Malayness as Civilizational Framework

Milner (2011) conceptualizes the Malay World through the lens of 'adat'—the customary ways of life modelled upon the Melaka Sultanate. He portrays Malay civilization as a "civilization in motion," wherein anyone who adopts Malay language, customs, and 'halus' (refined) behaviour, while upholding 'nama' (reputation) and 'maruah' (dignity), may be accepted as a Malay. In this reading, Malayness is fluid, flexible and negotiable, it is cultural rather than biological—an identity defined by moral conduct and participation in Malay communal life. Yet Milner also identifies a persistent anxiety among Malay intellectuals that Malay identity might "disappear from the world" should these cultural codes be neglected.

This framing illuminates how Malays conceptualize territorial control and collective identity. For Milner, the legitimacy of Malay dominance is spatially localized within the Malay World: those entering this domain are expected to conform to Malay norms. He denies that this worldview is inherently exclusionary, noting that under the Melaka Sultanate, non-Malay traders, such as the Chinese could accumulate wealth and social standing as long as they remained outside the royal hierarchy. Such arrangements, he argues, reflected class distinctions rather than racialized exclusion. Accordingly, Milner suggests that British "divide and rule" strategies (Chin,2022) merely reinforced pre-existing hierarchies rather than introducing new forms of segregation. Malayness, in his account, functions as an open civilizational framework—learnable, performative, and integrative.

Yet this reasoning is not without its problems. Milner's sympathetic reading of Malay dominance, and his minimization of systemic discrimination, reveal a distinctly decolonial yet pro-Malay stance that risks romanticizing precolonial hierarchies. His valorisation of Malay civilization tends to obscure the lived realities of minority marginalization—an enduring legacy of colonial racialization (Chin, 2022). Nonetheless, Milner's interpretation remains pivotal for understanding how the sultanate-based hierarchy evolved into a postcolonial ideological formation, one that naturalized Malay primacy as a self-evident "common sense" of the nation.

2.2 Multilingual Ecologies and the Colonial Rupture

In stark contrast, Ansaldo (2009) reconstructs the region's precolonial past as a dynamic and multilingual ecology. Focusing on port cities, such as Malacca, Aceh, and Batavia, he shows how maritime trade networks promote sustained intercultural interaction among merchants, sailors, missionaries, and adventurers from across the world. Prior to European colonization, these ports functioned as linguistic contact zones where Bazaar Malay served as a lingua franca. This environment nurtured a cosmopolitan order in which racial boundaries were fluid or absent.

Ansaldo's analysis reveals that precolonial Malacca was governed less by racialized hierarchy than by mercantile pragmatism. Commercial law, though influenced by Islamic jurisprudence, primarily ensured fairness in trade rather than enforcing religious or racial exclusivity. As he notes, "coastal societies were too diverse in culture and religion to display feelings of superiority toward one another" (citing Marsden, 1812). Hierarchies were class-based and situational, while cultural assimilation was common. In this milieu, foreign traders could integrate into local governance—some even acquiring titles, such as Orang Kaya (noblemen) or harbourmasters (Ansaldo, 2009; Reid, 1993).

This plural and decentralized order was disrupted by European colonial expansion. The Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511 and the Dutch occupation in 1641 dismantled the maritime cosmopolitanism that had defined the region (Chin, 2022). British consolidation through the 1824

Anglo-Dutch Treaty and the establishment of the Straits Settlements institutionalized a dual structure: Malay aristocratic sovereignty coexisted with centralized colonial control (Rustam A. Sani, 2008; Tan, 2000). Although framed as "indirect rule," British administration entrenched pro-Malay policies that bolstered the cultural and religious dominance of the Malay elite. Over time, a new class of Malay nationalist intellectuals emerged, transforming inherited hierarchies into modern ideological projects of Malay centralism (Tan, 2000; Kua, 2007; Rustam A. Sani, 2008).

2.3 Colonial Racialization and Postcolonial Continuities

The colonial economy also restructured Malaysia's demographic and linguistic landscape. British importation of Chinese and Indian labourers to serve plantation, mining, and administrative needs (Tan, 2000; Chin, 2022) intensified pluralism while hardening ethnic boundaries. Earlier Chinese settlers—traders and seafarers—had already established hybrid communities, such as the Baba Nyonya and Peranakan (Ansaldo, 2009; McPherson, 1993). Yet the massive influx of new migrants under British capitalism produced a racialized division of labour, institutionalized through the "divide and rule" policy: Malays in rural kampung, Chinese in urban centres, and Indians on plantations. This system entrenched both economic stratification and cultural segregation, laying the foundation for postcolonial racial discourse.

