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978-1-107-14853-6 - Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia

Rachel Leow

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## Taming Babel

Taming Babel sheds new light on the role of language in the making of modern postcolonial Asian nations. Focusing on one of the most linguistically diverse territories in the British empire, Rachel Leow explores the profound anxieties generated by a century of struggles to govern the polyglot subjects of British Malaya and postcolonial Malaysia. The book ranges across a series of key moments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which British and Asian actors wrought quiet battles in the realm of language: in textbooks and language classrooms; in dictionaries, grammars, and orthographies; in propaganda and psychological warfare; and in the very planning of language itself. Every attempt to tame Chinese and Malay languages resulted in failures of translation, competence, and governance, exposing both the deep fragility of a monoglot state in polyglot milieux, and the essential untameable nature of languages in motion.

Rachel Leow is a lecturer in modern East Asian history at the University of Cambridge.

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# Taming Babel

*Language in the Making of Malaysia*

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Rachel Leow

*University of Cambridge*



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*to my parents and sisters  
my favourite Malaysians*

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*And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.*

*And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.*

*And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.*

*And they said, Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.*

*And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.*

*And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.*

*Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.*

*So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.*

*Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.*

Genesis 11.1–10, The Tower of Babel

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## Preface

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*I do not like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work – the chance to find your self.* – Joseph Conrad

When I look back on the last seven years, it seems both improbable and inevitable that the tangle of paths I have taken should converge in this book. Like all things that move through time, this work is layered with the spirits and circumstances of its making. I first began to think about this project in 2008, and though I did not see it at the time, that year was a crucible of optimism: of youth and personal growth, of global and national politics. The thirteenth general elections in Malaysia saw an unprecedentedly poor showing by the authoritarian, racist ruling coalition which has governed almost unchallenged for over forty years. People spoke of a tsunami of change, of desert rain flooding the parched, ossified political landscape. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, another entrenched racial order appeared to be toppling. Barack Obama's election to the presidency of the United States was a momentous event for the world as much as for America, a country still nursing wounds from a long history of slavery.

I came into political awareness in the years leading up to these defining events of 2008, and I witnessed both, neither in America nor in Malaysia, but from a distance as a first-year PhD student at Cambridge in England. Through the shiny lenses of youthful optimism, made even shinier by what Benedict Anderson might have meant by 'long-distance nationalism', it seemed to me at least possible that the travails of racial discrimination were coming to an end, and that a new liberal era was upon us. While I was in Singapore and Malaysia in 2009 to conduct fieldwork, I witnessed friends, colleagues, and concerned citizens realigning to this new rush of hope, establishing newspapers, think tanks, political organizations, online media portals, non-governmental initiatives – striving to create institutions for what many hoped would be a new post-racial political order in the making. It was in this environment that I began to think, somewhat naively, about what a history beyond race could look

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like for a country that lived and breathed it, and seemed constantly on the verge of dying by it. I wanted to write a history acutely sensitive to constructivity: a post-racial history for a post-racial political order.

This book was thus conceived in a spirit of youthfulness, possibility, and hope, which, seven years later, seems much harder to recover. The language of race in Malaysia did not sink: it was kept afloat in a mire of corruption, political in-fighting, religious fanaticism, state repression, and systemic fearmongering. In America the impossibly high hopes which accompanied Obama's election had nowhere to go but down, and they were weighted firmly to the seabed by the most severe economic recession in living memory. By that time, I was a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard, and I watched this deflation up close. Then, in Malaysia, Barisan Nasional was re-elected in 2013 to a larger popular mandate, and I began to despair that 2008 looked more like a brief eddy in a pond, instead of the first frothings from a tsunami of change. At the time of writing, the leader of the multi-ethnic opposition front which rode to victory in 2008 is in jail (again) for sodomy; the front itself has dissolved; and the ruling coalition is mired in the largest corruption scandal in the country's history, allegedly involving the transfer of \$700 million to the personal bank account of its re-elected prime minister.

And yet, if there is anything that a long view shows us, it is that history is full of oscillations, openings, and closures that, in hindsight, are neither inevitable nor permanent. In this sense, it seems fitting that what emerged from this cauldron of optimism and despair, of change and continuity, was essentially a history of dialectic. The march of time presses on; generations turn and ages pass. In the year that I submitted this manuscript, nearly all the great Asian nationalists of the mid-twentieth century have passed into posterity, and new spaces yawn open for futures to come. There is always hope. My own hope is that this book might help to clarify for Malaysians where they have been, where they could yet go, and, perhaps, how they might get there.

