

Other languages can enrich Bahasa

I WAS recently invited to speak to a group of would-be diplomats and administrators attending a course at the newly-established Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

It was gratifying to note that as we worry about the declining standard of English among our people, a group of young civil servants is making a real effort to master and use the language. Being future diplomats and administrators, they must have a good command of English.

The institute also offers courses in several foreign languages for the benefit of trainees.

I visited a similar institute in Santiago, Chile, in 1990 when covering the visit to that country and Argentina by Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghafar Baba.

Even in Chile, where the national language is Spanish, government leaders and diplomats use English in foreign and trade relations.

So why all the fuss about Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad speaking English during interviews with the Indonesian Press and television stations at the recent Non-Aligned Movement summit in Jakarta?

It is almost a rule with the Prime Minister that if a reporter asks him a question in Malay, he replies in Malay. If he is questioned in English, especially by a foreign correspondent, Dr Mahathir answers in English. Now, what is so wrong about that?

If the issue at hand is that too many TV advertisements are in English, it is

injudicious for the parties involved in the debate to confuse the matter with the conduct of foreign relations.

By all means, fight the TV stations if they indeed carry too many advertisements in English. I cannot say if they are actually doing this, but what I will say is that they do air too many advertisements (regardless of the language) — even during the news.

It appears that some of the people involved in the renewed debate on Bahasa Melayu have allowed themselves to be consumed by emotions to the point that they become petty.

What is so wrong if Dr Mahathir or any other leader speaks in English at international forums? Have we not been able to make ourselves understood and respected by the world by speaking in the language most widely understood?

There is little need to defend Dr Mahathir here. If we know him well enough, we ought not to doubt his commitment to the national language.

After all, who put the National Education Policy (in which Bahasa Melayu is the medium of instruction), on its current footing if not Dr Mahathir who was Education Minister in the early years of the policy's implementation?

And we have to admit that his command of Bahasa Melayu is better than that of some of us!

It is the question of being realistic. At the Asean summit in Singapore in January, Dr Mahathir spoke in English at the opening ses-

sion. President Suharto spoke in Bahasa Indonesia.

Everybody at the summit, including President Suharto, understood what Dr Mahathir said. But only those who read the English translation of President Suharto's speech understood what he said.

SPEAKING of Bahasa Melayu, I am reminded of the fun-filled *Bulan Bahasa Kebangsaan* in the 1960s when all kinds of competitions were held at school, district, state and national levels to promote the use of the language.

In a way, I was the product of the National Language Month. In 1966, I represented Kedah in an oratory contest at the *Bulan Bahasa* final at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in Kuala Lumpur.

I came out third and received a prize from the Raja Permaisuri Agong.

But the best part was spending two weeks at the somewhat notorious Eastern Hotel off Jalan Dang Wangi (then Campbell Road) and receiving a daily stipend of \$15 from the State Government.

Until it was torn down for redevelopment a few years ago, Eastern Hotel was well-known for its lively nightclub.

For 30 sen, you could choose your most desirable *joget* girl for either a slow number, when you could hold her as close to you as possible, or for a very energetic *twist* which was as good as doing a lap around the football field.

As for the dancing girls, they all looked desirable in

OTHER THOTS

By A. Kadir Jasin

the dimly-lit, hot and steamy cabaret. It was in a place such as this that boys began their journey to manhood. I am not saying that it was how mine started, but it was close enough.

It was also during this period that I got to know journalist Jamaluddin Ali, or Abang Jamal as we call him, who was then working for the now defunct *Eastern Sun* newspaper, and became interested in journalism. Thank you, Abang Jamal.

WE cannot leave the enrichment of the national language to the *pejuang bahasa* alone. In all frankness, we must admit that not all *pejuang bahasa* can contribute to the enrichment of the language.

Not only is their field of knowledge restricted, many are conversant only in *Bahasa Melayu*.

If non-linguistic and literary people like scientists, business managers, engineers and doctors have not participated in the process, our national language would not have become what it is today.

I remember that when *Bernama* started its economic news service in the early 1970s, we literally had to invent terms for the national language bulletin.

