

Do we need to be so critical?

Augmenting language policy research through posthumanism

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This paper argues that critical inquiry, as a popular approach in sociolinguistics, may fail to capture the breadth of minority group experiences under a nation's language policy (Albury, in press), and shows this in the case of Malaysia. Indian and Chinese minorities have long called Malaysia home, but Malay ethnonationalism has structured social policy – at least until the 2018 shift in Malaysian politics - on the basis that Malaysia is ethnic Malay land, Islam the religion, and Bahasa the sole national language. Language policy therefore privileges ethnic Malays, and minority rights are restricted to primary education in Mandarin or Tamil (Gill, 2013). The Malaysian situation – like language policy generally – has attracted critical perspectives with a focus on power and oppression (Albury, 2018; Coluzzi, 2017). Nonetheless, Malaysia remains intensely multilingual. It is perplexing that faced with linguistic hegemony, non-Malays have not typically shifted to Bahasa.

To understand multilingualism on the ground contrary to policy, the paper draws on quantitative data about the multilingual practices of 78 Chinese- and Indian-Malaysian youths, and on their meta-commentary about those practices. Analysis shows that critical theory may indeed be best placed to understand the Indian-Malaysian youths' multilingualism and their bias against Bahasa. Language policy may be so ethnonationalist that it causes them to disassociate from ethnic Malays. However, Chinese-Malaysian multilingualism, plus the pedestalisation of Mandarin rather than Bahasa as the community's lingua franca, is better explained through posthumanist applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2018). Chinese-Malaysian language choices were interdependent on material and immaterial affordances within the community, rather than in dialectic relationship to the power structures that preoccupy critical inquiry. This shows that language policy research ought not to be confined by the epistemology of critical theory, and that posthumanism helps to reveal a much broader diversity in human experiences under a state's language policy.

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