I have incurred numerous debts in the course of this project. The research for this book was made possible through the generous support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Tunku Abdul Rahman Scholarship Fund at St Catharine's College, Cambridge. I am grateful to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore (ISEAS), which hosted me as a research associate during my fieldwork year in 2008–9, and to Ambassador Kesavapany and Mrs Y. L. Lee for making this affiliation possible and painless. The National History Center in Washington DC, whose annual Decolonization seminar, which I attended in 2010, provided a rich space for discussion and archival exploration. I also received further support from the Center of History and Economics (CHE) at

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I owe a great deal to the staff of the archives and libraries I have visited. In Singapore, Ang Seow Leng and Timothy Pwee lent invaluable assistance at the Singapore National Library, and Miss Ch'ng Kim See and the staff at the ISEAS library were unfailingly generous with their time and advice. I am also grateful for assistance rendered by staff at the libraries of the National University of Singapore, the National Archives of Singapore, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka library in Kuala Lumpur, and the University of Malaya library in Petaling Jaya. In the United Kingdom, I have spent many happy hours at the Cambridge University Library, the Center for South Asian Studies (CSAS) library at Cambridge, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) library in London, the National Archives at Kew, and the British Library (BL). I am grateful to the staff of the Kroch library at Cornell, who alerted me to the existence of the many Malay political dictionaries in their collections, and to Ian Ralby and Aaron Ralby for making my stay at Cornell possible. I thank, in particular, both Rachel Rowe and Kevin Greenbank at CSAS for rendering assistance on numerous occasions over the duration of my PhD, and Annabel Teh Gallop and Graham Hutt for their vast knowledge of the Malay and Chinese language collections available in the BL.

I have learned so much from the many people I have been in conversation with over these seven years: so many that I fear that I run the risk of omission.

My many visits to Singapore and Malaysia have been marked by the greatest warmth, hospitality, and friendship, and I thank the many colleagues and friends there who made my times there memorable and who so readily indulged my curiosity and ignorance: the late Cheah Boon Kheng, Terence Chong, Pak Chong (Chong Ton Sin), Chua Ai Lin, Leon Comber, Ding Choo Ming, Michael Fernandez, Mark Frost, Goh Jing Pei, Dave Henkel, Hui Yew Foong, Neil Khor, Paul Kratoska, Raman Krishnan, Kwa Chong Guan, Lee Hock Guan, Lee Kam Hing, Loh Kah Seng, Loh Wei Leng, Sumit Mandal, Abidin Mukhriz, Farish Noor, Ong Kian Ming, Ooi Kee Beng, Will Quah, Quek Kiok Chiang, Kumar Ramakrishna, Rohani Rustam, Tansen Sen, N. Sivasothi, S. Airani, Jacqueline Ann Surin, Leo Suryadinata, Tan Chee Beng, Nathaniel Tan, Geoff Wade, Wang Gungwu, Wee Wan Ling, Danny Wong and Wong Siew Lyn. William Gwee and his wife shared with me their house, tea, time,

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memories, and astonishing collections of Baba historical materials. I also wish to thank, in particular, Farish Noor for the many wonderful conversations we had during my stay in Singapore, which helped shape my political and historical perspective at a formative period in my research; and Sumit Mandal, with whom I have shared many lines of thinking over the years, and who has figured so deeply in my personal, political, and intellectual development.

I am beyond fortunate to have enjoyed the intellectual environments of both Cambridge and Harvard in the process of writing this book. I owe a great deal of my intellectual makeup to the many historians, colleagues, and friends at Cambridge with whom my ideas have been refined in conversation and mutual exchange, and whose continuing friendship and collegial support over the years have been a source of enormous strength for me: Sunil Amrith, Andrew Arsan, Alexandra Cox, Lucy Delap, Leigh Denault, Zoe Groves, Emma Hunter, Leslie James, Andrew Jarvis, Simon Layton, Su Lin Lewis, Daniel-Joseph Macarthur-Seal, Sunil Purushotham, Andrew MacDonald, Kate Peters, Pallavi Raghavan, John Slight, Mishka Sinha and Kirsty Walker. I am grateful to the Cambridge History Faculty, St Catharine's College, and Murray Edwards College for providing unparalleled environments for my continuing development as a scholar and, now, as a colleague. I cannot thank Amanda Falgas-Ravry, Victor Falgas-Ravry, Peter Fremlin, Chris Eagle, and Adam Myers enough for the part they played, and continue to play, in my development as a scholar and human being during my time at Cambridge.