By the early twentieth century, racial segmentation was embedded in colonial governance and identity formation. Simultaneously, anti-colonial nationalism gained momentum through local newspapers and journals, such as *Saudara*, *Majlis*, and *Pikiran Rakyat* (Wan Suhana binti Wan Sulong 2006; Rustam A. Sani, 2008; Matheson-Hooker, 2021). The movement culminated in the independence of Malaya (including Singapore) in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, later followed by Singapore's separation in 1965 (Chin, 2022).

The new Federation adopted a multiracial coalition model under UMNO, MCA, and MIC—symbolically inclusive yet structurally majoritarian. Smaller indigenous groups were absorbed under the umbrella of bumiputra ("sons of the soil"), effectively assimilated into the Malay-dominant framework. While this arrangement was framed as inclusive nation-building, it entailed linguistic and cultural homogenization under the ideology of Malay-Islamic unity.

Decades of UMNO-led governance reinforced this ideology through education, bureaucracy, and symbolic politics. Although the Barisan Nasional coalition's six-decade rule ended in 2018 with the rise of Pakatan Harapan—a multiracial alliance blending Islamic and secular elements—political realignments soon reinstated Malay nationalist dominance. These oscillations underscore a central question: Can Malaysia transcend its ethnolinguistic hierarchy to imagine a genuinely inclusive national identity, or is it fated to remain a Malay nation-state in perpetuity?

3. Methodology

This study aims to uncover the mechanism of the dual discourse system that shapes the reconstruction of Malaysia's postcolonial national image. This system consists of two competing yet coexisting ideologies: the multilingual discourse, which manifests through Malaysia's plural linguistic and cultural realities, and the Herderian monolingual ideal, encapsulated in the dictum "one people, one fatherland, one language." Each possesses its own historical legitimacy and sociopolitical rationale. Their coexistence does not represent a simple binary choice, but rather a dynamic tension that sustains the nation's identity formation. Understanding how these opposing discourses function in parallel—without producing constant friction—requires an analytical framework capable of revealing the interplay between language, race, and power.

To this end, the study adopts a raciolinguistic perspective as its primary analytical lens, complemented by citizen sociolinguistics as a participatory and corrective method. Together, these frameworks enable a multi-layered investigation of how linguistic ideologies and racialized discourses interact within Malaysia's sociohistorical and political context.

3.1 The Raciolinguistic Perspective

Raciolinguistics provides a critical framework for examining how language and race are co-constructed and mobilized in systems of power. As articulated by Rosa and Flores (2023), this perspective reveals how linguistic diversity and perception often serve as sources of marginalization and exclusion, operating through deeply embedded colonial hierarchies. They identify five key dimensions of the raciolinguistic analytic:

1. the colonial foundations of racial and linguistic hierarchies;
2. the perceptual modes through which race and language are jointly apprehended across contexts;
3. the production of naturalized typologies that link racial and linguistic forms;
4. the intersectional matrices of marginalization that continually restructure these hierarchies; and
5. the imperative to reimagine transformative theories of change that challenge colonial, imperial, and capitalist power formations (Rosa & Flores, 2023).

Applied to the Malaysian context, the raciolinguistic framework serves as a diagnostic tool to expose how race-based hierarchies are linguistically reproduced in policy, education, and everyday discourse. It illuminates the mechanisms through which racialized identities are constructed, legitimized, and weaponized to sustain political and economic dominance. In particular, this approach helps identify how language ideologies are mobilized as instruments of control—shaping social recognition, territorial belonging, and access to resources.

However, raciolinguistics is not without limitations. As a perspective grounded in critical interpretation, it remains vulnerable to subjectivity and overgeneralization. The interpretation of racialized linguistic phenomena often depends on the analyst's positionality and sensitivity to context. Recognizing this epistemic limitation, this study incorporates an additional methodological layer to counterbalance the potential bias inherent in critical interpretation.

3.2 Citizen Sociolinguistics as Complementary Method

To complement the raciolinguistic framework, this study integrates citizen sociolinguistics, as developed by Rymes (2020, 2022). This method situates language analysis within community-based interaction and emphasizes public participation in meaning-making. In citizen sociolinguistics, the medium itself is the method: public discussions, online forums, and social exchanges about language become sites of inquiry. The process involves posing questions about linguistic practices or ideologies, gathering diverse responses from participants, analysing these interactions within their sociocultural contexts, and fostering sustained dialogue within communities (Rymes 2020).

