

## The identity in religious language in Malaysia

Munif Zarirruddin Fikri Nordin

(School of Languages, Civilization and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia)

**ABSTRACT:** In Malaysia, the Malay language is a national language in relation to its identity formation in a multi-ethnic country. However, there are some linguistic practices and texts which are of critical importance to religious understandings among different religious adherents, such as the issue of the use of the word 'Allah'. This paper discusses how the Malay language plays its role in religious understandings and how religious understandings have impacted on the political and intellectual spheres in Malaysia. The discussion is based on the pragmatic concept suggested by Crystal (1999) which views identity and language from the perspective of its users, and Russell's approach (1940) to identity and meaning in the philosophy of language. The data used in the discussion relate to a controversial issue of religious language in Malaysia. The discussion shows that although the Malay language plays its vital role in religious understandings, its role leaves unclear identity because the Malay language is too exclusive to the Muslim community. The discussion also shows that religious understandings have impacted on the political and intellectual spheres in Malaysia by taking into consideration the different views among Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) leaders over the use of the word 'Allah' by Christians.

**KEYWORDS:** Sociolinguistics, religious discourse analysis, language and religion

### I. INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the Malay language is a national language in relation to its identity formation in a multi-ethnic country. However, there are some linguistic practices and texts which are of critical importance to religious understandings among different religious adherents. Some pragmatic problems occur when religious meaning is understood differently by the Malay language users from different religions, such as in the issue of the use of the word 'Allah'. This issue enhances prejudice among the Muslim community against the spread of Christianity.

This paper aims to discuss how the Malay language plays its role in religious understandings and how religious understandings have impacted on the political and intellectual spheres in Malaysia. The discussion is based on the pragmatic concept suggested by Crystal [1] which views identity and language from the perspective of its users, and Russell's approach [2] to identity and meaning in the philosophy of language. The data used in the discussion relate to some controversial issues of religious language in Malaysia, that are, the use of the 'Allah' word by non-Muslims, the translation of the Bible into the Malay language, and the use of Islamic words in the Malay language by other religions.

### II. THE MALAY LANGUAGE AS A NATIONAL LANGUAGE

Although the Malay language is the language of the Malay ethnicity, it is the official language and national language of Malaysia. To arrive at this status, the Malay language has undergone a process of consolidation and development, particularly through legal channels, such as the Education Act 1961, the Language Act 1963, the Parliament Act in 1967 and the National Education Act 1971 [3].

In the Federal Constitution, the Malay language is given a clear legal status and position as a language that must be used for any purpose, including political, administrative, educational, economic, cultural and identity purposes. Article 152 states:

"The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in such script as Parliament may by law provide." [4].

However, the use of the Malay language in the context of religion still causes disagreement among people in Malaysia. Over the past decade, there have been several linguistic issues relating to the use of the Malay language as the language of religion, leading to some confusion in this regard, particularly involving Muslims and Christians. In Malaysia the ratio of followers of Islam and Christianity is six Muslims for every one Christian. As mentioned by Hunt [5], the Christian use of the Malay language represents, as it always has, a major point of contact between Christianity and Islam in Malaysia, and is thus a subject demanding serious and sustained attention.

According to data from the Department of Statistics of Malaysia [6], Islam is the religion that has the highest number of adherents in the country, that is, 61.3%, followed by Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), Hinduism (6.3%), Confucianism and Taoism (1.3%), and other religions (2.1%) as shown in Fig. 1.

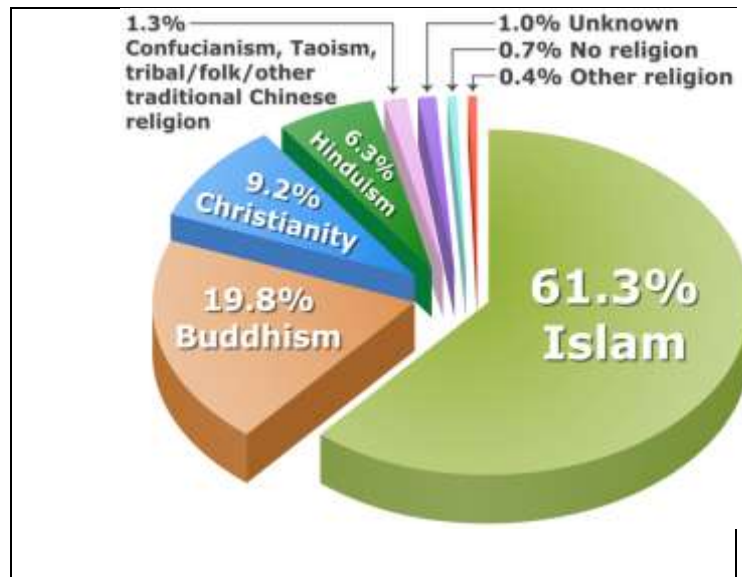


Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Malaysian Population by Religion [6]