At Harvard, I could not have asked for a richer post-doctoral experience, and my thanks go to the many people I met there for their support, their unfailingly astute conversation and critique. At CHE, Emma Rothschild was and continues to be a pillar of support, encouragement, mentorship, and intellectual guidance, as well as a model scholar. I am incredibly grateful to her, as well as others at CHE, including Jessica Barnard, Emily Gauthier, Inga Huld Markan, Jennifer Nickerson, and Amy Price; my fellow prize fellows Johannes Haushofer, Ben Golub, Noah Millstone, and Alexia Yates; and the many other wonderful graduate students and fellows I met in my time there. For making my time in North America memorable and full of learning and opportunity, I thank my fellow Asianists Jennifer Altehenger, Luke Bender, Felix Boecking, Javier Cha, Gail Chen, Brent Ho, Amali Ibrahim, Miriam Kingsberg, Konrad Lawson, and Ian Miller, as well as Cyrus Chen, Colin Klein, and Esther Sunkyoung-Klein. I am also indebted to the compadres who made my life in Cambridge, Massachusetts the greatest of delights, who constantly challenged and enriched my thinking from perspectives well

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outside my own discipline: Robert Bao, Michael Baym, Britt Harter, Odile Harter, Jon Kelner, Sophie Klein, and Abby Spinak.

Many scholars have supported me in my work, and have given generously of their time and expertise. I would not be where I am today without the unstinting encouragement I received from Maxine Berg and Colin Jones in my initial bid for graduate school. I am grateful to Ulrich Kratz at SOAS for taking fewer than ten lessons to make the world of Jawi script legible to me, which opened up crucial avenues in my research. David Armitage, Sugata Bose, Fred Cooper, Robert Cribb, Caroline Hau, Audrey Kahin, Anthony Reid, Ronit Ricci, Eric Tagliacozzo, and Hans van de Ven have provided encouragement and kindness over the years. Richard Drayton, Emma Rothschild, and Jeff Wasserstrom have been unflagging advocates of my research and professional trajectory, and I could not have done what I have without their support.

Without question, I owe my greatest intellectual debt to Tim Harper, who has been from the beginning my most sympathetic, critical, and discerning audience. He is a model historian, advisor, teacher, colleague, and friend, and this book could not have been written without his wisdom and guidance. I am also profoundly grateful for the support and mentorship of the late Chris Bayly, and profoundly sad at his untimely death. His comments on the original dissertation, and those of William Gervase Clarence-Smith, offered crucial leads and avenues for revision.

I have shared parts of this book at a number of seminars and conferences, and I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to do so: in particular, at the prize fellow seminars at Harvard, CSAS at Cambridge, the Tufts history faculty, the Oxford global and imperial history seminar, the Institute for Historical Research in London, and the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. I am grateful to David Arnold, Joya Chatterji, Kris Manjapra, and many others at these seminars who offered thoughtful criticism and probing questions. I was also delighted to attend the International Seminar on Decolonization at the National History Center in Washington DC, and I thank Wm. Roger Louis, Dane Kennedy, Philippa Levine, and Jason Parker for the opportunity to share my work in such spirited company.

Several people have read drafts. I thank both Joachim Kurtz and James Siegel for reading and responding with grace and speed to what eventually became Chapter 3. Ruth Craggs and Claire Wintle were instrumental in helping me articulate the key themes of what became Chapter 5, a version of which appears as a stand-alone chapter in their forthcoming *Cultures of Decolonisation* (2016). Geoff Wade has critiqued every piece of writing I have ever sent him with an energy and incisiveness I have rarely found elsewhere. Andrew Marble offered

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meticulous comments at various stages throughout this project, and has always been an exemplary editor. Sarah Allen, Justine Cohen, Peter Fremlin, Mark Frost, Sumit Mandal and 'Abidin Mukhriz have read and commented generously and insightfully on various versions. Sarah provided crucial administrative assistance in the final stages of the project, and I am grateful to Adrienne Leow and André Rosendo for help with my maps. I am also grateful to Lucy Rhymer and Rosalyn Scott at Cambridge University Press for their enthusiasm and support, and for the two anonymous reader reports, whose interventions have greatly improved the manuscript.