Citizen sociolinguistics is thus participatory and reflexive. It breaks through the isolation of academic discourse and the echo chambers of like-minded elites, promoting inclusivity by amplifying the voices of ordinary speakers. Importantly, its validity lies in participation itself: when individuals engage in linguistic reflection, they enact awareness of language ideologies. Its accuracy resides in the experiential authenticity of participants 'narratives—their recognition, interpretation, and contestation of linguistic hierarchies (Rymes, 2020, 2022).

While citizen sociolinguistics does not adhere to conventional academic standards of data collection or control, it offers a distinct epistemological value. By bringing community voices—often marginalized in institutionalized research—into analytical dialogue, it enriches and grounds the raciolinguistic lens. As

Rymes (2020) notes, even miscommunication and verbal conflict are productive sites of meaning, fostering permeability among social groups and giving space to the "quiet majority."

3.3 Integrating the Two Approaches

This study therefore employs a dual methodological design. The raciolinguistic framework provides a critical-interpretive foundation to identify how racialized language ideologies operate in Malaysia's national discourse. Citizen sociolinguistics supplements this with empirical and participatory engagement, ensuring that analysis reflects lived linguistic realities and community voices. Together, they enable a multidimensional examination of Malaysia's dual discourse system—one that is both top-down and bottom-up, structural and experiential, linguistic and racialized.

Through the interplay of these two methods, the study aims to capture the dialectic between national ideology and grassroots linguistic practice. This synthesis enhances the interpretive depth of raciolinguistics while preserving the ethical commitment of citizen sociolinguistics to inclusivity and reflexivity. Ultimately, this combined methodology seeks not only to analyse how dual discourses of monolingual nationalism and multilingual pluralism coexist, but also to reveal how they shape and contest the racialized imagination of the Malaysian nation.

3.4   Data Sources

The study draws on diverse forms of naturally occurring data that exemplify citizen sociolinguistic participation:

- Popular culture: e.g., Ali, Ahkao dan Muthu (Namewee, 2020), a widely circulated patriotic song.
- Digital platforms: YouTube comments, Reddit threads, and social media debates on topics, such as Bahasa Melayu vs. Bahasa Malaysia.
- Media commentary: newspaper columns and blogs reflecting citizen voices on race and language.
- Daily discourse: informal conversations, memes, creative insults, and other grassroots expressions.

These data sources were selected because they capture spontaneous engagement with language ideologies in public or semi-public arenas, providing insight into how discourses circulate beyond official policy documents.

3.5 Analytical Strategies

The analysis proceeds in two stages:

1. Raciolinguistic mapping: identifying how race and language are co-constructed in each discourse, tracing their colonial genealogies and institutional embedding.
2. Citizen sociolinguistic interpretation: analysing how citizens themselves comment on, negotiate, or contest these discourses in practice.

By combining these approaches, the study situates citizen perspectives within broader raciolinguistic structures. This dual lens illuminates both top-down impositions (state policies, political rhetoric) and bottom-up negotiations (citizen resistance, reinterpretation, and complicity).

4.   Data Analysis

To demonstrate how the dual discourse system functions and operates—particularly through its mechanism of parallelism—this study employs a raciolinguistic framework (Flores & Rosa, 2015) in conjunction with citizen sociolinguistic methods (Rymes, 2020). The data corpus comprises everyday communicative practices, including spontaneous conversations, online debates, creative insults, song lyrics, artworks, memes, and written comments. These data are credible because they represent

authentic, organic interactions—genuine social responses produced through lived experience and unconscious reactions to real-world events.

By analysing these materials through a citizen raciolinguistic perspective, the study investigates how the dual discourse system manifests when Malaysians discuss the Malay language and other ethnic languages. Through this analysis, it aims to uncover how discursive negotiations surrounding language reveal the underlying mechanisms shaping ethnicity, national identity, and community formation in post-independence Malaysia.

4.1 Popular Culture and the Imaginary of Unity

Case study: Ali, Ahkao dan Muthu (Namewee, 2020)

Description: The song "Ali Ahkao dan Muthu", composed by Malaysian artist Namewee, became a national hit after its release on August 28, 2020, via YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zl5x71RGK28) , garnering over 183,000 views. Although initially perceived as an Independence Day (August 31) tribute, the song's title evokes nostalgia among Malaysians born in the 1970s and 1980s.