All true Malaysians must be *pejuang bahasa*. But this does not mean that we should promote the national

language by suppressing other languages. On the contrary, we should use our expertise in foreign languages to enrich the national language.

How can we make it a language of knowledge if we are competent only in it? How are we to acquire knowledge in other languages? Would *Bahasa Melayu* be what it is today if the language fighters of the past rejected Sanskrit, Arabic, Portuguese and Dutch?

Ironically, it is the *pejuang bahasa* themselves who are often carried away by the use of foreign words in the national language. A perfectly accurate Malay word like *mutu* (quality) is being neglected in favour of *kualiti*.

Of course, almost every young Malay believes that *frus* is a perfectly correct English word which is superior to such Malay equivalents as *kecewa*, *hampa* and *merana*.

What *frus* has that *kecewa*, *hampa* and *merana* do not is the destructive force. In those days, a young man *merana* because his sweetheart was married off to another man. To console himself, he wrote poems and went on a *merantau*. He travelled as far away as he could to forget her.

Today's youth, especially Malays, seldom *kecewa*, *hampa* or *merana*. They

frus. When they *frus*, they don't write poems or go on a *merantau*. They travel to the psychedelic world of *dadah* from which very few ever return.

Even university graduates and ITM diploma holders who came for job interviews were convinced that there is such a word as *frus* in English.

CITY Hall has been instructed to sell the 23 Volvo 240 GLTs purchased for its officers who are not eligible to such a car or any car at all.

Its director-general, Datuk Noordin Abdul Razak, would not say who gave the order to sell.

I have refrained from making any comment on the Volvo issue beyond stating the *New Straits Times'* policy on the protection of sources of information.

I was compelled to make that statement in the Aug 30 column because the police had indicated interest in interviewing our reporters who were involved in highlighting the purchase of the cars and the trip to Casablanca by City Hall officials.

The police had first indicated their intention directly to us and later through a lawyer we engaged to advise us on the matter.

We decided to deal through our lawyer instead of the usual friendly, unofficial basis because we viewed the matter very seriously in light of a police report alleging we had breached the Official Secrets Act by reporting the issues.

The report was made by the leader of Batu Ummu Youth division Zainuddin

Othman on Aug 21. He alleged that an officer of the Auditor-General's Office had contravened the OSA by speaking to reporters of our afternoon newspaper, *The Malay Mail*.

In any case, we were more than willing to co-operate with the police as long as it was in accordance with the rules.

This is nothing new. We co-operate with the police all the time because we share a common interest in the maintenance of law and order.

We co-operate with the police often by not printing certain information that we have until such time that they have completed their investigations.

In some cases, information which we consider prejudicial to the interests of the country is not published at all.

For example, several months ago, we received a telephone call from a person claiming to represent a group (which was later privately confirmed to us by the police as a splinter group of the Communist Party of Malaya), threatening to bomb a public place in Kuala Lumpur.

We not only reported the matter to the police but published nothing about it either at that time or when the place in question was badly damaged in a major fire some months later.

If we are the irresponsible "vultures" that some people make us out to be, we would have mentioned the earlier threat we had received when the place caught fire. The fire and the threat might not have been con-

nected, but it would have made good reading.

It is never an easy decision. Just suppose the threat was real and was carried out. We would have been guilty of not reporting it to warn the public to stay away from the area.

I feel that I need to clarify this matter because the Aug 30 comment was picked up by international news agencies and published by newspapers in many parts of Asia.

The report and subsequent follow-ups gave the impression that something extraordinary had just happened in the Malaysian media scene, that some kind of Press campaign had been waged against Tan Sri Elyas Omar.

I personally received several letters condemning the Press. A few alleged that the NSTP Group was used by "enemies" of Tan Sri Elyas.

I wish I could highlight some specific allegations, but since the writers had not dared to reveal their identities I do not feel it is justified to print them.

Suffice to say that the Press is not above the law. Journalists are not free to report whatever they like. Least of all, they cannot expect to make baseless accusations and get away with it.

Journalists and editors are taken to court all the time for allegedly defaming, libelling and slandering people and organisations. If the aggrieved parties are reluctant to sue, the lawyers will encourage them.