Based on the composition of the religions in the statistics, the engagements to the linguistic issues and confusions give many advantages in favour of the majority of believers, namely Muslims. In dealing with the linguistic issues, the civilization, the history of religion, culture, etymological terms and epistemology of knowledge are often highlighted. In addition, the court had to be used to determine the 'truth' of the socio-pragmatics of the Malay language as the language of religion.

Religion (Islam) and language (Malay) are two identities which are often ascribed to the Malay ethnicity. In other words, the Malay ethnic identities are religion (Islam) and language (Malay). The symbiosis has had an influence and impact on the Malay language as a religious language, particularly in terms of the formation of the corpus of the language. Before the arrival of Hinduism and Islam, the Malay community's faith had been influenced by animism and dynamism, as can be detected in their religious language. The expressions that contributed to the vocabulary of the Malay language in the pre-Islamic period relate to the soul or spirit, magic and taboos. The characteristics of this animism obviously influenced the ancient stage (before the second century) and a small part of the stage of the ancient Malay language (from the second century to the thirteenth century).

### III. THE MALAY LANGUAGE AND RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS

Does language represent religious understandings of its users? Indeed, language is used together with intention and purpose. Therefore, in relation to religion, language is used by taking into consideration God, the holy book, sacred words, sacred places, worship, rituals, recitation, etc. Language is the medium which transfers the meaning from one to the others to express these religious elements and activities which have similar understanding and interpretation.

In some religious contexts in Malaysia, the Malay language is used doubtfully. Although the Malay language is the official language and national language of Malaysia, it does not represent all religions. The use of the Malay language is limited to the use of a specific religion, i.e. Islam. In other words, Islam has the privilege in using the Malay language by taking into consideration the Malaysian history and Malaysian constitution.

There are mainly two different religious understandings which are the Muslim understanding and the Christian understanding. From the perspective of Muslims, religious understanding while using the Malay language is based on the Muslim understanding. However, from the perspective of Christians, the use of the Malay language should be extended in the area of religion.

During the last five years, there have been at least three controversial issues relating to two religions; the use of the 'Allah' word by non-Muslims, the translation of the Bible into the Malay language, and the use of Islamic words in the Malay language by other religions.

The main challenge with regard to this language monopoly issue is to justify why the use of the Malay language as a religious language for religions other than Islam is not allowed. Article 152 of the Federal Constitution states that Malay is the national language for all activities. This includes use in a religious context, whether by Muslims or non-Muslims. Thus, there is no prohibition or restrictions on the use of the Malay language in the religious activities of any religion. In addition to Islam, the Malay language can be a medium for spreading other religions, including the language of the Bible.

This particular challenge exists as a result of the prejudice among the Muslim community against the spread of Christianity. History shows that there was indeed an attempt to Christianize Malay Muslims in Sarawak [7], and in Peninsular Malaysia [8]. Among the strategies used in this Christianization was the use of the Malay language.

Therefore, Islamic law is now applied to prevent the use of the Malay language as the language of other religions. In some states, the words mosques, pilgrimage, prayer, zakat and hajj have been designated as exclusive words by the enactment of Islamic state laws. Table 1 shows the words and phrases prohibited for non-Muslims in four states in Malaysia; Kedah, Selangor, Pahang and Penang.