Raciolinguistic perspective analysis: These names—Ali, Ahkao, and Muthu—originated from school textbooks, symbolizing the three major ethnic communities: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. This trio of names was designed to represent unity through diversity, embodying the "One Malaysia" discourse that has been normalized and internalized via the national education system. Yet, beneath the façade of harmony lies an implicit hierarchical order—"Malay first, then others." Indigenous communities, such as the Negrito, Senoi, Temuan, Jakun, Kadazandusun, Murut, Rungus, Iban, Melanau, Dayak, and Bidayuh, remain marginalized, their identities subsumed under the generic category of "bumiputra" ("sons of the soil"). This classification dissolves their individuality and positions them as a silent backdrop to the nation's multicultural narrative.

Citizen Sociolinguistic analysis: YouTube comments reveal public awareness of this exclusion. Commenters celebrate the song's multiracial imagery but also note the erasure of Sabah, Sarawak, and Orang Asli communities. Others highlight how politicians, not citizens, are the primary drivers of racial division.

Responses from YouTube users to Namewee's video illuminate this awareness:

> Youtuber A: Mungkin satu-satunya lagu merdeka yg tunjuk pasal berbeza kaum kat Malaysia boleh Bersatu (Maybe this Merdeka/ independence day's song is the only song that shows that different races can unite together.)

> Youtuber B: Rakyat memang boleh bersatu x kira bangsa ke agama. Politician tu yg kacau je (The people are united no matter which race or religion, the politician(s) is/ are the one(s) who make(s) trouble.)

> Youtuber C: Perpaduan boleh nampak kat east malaysia (Unity can be witnessed in East Malaysia

> Youtuber D replied Youtuber C: ni mesti tak pernah tengok perpaduan dekat negeri kedah,perlis,terengganu & kelantan ni (You may have not seen the unity in Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu and Kelantan states.)

> Youtuber D: tapi lagu ni tak libatkan orang-orang sabah,sarawak & orang asli pun...malaysia bukan orang melayu,cina & india je (But this song didn't even involve people from Sabah and Sarawak and the indigenous people...Malaysia doesn't only belong to Malay, Chinese and Indians)

> Youtuber E: Rakyat Malaysia memang united and steady together - it's the scumbag politaik yang selalu buat kacau! (The Malaysians have always been united and living together- it is the scumbag politician(s) who has(ve) always been the trouble maker)

These public reactions suggest a collective consciousness of both the exclusion of indigenous groups and the political manipulation of racial discourse. Despite exposure to state-led narratives of unity, Malaysians recognize the instrumental use of racial divisions by politicians. Thus, while most citizens embrace the ideology of unity in diversity, they remain susceptible to racially charged provocations. The dual discourse system consequently functions ambivalently—simultaneously uniting and dividing.

Insight: This"Ali Ahkao and Muthu"popular image normalizes unity discourses, while citizen voices expose the selective inclusivity embedded within them. It has successfully promoted the concept of unity through diversity which was generally accepted by the population as a politically correct mindset. The authority has intertwined two different and opposite discourses and reprogrammed them into a kind of common sense in Malaysian context. The intention is obvious i.e., to unite all Malaysians but the hierarchy still maintains, Malay first then the others.

From the above discussion, it is obvious that Malaysians in general are aware that the indigenous people have been left out and they should be part of the nation building. Despite of the mainstream programmed unity discourse, the Malaysians in general are conscious about the fact that politicians are using racial discourse as the manipulative strategies to influence the population. The Malaysians in general are used to living in the multilingual society and recognize the significance of unity through diversity. They certainly accept the unity ideology, but they are vulnerable and exposed to the provoking racial discourses in the reality which are usually initiated by the racist politicians. Nevertheless, the mindset of racial hatred and rivalry still exist and it promotes the racial discourse political market. This dual discourse system works both ways, it unites and separates the people.

4.2 Political Doublespeak and the Commodification of Race

Case study: Political leader's contradictory appeals to non-Malay voters while labelling them pendatang ("immigrants").

