Language Standardization Problems of Malaysia set in Context

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Introduction: Underlying Variables

In any discussion of the problems associated with the so-called standardization of a language it is useful to make some distinctions and ask some pertinent questions at the outset; it is doubtful if the complete set of answers will be the same for any two communities, and doubtful therefore whether there are any universally-valid procedures to be laid down. The most one can hope to do is to try to understand the true nature of the problems and perhaps prevent waste of valuable resources in pursuing confused and/or impracticable ends. Perhaps these basic points will seem quite obvious; nevertheless, failure to make them does often lead to confusion.

Norms and Yardsticks

We must distinguish between a standard that is a norm, and a standard that is a yardstick. One can say, for example, "a vegetarian diet is fairly standard in the region" meaning that it is the normal thing to be encountered. Or one can say, "His behaviour was not up to standard" in the sense that somebody has failed a test. Frequently in the history of standardization a norm becomes converted into a yardstick or a test, but this will not necessarily happen, nor are yardsticks always based upon accepted norms. Nevertheless there is a strong tendency for communities to convert norms of behaviour into tests for membership of (or for rejection form) elites — that is, into yardsticks.

Speech and Writing

We must distinguish between spoken vernaculars, the writing down and reading of spoken vernaculars, and written language that has its own norms of representation, of lexicon and of syntax. The writing-down of the spoken vernacular involves developing a set of graphic conventions to replace the phonemic or morphophonemic conventions of speech in representing the same lexicon and syntax. Thus to learn to write down and read one's spoken vernacular can mean simply learning a set of conversion rules; to learn to read and write a written language involves bilingualism at least to some degree — the written language is another language. But a written-down vernacular will only be "standard" to the extent that the spoken vernacular is "standard", that is, the
norm, whereas a written language can be standard for speakers of many quite different languages or dialects, as is written Chinese, and may have to be learned more or less independently of the spoken language.

**Overt and Covert Attitudes**

We must distinguish between what people do, what they say they do, and what they think they ought to do. This is especially important in matters of language policy, where what teachers think they ought to do or are told they ought to do by a Ministry of Education, what they say they do and what they in fact can be observed to do are frequently three quite different things.

**What Need for a Standard?**

We must ask why it is thought that a standard language is necessary, what aims and ends it will serve. A well-known preface by the first English commercial printer, Caxton, pleading the case for a standard form of English, was inspired partly by Caxton’s commercial instincts and partly by a cultural inferiority complex on the part of people educated no longer in Latin or French but in their native vernacular, English — the feeling that English was not really a language in the full sense of the term but only a “vulgar tongue”, lacking a standard which could be held up as a model and taught prescriptively in the schools as Latin had been. The commercial motivation was as important as, and interwoven with, the latter consideration. It was far more expensive to set a book up in type than to employ scribes to write single copies, and so one had to print and sell a great many copies. The market therefore had to encompass a wider geographical region and a broader social spectrum than that for manuscripts. In any case a scribe could always adapt the language of whatever he was copying to local usage if necessary: The commercial considerations are of very great importance today, as we shall see.

A standard written language was already emerging in London in Caxton’s day, the so-called Chancery Standard — but it was the norm only among a highly-specialist group of educated State servants, using it for official purposes. Caxton needed a standard that every educated person in the country could read and write. He illustrated his argument for it however partly from an anecdote concerning diversity in the spoken vernaculars of his day. Again, the relationship between the two, spoken and written, will be seen to be of great importance today.

A great many communities in the post-colonial period for whom formerly a European language did duty as an educated standard, or norm, have felt the need to replace this with an educated standard of an indigenous language and have tried to evolve policies to that end. When I gave a seminar on this subject in Penang in 1982 one of my audience told me that, while it was interesting to hear examples of a slow process of standardization taking place over centuries in Britain, Malaysia could not wait that long. They had to produce a standard quickly. It is worth exploring in some detail why this need is felt, who feels it, and whether it is a need for a norm or for a yardstick, for a written-down standard vernacular or for a written language.