Table 1: Words and Phrases Prohibited for Non-Muslims in Four States in Malaysia

	States	Words and Phrases Prohibited (#)	Enactments
.	Kedah	masjid, surau, mussala, musabaqah, zakat, fitrah, ulama, syariah, akhirat, baitullah, Allah, firman Allah, hadis, kaabah, kadi, ibadah, wali, azan, as-sunnah, mubaligh, qibiat, haji, hajjah, mufti, rasul, Quran, sheikh, karamah, tabligh, aulia', solat, khalifah, khutbah, fatwa, iman, dakwah, nabi, shahadah, lillahi, wahyu, subhanallah, Allahu akbar, Walillahihamd, alhamulillah, insyaallah, wallahi, lailahailallah, masyaallah, wabillahi, watallahi, assalamualaikum, auzubillahi, astagfirullah al azim, lahoula walaquata illabillahi laiyil azim (54)	Control and Restriction of the Propagation of Non-Islamic Religion (Kedah) Enactment 1988 (Enactment 11/1988) (2014 Amendment)
.	Selangor	Allah, firman Allah, ulama, hadith, ibadah, Kaabah, kadi, ilahi, wahyu, mubaligh, syariah, qiblat, haji, rasul, iman, dakwah, Injil, salat, khalifah, wali, fatwa, imam, sheikh, subhanallah, alhamdulillah, Allahu akbar, insya Allah, Astaghfirullahal 'Azim, tabarakallah, masyaAllah, La hawla wala quwwata illa billah (34)	Control and Restriction of the Propagation of Non-Islamic Religion (Selangor) Enactment 1988 (Enactment 1/1988)
.	Pahang	Allah, firman Allah, ulama, hadis, ibadat, Kaabah, kadi, ilahi, wahyu, mubaligh, syariah, kiblat, haj, mufti, rasul, iman, dakwah, injil, solat, khalifah, wali, fatwa, khutbah, nabi dan tabligh, subhanallah, Alhamdulillah, Lailahailallah, Walillailhamd, Allahu Akbar, Insya Allah, Astagfirullahal Azim, Tabaraka Allah, Masya Allah, La haula Walaquata Illabilahilaliyil Azim (35)	Control and Restriction of the Propagation of Non-Islamic Religion (Pahang) Enactment 1989 (Enactment 5/1989)
.	Penang	Allah, solat, surau, masjid, firman Allah, ulama, hadis, ibadah, Kaabah, qadhi, illahi, wahyu, mubaligh, syariah, kiblat, haji, mufti, rasul, iman, dakwah, wali, fatwa, imam, nabi, sheikh, khutbah, tabligh, akhirat, azan, al-Quran sunnah, auliya, karamah, syahadah, baitullah, surau, zakat fitrah, hajjah, taqwa dan soleh (40)	Control and Restriction of the Propagation of Non-Islamic Religion (Penang) Enactment 2004 (Enactment 48/2004)

The implementation of the enactments under Islamic law aims to control the propagation of non-Islamic religions among Muslims, including through the use of the Malay language. Although the legal provisions seem adequate and appropriate, their enforcement is subject to jurisdictional issues involving Islam, the Syariah Court and non-Muslims. At the state level, the issue is that legal enforcement applies only to Muslims because the Syariah Court cannot prosecute non-Muslims [9].

#### IV. RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS AND THE POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL SPHERES

In the Malaysian context, as the use of the 'Allah' word by non-Muslims, the translation of the Bible into the Malay language and the use of Malay Islamic words by other religions are vital issues in this multi-religious country. These issues have been tackled by some political parties and have been debated seriously by a number of scholars in Malaysian intellectual spheres.

There were two Muslim dominant parties involved particularly in the use of the 'Allah' word by non-Muslims, the translation of the Bible into the Malay language, that is the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS)) and United Malay National Organisation (UMNO).

In comparison, PAS solidarity especially among its leaders has been widely affected in tackling the issues while UMNO members have managed the issues effectively. At the PAS general assembly in June 2015, which was held in Kuala Selangor, a group of its members of parliament lost their posts in the PAS national committee election.

The group led by approximately half of its Members of the Malaysian Parliament launched a new party named the National Trust Party (*Parti Amanah Negara*), commonly known as *Amanah*. One of the reasons behind the establishment of this new party is the failure of the group in promoting the idea of liberalisation and inclusivism among PAS traditionalists, including allowing non-Muslims to use the 'Allah' word by non-Muslims as well as the translation of the Bible into the Malay language. Those members who established *Amanah* were labelled by the traditionalists as liberalists, traitors, parasites and enemies from within, Democratic Action Party (DAP) lackey and pro-secularism. *Amanah* contested in the 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election which was held in 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018 and won a number of parliamentary seats. Nine of its member of parliaments were appointed as cabinet members of the current government of Malaysia [10].

In this relation, religious understandings portraying the identity are measured by the language that is used. Most of the *Amanah* members are not formally from the Islamic studies background. They were educated in various fields of professional studies, like medicine, economics, architecture, engineering, business etc. They made an effort to learn Islam when they were PAS members.

In the Malaysian intellectual sphere, the issues of the use of the 'Allah' word by non-Muslims, the translation of the Bible into the Malay language, and the use of Malay Islamic words by other religions have divided Islamic discourse into three different groups of scholars; traditionalists, modernists and reformists. The identity of each group is in line with the identity analysed by Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah [11].