Description: Racial tensions have continually haunted Malaysia's multiracial social landscape. The persistence of dual racial discourses—namely, the discourse of Malay dominance and Islamization (Chin, 2022) versus the discourse of non-Malay dominance and Malay marginalization (Rajakrishnan Ramasamy, 1993)—illustrates their parasitic entrenchment within the national psyche. These discourses often resurface during election periods, when opportunistic politicians instrumentalize racial anxieties to mobilize support and sustain control. In this process, racialized fear becomes a political commodity, circulating within what might be termed a "fear economy." Politicians cultivate insecurities through racialized narratives, monopolize information channels, and then present themselves as protectors and problem-solvers. The outcome is a self-perpetuating cycle: racial fear is produced, consumed, and reproduced in the political marketplace.

Nevertheless, rationalist voices continue to resist this manipulation. *Free Malaysia Today,* columnist K. Parkaran (2023) recounts three incidents that illustrate the dynamics of racial discourse at the interpersonal level:

1. A Hindu temple incident: A Malay man intervened to stop another Malay from vandalizing a Hindu idol, suggesting a growing acceptance of multicultural coexistence among Malaysians.

2. A Malay girl in Indian attire: When asked about possible backlash, her father dismissed concerns, saying, "It's just fashion—it has nothing to do with religion," revealing cross-cultural openness even among devout Malays.

3. A political party leader's doublespeak: Certain political leader simultaneously appealed for non-Malay votes while labelling non-Malays 'pendatang' ("immigrants"). This rhetorical inconsistency epitomizes the logic of the dual discourse system, where inclusivity and exclusion coexist within a single ideological frame.

Raciolinguistic perspective: Such doublespeak exemplifies how politicians weaponize racialized language ideologies to secure legitimacy. By mobilizing both inclusionary and exclusionary discourses, political actors reinforce racial hierarchies while claiming national unity. This doublespeak operates much like the yin–yang duality—a system that sustains both unity and division, creating confusion, ambiguity, and instability within Malaysia's sociopolitical fabric.

Citizen sociolinguistics: Media commentary (Parkaran, 2023) shows that many Malaysians recognize this doublespeak and resist its manipulative logic. Everyday observations—such as Malays embracing Indian cultural dress without backlash—illustrate openness that contradicts political rhetoric.

Insight: The political field converts racial discourse into a market commodity, producing fear, mistrust, and dependency. Miscommunication and misunderstanding often happen and these negative interactions accumulate unintentionally and gradually. Yet citizen perspectives reveal counter-narratives that contest this manipulation. Some rationalists are more critical and sceptical towards the threats and rumours in the society and reject these manipulations.

4.3 The "X for All" Formula in Education, Policy, and the Illusion of Social Equality

Case study: The 1951 Barnes Report, Pupils' Own Language (POL) classes, and indigenous education policies

Description: In the development of Malaysian education policy (Gaudart, 1987; Rajakrishnan Ramasamy, 1993), the government attempts to fit all races into the mainstream education system. For example, the implementation of Pupils' Own Language (POL) classes in public schools aims to preserve indigenous languages and cultures. The class will be available only if there is an enrolment of at least 15 students (Yang, 1998). Previously, in 1951 Barnes Report, the colonial government emphasized the Malay and English as the medium of instruction in the public schools, the mother tongue education of Mandarin and Tamil were provided for Chinese and Tamil communities, there was hardly any mother tongue education for indigenous people who are ethnic minorities. Some governmental efforts and policies were made to upgrade their education, economy situation and quality of life, but the outcome was not significant (Mohd Roslan Rosnon, 2016).

Raciolinguistic perspective: The appealing rhetoric of "something for all"—common in education and welfare policy—often conceals an assimilationist agenda that pressures minorities to conform to mainstream cultural norms. In Malaysia, this tendency is evident in some educational policies, such as the Pupils 'Own Language (POL) classes. While ostensibly designed to preserve indigenous languages, these programs often result in language shift toward dominant tongues due to insufficient funding, lack of materials, and unqualified instructors (Yang, 1998).

Citizen sociolinguistics: Public discussions and studies of Mohd Roslan Rosnon (2016) note that indigenous students actually face high dropout rates, low employment, persistent poverty, and enduring marginalization. Citizen voices interpret these policies as pseudo-equality: inclusive in rhetoric but exclusionary in practice. Although the government claims to integrate indigenous peoples into national development, these issues trace back to the 1951 Barnes Report, which institutionalized Malay and English as the primary languages of instruction, largely neglecting indigenous mother tongues. This colonial legacy of exclusion was never dismantled; instead, it was rearticulated within a Malay-dominant postcolonial framework, perpetuating structural marginalization.