To my parents, and my sisters Kristel, Florentyna, and Adrienne, I owe many more than seven years of unconditional love, support, and tolerance for my long periods of absence and inattention, as well as occasional photocopying, bibliographic, map drawing, and logistical help. This they gave freely, despite what I am sure must appear to them, at times, as a peculiar vocational choice. They are more than any person could ever wish for from a family, and more than anything, this book is for them.

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## Note on the Text

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A text featuring so many different languages will inevitably demand a fair bit of the reader. I have provided glosses for non-English words only in their first appearance, and provide brief definitions in a glossary at the end of the book. Naturally, I have retained the original spelling when quoting from the primary sources. However, in transliterating Chinese languages and Arabic-script Malay, I have, on the whole, used the most common form of romanization and transliteration, which is to say *pinyin* and the standard form of Malay and Indonesian spelling prevailing today. This has been a difficult choice where the text in question is clearly meant to be enunciated in a Chinese language other than putonghua (Mandarin), such as Cantonese or Hakka, and I hope that the reader will forgive my (alas) somewhat ironic capitulation to the hegemony of *pinyin* in making the transliteration decisions I have. Malay, Indonesian, and Chinese names appear in their modern forms unless they are quoted in a source, or where failing to do so would hinder common understanding: thus, Sukarno rather than Soekarno, but Chiang Kai-shek rather than Jiang Jieshi.

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## Abbreviations

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ABCFM	American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions
AFPU	Army Film and Photographic Unit
API	Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (Generation of Aware Youth)
ASAS 50	Angkatan Sasterawan '50 (Generation of the Writers of the 1950s)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BMA	British Military Administration
BMBC	British Malayan Broadcasting Corporation
BN	Barison Nasional
BTN	Biro Tatanegara (National Civics Bureau)
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CFU	Crown Film Unit
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPM	Communist Party of Malaya
CT	'Communist Terrorists'
DBKK	Dewan Bahasa dan Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (Singapore)
DBP	Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Federation)
DPR	Department of Public Relations
EIC	East India Company
EIS	Emergency Information Services
EU	European Union
FEB	Far Eastern Bureau
FMS	Federated Malay States
HKU	Hong Kong University
JIPC	Joint Information and Propaganda Committee
Kantoor	Kantoor voor Chineesche Zaken, Office for Chinese Affairs
KITA	Gerakan Kiri Tanahair (Homeland Leftwing Movement)
KL	Kuala Lumpur
Komisi	Komisi Bahasa Indonesia, Indonesian Language Commission (Batavia)
KMT	Kuomintang/Guomindang

xviii Abbreviations

Lembaga	Lembaga Bahasa Indonesia, Institute of Indonesian Language (Medan)
LMS	London Missionary Society
MBRAS	Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society
MCS	Malayan Civil Service
MFU	Malayan Film Unit
MPAJA	Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army
MSS	Malayan Security Service
NLAF	National Language Action Front
PAP	People's Action Party (Singapore)
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)
PERKASA	Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia
PKMM	Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (Malay National Party)
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat (People's Justice Party)
POW	Prisoners of war
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PR	Public Relations
PRO	Public Relations Office
RAH	Raja Ali Haji (1808–1873)
SCA	Secretariat for Chinese Affairs
SEAC	Southeast Asia Command
SEATO	Southeast Asian Treaty Organization
SEP	Surrendered Enemy Personnel
SITC	Sultan Idris Training College
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies (London)
SOE	Special Operations Executive
SS	Straits Settlements
SSE	Straits Settlements Establishments
TES	That Effing Show
UM	University of Malaya
UMNO	United Malay National Organization
UMS	Unfederated Malay States
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VOC	Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company)
Za'aba	Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad (1895–1973)



Map 1. Malay peninsula.



Map 2. South East Asia.