On the one hand, traditionalists led by *pondok* scholars maintain the authenticity of Islam according to their 'holier-than-thou' attitude with the past, especially the Prophet's time. Therefore, not much tolerance was allowed for Muslim relations with non-Muslims, in particular, Christians. From their point of view, the Christian mission must be kept apart from the Muslim community [12].

However, modernists choose an inclusive approach by freeing life from conservative values and equalizing all religions as similar by associating those values to modernism and Western liberalism. From the traditionalists' perspective, for instance, Sisters in Islam (SIS) is considered one of the intellectual organisations which deal with modernism. The modernists who form the majority of Malay Muslims as mentioned by Hussin Mutalib [13] do not want an Islamic state for Malaysia.

On the other hand, reformists propose a modest reform through the harmonization of conservative and modern values. The harmonization allows Muslims and non-Muslims to engage with tolerance in appropriate matters in order to improve their quality of life.

In this regard, the identity and religious understanding of these three groups can be identified from the language they use. SIS's mission, for instance, is to promote the principles of gender equality, justice, freedom and dignity in Islam and empower women to be advocates for change [14]. The identity and understanding represented by SIS are in line with the teachings of Islam in promoting a good quality of life.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The discussions show that although the Malay language plays its vital role in religious understandings, the role leaves an unclear identity because the Malay language is too exclusive to the Muslim community. It is quite sensitive to discuss the issue openly, especially within the Muslim community. For them, Islamic words and phrases are sacred and the use by others is considered propagation. To control the language, Islamic law was implemented in order to prevent the propagation of non-Islamic religions among Muslims.

The discussions also show that religious understandings have impacted on the political and intellectual spheres in Malaysia, particularly from 2015 until 2018, by taking into consideration the different views among Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) leaders over the use of the word 'Allah' by Christians. The group of modernists who by majority bring into being the contemporary identity of Islam in Malaysia have proven themselves as progressive Muslims by winning most of their contested seats in the 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election and will be again the playmakers in the identification of religious language.

## VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by Malaysian government through Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (Ref: FRGS/1/2014/SSI01/UUM/02/1).

## REFERENCES

- [1]. D. Crystal, Pragmatics, in A. Bullock & S. Trombley (Eds.), *The new Fontana dictionary of modern thought*, 3 (London: HaperCollinsPublishers, 1999) 678.
- [2]. B. Russell, *An inquiry into meaning and truth* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1940).
- [3]. D.M. Abdul Rashid and J.M. Amat, *Sosiolinguistik dan bahasa Melayu* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2011).
- [4]. *Federal constitution* (Kuala Lumpur: International Law Book Services, 2001).
- [5]. R. Hunt, The history of the translation of the Bible into Malay, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 52(1), 1989, 35-56.
- [6]. Department of Statistics Malaysia, *Distribution of Malaysian population by religion*, 2010, Accessed 20 January 2018 from [http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download\\_Population/files/census2010/Taburan\\_Penduduk\\_dan\\_Ciri-Asas\\_Demografi.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-Asas_Demografi.pdf)
- [7]. A. Nordi, *Kolonialisme dan kristianisasi Melayu di Sarawak 1850-1950* (Kota Kinabalu: Penerbit Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 2013).
- [8]. A.R. Ismail, Gerakan missionari Kristian di Semenanjung Malaysia, in A.R. Ismail and O. Mohd Nasir (Eds), *Islam: Cabaran dan isu semasa*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991) 1–25.
- [9]. M.K. Zuliza, N. Zaini, S. Mohd al-Adib Samuri and M.Z. Mat Noor, Legal provisions and restrictions on the propagation of non-Islamic religions among Muslims in Malaysia, *Kajian Malaysia*, 31(2), 2013, 1–18.
- [10]. *Amanah*, 2018, Accessed 1 August 2018, from <https://amanah.org.my/>
- [11]. H.A. Abdul Rahman, *Pemikiran Islam di Malaysia: Sejarah dan aliran* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1998).
- [12]. L.K. Hing, Christians in Malaysia: Early efforts at inter-civilizational engagements, in K.S. Nathan (Ed), *Religious Pluralism in Democratic Societies*, (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Association for American Studies, 2007) 61–74.
- [13]. M. Hussin, Religious diversity and pluralism in Southeast Asian Islam: The experience of Malaysia and Singapore, in K.S. Nathan (Ed), *Religious Pluralism in Democratic Societies*, (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Association for American Studies, 2007) 35–60.
- [14]. Sisters in Islam, 2018, *Sisters in Islam mission*. Accessed on 15 July, from <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/>