Insight: The discourse of equality is mobilized as a homogenizing project that erodes minority linguistic identities, reinforcing colonial hierarchies in a new form. Even though the idea of diversity in many educational policies and projects seems to answer the call of "something for all" and to provide equal opportunities to all social members, but it is actually building an illusion or utopia for them because it perpetuates the idea of assimilation to homogenize varied minorities or ethnic groups and labels them

as the inferior particular objective members. Only by accepting the assimilation can they participate in an upward social mobility provided by a standardized mainstream education system. This reveals the fact that the indigenous people had never been treated with dignity since the time of colonial government and they are severely marginalized even after independence.

4.4 Bahasa Melayu versus Bahasa Malaysia

Case study: Online debates over Bahasa Melayu vs. Bahasa Malaysia (Reddit threads, blogs)

Description: For many Malaysians, the question of whether the national language should be called Bahasa Melayu or Bahasa Malaysia remains contentious. The word bahasa means "language," while Melayu denotes "Malay." Thus, Bahasa Melayu refers to the Malay language, whereas Bahasa Malaysia denotes the language of the Malaysian nation-state.

Raciolinguistic perspective: The shift in terminology reflects a political project. Bahasa Melayu emphasizes ethnic Malay identity, while Bahasa Malaysia signals a more inclusive, nation-wide language. This renaming encodes racialized hierarchies within national unity projects. As Fernandez (2016) observes, the Federal Constitution identifies the national language as Bahasa Melayu, but a 1997 Cabinet directive officially rebranded it as Bahasa Malaysia to promote unity. This semantic shift exemplifies the dual discourse system in action: the oscillation between ethnic specificity and national inclusivity.

Citizen sociolinguistics: Reddit users demonstrate awareness of these manipulations. Some insist on Bahasa Melayu as the authentic historical language, while others support Bahasa Malaysia as a pragmatic label for inclusivity. Citizens use both terms fluidly, reflecting a multilingual habitus shaped by daily negotiation.

A Reddit discussion on the issue reflects this nuanced public awareness:

> Reddit user A : Historically, the term Bahasa Melayu that was used but the issue of Bahasa Melayu vs. Bahasa Malaysia was brought up in mid-2007 in the parliament and by the end of 2007, the Kabinet, through Kementerian Penerangan decided to change the national language from Bahasa Melayu to Bahasa Malaysia to foster unity. So, technically speaking, the current "official" term for the national language is Bahasa Malaysia, but both Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Malaysia can used in official communication; Bahasa Melayu is used when referring to Malay culture/civilization.
> Sauce : https://ppuu.upm.edu.my/.../20180726155658RUJ_1...
> http://prpmv1.dbp.gov.my/Search.aspx?k=kabinet&d=10

> Reddit user B: ...What we have learnt at school is Bahasa Melayu. How we converse to each other on our everyday life is Bahasa Malaysia.

These comments reveal how Malaysians strategically negotiate linguistic identity: officially embracing Bahasa Melayu for its cultural legitimacy, yet employing Bahasa Malaysia as an inclusive, pragmatic medium.

Further discussion underscores the awareness of language's organic connection to identity and territory:

> Reddit user C: I mean the language exist before the country so why is this even something to talk about

> Reddit user D: You know, Bahasa Indonesia was formerly known as Bahasa melayu too. Maybe name it as Bahasa melayu Malaysia? Lol

Reddit user C: Well, they've changed it to bahasa indonesia so there's not really any need to add malaysia to thr BM name

Reddit user E: Bahasa Melayu Malaysia is acceptable, but also unnecessarily mouthful. Even Singapore's national language is "bahasa Melayu", not "bahasa Melayu Singapura."

Reddit user F: I can understand why it's called "Bahasa Melayu". And it's not like we're unique about this; after all, in Switzerland you don't speak "Swiss", yo speak "Swiss German". But I would still prefer it to be called "Bahasa Malaysia". I mean come on, calling it "Bahasa Melayu Malaysia" is a bit of a handful; at the same time, we need to distinguish our language from what's spoken in, for example, Indonesia.

Such exchanges demonstrate that Malaysians, shaped by multilingual lived experience, exhibit discursive flexibility and critical linguistic consciousness. Their multilingualism allows them to navigate, reinterpret, and resist-imposed ideologies. Far from passive recipients of state discourse, they actively appropriate and demystify the logic of the dual discourse system through every day linguistic practice. Insight: The dual discourse system is not hidden from the public; Malaysians consciously navigate and even exploit its contradictions. For Malaysians whatever race they are, since they have rich life experience in a multilingual society, their perception and language ideology are in a fluid condition, mobile and flexible because their multilingualism helps them to develop a multiple identity so that they can adapt and negotiate easily in an ecology which is in a constant change. The dual discourse system is not something new to them and they have learnt how to antagonize the racialized discourses and demystified certain ideology through the dual discourse system.

5.   Conclusion

In postcolonial societies, the project of nation-building is rarely straightforward. The Herderian model of "one people, one language, one nation" continues to exert strong influence on state ideologies, yet it often clashes with the historical realities of pluralism, migration, and colonial racial governance. Malaysia offers a striking case of this contradiction. How can a multiracial country to be 'one' as a nation and maintain 'multiple' at the same time? While officially positioned as a Malay Islamic nation, it is in practice sustained by a long history of multilingual and multicultural interaction. This paper has argued that this apparent contradiction is not simply a site of tension, but a dual discourse system that functions as a mechanism of governance, identity, and negotiation.

Despite ongoing instances of racialized discourse and discrimination, a colonial hierarchical logic continues to operate silently within the social fabric. The colonial legacy of racial classification and cultural valuation persists, internalized as common sense. This embedded hierarchy subtly informs aesthetic, moral, and social judgments, perpetuating invisible boundaries of superiority and inferiority even in a modern nation-state. The colonial hierarchical logic and formation have been adapted into the system.

Through a combined raciolinguistic and citizen sociolinguistic approach, the study traced how two discourses—Malay dominance and multilingual pluralism—operate simultaneously. The raciolinguistic lens revealed the colonial continuities embedded in Malaysia's language ideologies, showing how race and language remain naturalized categories that reproduce hierarchies of belonging. At the same time, citizen sociolinguistic data—from popular songs, online debates, and public commentary—

demonstrated how ordinary Malaysians actively recognize, navigate, and sometimes resist these discourses. This dual perspective illuminated not only how power operates from above, but also how citizens participate in reshaping discursive boundaries from below.

The findings suggest three broader insights for raciolinguistic scholarship:

First, the Malaysian case underscores the enduring impact of colonial racial orders on postcolonial language ideologies. The British policy of "divide and rule" institutionalized ethnic separation, while privileging Malay rulers and Islam as political anchors. These colonial hierarchies were not dismantled at independence; rather, they were reprogrammed into the nation's constitutional framework and educational system. The privileging of Bahasa Melayu as the national language, the constitutional status of Islam, and the categorization of bumiputra versus non-bumiputra all illustrate how colonial structures of inequality have been naturalized as common sense. From a raciolinguistic perspective, this highlights the necessity of viewing language ideologies not merely as cultural choices, but as legacies of racialized governance.

Second, the dual discourse system demonstrates how contradiction can function as a form of stability. On the surface, the discourses of Malay dominance and multilingual pluralism appear incompatible. Yet their coexistence allows the state to present an image of unity ("One Malaysia") while preserving entrenched hierarchies. This doublespeak is particularly evident in political rhetoric, where appeals to inclusivity coexist with exclusionary labels, such as "pendatang". Importantly, citizen voices reveal that Malaysians are not passive recipients of such discourses. Online discussions about Bahasa Malaysia versus Bahasa Melayu, or critiques of the erasure of indigenous groups in patriotic songs, show that citizens are aware of manipulation and negotiate these contradictions strategically. The coexistence of these discourses therefore reflects not paralysis, but a dynamic mechanism that both governs and is contested in everyday practice.

And third, this study demonstrates the value of integrating citizen sociolinguistics into raciolinguistic research. While raciolinguistics provides the theoretical tools to expose how race and language are co-naturalized in the service of hierarchy, citizen sociolinguistics captures the lived negotiations of these ideologies. YouTube comments, Reddit debates, and public opinion pieces may lack the polish of official discourse, but they reveal how ordinary people interpret, contest, and reshape linguistic ideologies in real time. This combination offers a more complete picture of how racialized language ideologies circulate and are re-evaluated in society.

The Malaysian case contributes to raciolinguistics by expanding its empirical reach beyond Euro-American contexts. Southeast Asia, with its histories of colonial entanglement and its deeply multilingual societies, provides fertile ground for examining how race and language intersect in ways that are both globally resonant and locally specific. More broadly, the framework of the dual discourse system can inform comparative studies of other postcolonial multilingual states, from Singapore and Indonesia to India and beyond.

At the same time, the study acknowledges its limitations. The data presented here highlight popular and critical voices, but do not sufficiently capture perspectives from Malaysians who strongly support Malay-dominant discourse. The study should therefore include broader data from pro-Malay discourses. Future research should seek to engage more directly with these positions, not to legitimize them uncritically, but to understand how they are rationalized and sustained within the dual discourse system. Additionally, more systematic ethnographic work could complement the citizen sociolinguistic approach, grounding online commentary in the complexities of lived experience.

This research mainly employs a dual methodological approach, including raciolinguistic framework and the citizen sociolinguistics. These two approaches enable a multidimensional examination of Malaysia's

dual discourse system to capture the dialectic between national ideology and grassroots linguistic practice. Future research should apply different methodologies to compare the findings.

In conclusion, Malaysia illustrates how raciolinguistic hierarchies do not always operate through singular, hegemonic discourses, but through parallel and competing logics that both unify and divide. The dual discourse system allows the state to manage diversity, citizens to negotiate belonging, and politicians to weaponize race for power. By theorizing this system as a mechanism rather than a contradiction, this paper contributes to raciolinguistics a new lens for understanding postcolonial multilingualism: one that recognizes both the persistence of colonial hierarchies and the agency of citizens in reimagining them.

References

1) Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.

2) Ansaldo, U. (2009). Contact languages: Ecology and evolution in Asia. Cambridge University Press, 18–23.

3) Chin, J. (2022). Racism towards the Chinese minority in Malaysia: Political Islam and institutional barriers. *The Political Quarterly*, 93(3), 451–459.

4) Fernandez, K. (2016, June 1). The history of Bahasa Melayu / Malaysia: The language of the Malay(sian) people. ExpatGo. https://www.expatgo.com/my/2016/06/01/history-bahasa-melayu-malaysia

5) Gaudart, H. (1987). A typology of bilingual education in Malaysia. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 8(6), 529–552.

6) Kua Kia Soong (2008). Racial conflict in Malaysia: against the official history. *Race & Class*, *49*(3), 33-53. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396807085900

7) Matheson-Hooker, V. (2021). *Writing a new society: Social change through the novel in Malay*. Brill, 90–91

8) Milner, A. (2011). *The Malays*. Wiley-Blackwell, 40–49

9) Mishra, P., & Tan, Y. (2021). Questioning the Herderian ideal. In Y. Tan & P. Mishra (Eds.), *Language, nations, and multilingualism: Questioning the Herderian ideal* Routledge, 1–14.

10) Mohd Roslan Rosnon (2016). Indigenous education policy in Malaysia: A discussion of normalization in schooling. *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 4(June), 25–32.

11) Parkaran, K. (2023, October 24). Hadi's call to woo non-Malays is political doublespeak. *Free Malaysia Today*. https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2023/10/24/hadis-call-to-woo-non-malays-is-political-doublespeak/

12) Rajakrishnan Ramasamy. (1993). Racial inequality and social reconstruction in Malaysia. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 28(3-4), 217–229.

13) Reddit (2024). Bahasa Melayu or Bahasa Malaysia as Putrajaya? https://www.reddit.com/r/malaysia/comments/1anw10v/bahasa_melayu_or_bahasa_malaysia_as_putrajaya/

14) Rosa, J., & Flores, N. (2023). Rethinking language barrier & social justice from a raciolinguistic perspective. *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, 152(3), 99–114. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_02020

15) Rustam A. Sani. (2008). Failed nation? Concern of a Malaysian nasionalist. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: SIRD.

16) Rymes, B. (2020). *How we talk about language: Exploring citizen sociolinguistics*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108770194

17) Skott, C. (Ed.). (2017). *Interpreting diversity: Europe and the Malay world*. Routledge, 2–5.

18) Tan, C. B. (2000). Ethnic identities and national identities: Some examples from Malaysia. *Identities*, 6(4), 441–480.

19) Wan Suhana binti Wan Sulong (2006). *Saudara* (1928–1941): Continuity and change in the Malay society. *Intellectual Discourse*, 14(2), 179–202.

20) Yang, P. K. (1998). Constitutional & legal provision for mother tongue education in Malaysia. In K. K. Soong (Ed.), *Mother tongue education of Malaysian ethnic minorities*. Dong Jiao Zong Higher Learning Centre. 26–71.