

Empowering the Humanities: A Focus on Language Studies¹

Keynote Address

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Abstract. The division of knowledge in universities into the Arts or the Humanities on the one hand and the Sciences on the other, has given rise to the perception that the latter are more important in nation building compared to the former, as seen in the emphasis given by the authorities in the training of expertise, budgeting of research projects and planning of manpower.

This paper foregrounds the importance of the Humanities as an academic discipline in a well balanced programme of nation building. This significance lies in the Humanities' focus on the person as a human being, and arising from that the human civilisation. In order to change the world-view of the authorities the disciplines in the Humanities have to empower themselves through collaboration in their research as there is a great deal of overlapping between them in terms of data and methodology, trends of thought in application of theory, not to mention the basic concepts which flow from one discipline to the other. Collaborating rather than isolating is a powerful method in the generation of new ideas for the development of society. Illustrations are taken from research in linguistics.

Keywords and phrases: generating ideas, research projects, collaboration

Introduction

We are guided by the Introduction in the Conference Brochure which is not only well written but is also very clear in the conference objectives and subdivision of the Humanities. The subdivision given has made my work in preparing this address easier, because Linguistics, my field of specialisation, is included in the Humanities.

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People of my generation who had had their university education in the 1950s and 1960s and even those who came much later in the 1970s and 1980s are more familiar with the division of the branches of knowledge into two main categories: the Arts and the Sciences. As we progress on in our search and attainment of knowledge, we find that the category known as "the Arts" is indeed a mixture of almost everything that concerns people and the growth of civilisation. This means that its focus of study is not on the human being just with its physiology, and the physical and natural environment that surrounds the human population, but rather the human being as a person.

A person has a mind, and with it language and the faculty of thought. It is this intrinsic ability of *linguaging* (if I may be allowed to use this word) and *thinking* that engenders the growth and development of civilisation. The multifarious nature of the Arts (as opposed to the Sciences) is seen in the objects of study, and with this the methodologies in data collection and the methods of analysis. Some of the disciplines in the Arts are seen as having methodologies and methods that approximate the Sciences, while others do not have such characteristics. It was perhaps this characteristic that motivated the name change of the original Faculty of Arts of the University of Malaya in the 1980's to the Faculty of Arts and the Social Sciences (*Fakulti Sastera dan Sains Sosial*).

The name change has not affected the types of courses offered, but in the mind of the academics the Arts comprise History, Literature, Culture, Fine Arts, Religious Studies and Philosophy, while the Social Sciences comprise Linguistics, Anthropology, Sociology and Geography. Some of the departments offered a mixture of the two. An example was the Malay Studies Department (before it separated from the Faculty to form the Academy of Malay Studies in 1990) where Linguistics, Anthropology and Sociology were offered alongside the Arts subjects. However, the academic degrees awarded by this Faculty still retain to this day nomenclatures of Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts.

It is interesting to note that Universiti Sains Malaysia uses the term "Humanities" to denote the Arts (Malay Language, English Language, Literature, Translation Studies, History, Geography, Islamic Studies, Philosophy and Civilisation), i.e. exclusive of the Social Sciences. Universities have their own preferences in the choice of labels in the grouping of courses they offer. To me as a linguist, this is an example of what linguistics refers to as the arbitrariness of language. That means one is free to choose or create any name to denote an entity, abstract or concrete, as long as one defines its meaning.

Overlapping of Disciplines

In current usage, it appears that the terms *Arts*, *Social Sciences* and *Humanities* are in free variation with one another. This is a manifestation that there is no clear cut boundary between them. Although each discipline in each of these groupings tries to show that it is a branch of knowledge in its own right independent of any other discipline, the fact of the matter is that there is a great deal of overlapping between member disciplines, especially in terms of data and methodology of data collection. Language data is not just for use by the linguists, as it is also useful to other researchers in the Humanities: anthropologists, sociologists, historians, not to mention those in literary studies. Overlapping is not the same as interdependence. The latter concept, interdependence, means that the one cannot function without the other.

Most of the time, and all this while, each discipline projects an image that it is a branch of knowledge within its own right. Everybody, including university authorities, recognises this fact, and it is for this reason that each discipline is given its administrative department within a particular academic institution. Due to this "exclusive right" to a single discipline, academics are at times in conflict with one another over a single course in terms of where this course should be taught. There are many instances that one can gather from local universities to illustrate the point I have just made.

Let's take a hypothetical case where a university offers linguistics courses in more than one department. Let's limit this just to two departments. One department offers a list of courses pertaining to Malay linguistics: Malay Phonology, Malay Syntax, Malay Lexicology etc. The other department's courses are on General Linguistics, i.e. linguistics that applies to languages in general. So the courses it offers would be something like this: Introduction to Phonology, Introduction to Syntax, Introduction to Lexicology, and so on. This set-up requires that the corpora of data have to come from many languages, not just one. If the department that specialises in Malay intends to have a monopoly over the Malay language corpus in the sense that it cannot be used by the other department, can we accept its stand? I leave it to you, ladies and gentlemen, to answer this question.

In most universities in Britain, Linguistics and Applied Linguistics are offered in separate departments. Linguistics is meant to train students in the study of language in general with all its different aspects, while the function of Applied Linguistics is to train would-be graduates who will be able to apply linguistic ideas in the professions. Most of the Applied Linguistics courses are designed for the training of language teachers. Their training concerns the practical: how to teach the various skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing, whether it is

for first, second or foreign language. Linguists and applied linguists are well aware of the interrelationship between their two sub-disciplines and of the reason for the necessary separation between them. Relationship between the two groups has always been cordial, and they have been supportive of one another.

Universities in Malaysia have their own education faculty whose function is to train teachers for the schools. Among these teachers are language teachers: teachers for Malay, English, Chinese, Tamil and Arabic. They are also trained in the art of pedagogy so that they become efficient as language teachers in the classroom. How would one react if there is an opinion that applied linguistics, specifically the linguistics-based courses that are also relevant in the training of language teachers, should be the exclusive domain of the Faculty of Education, and the department which specialises in linguistics should not deal with them?

While I do respect the right of academics to label themselves according to their area of specialisation, I am of the opinion that building brick walls surrounding each and every discipline is an act of disempowering rather than empowering the Humanities. To me such an act is tantamount to travelling through a long narrow road without taking in the scenery to the right and to the left.

Linguistics, for example, takes pride in being an academic discipline in its own right. It has developed approaches in data collection and theories for analysing linguistic data and explaining the ontogeny of language, language acquisition, language and the mind, language and society etc. From the beginning of time linguists have always acknowledged the fact that expertise in their subject matter could be made the richer by referring to other branches of knowledge.

The discipline of Linguistics or the Science of Language, as some prefer to call it, has indeed benefited from other disciplines in terms of data, methodology, and findings. Perhaps this is one of the factors that have made Linguistics one of the fastest growing academic disciplines in the Humanities and the Social Sciences. And, Linguistics has been appreciative of this by indicating the name of the contributing discipline in the labelling of its branches, as seen in *psycho-linguistics*, *socio-linguistics*, *ethno-linguistics*, *geo-linguistics*, *neurolinguistics*, *anthropological linguistics*, *computer linguistics*, *forensic linguistics*, and what have you. Indeed these are additions to the core branches in general linguistics, the ones that are usually termed as linguistics proper. This does not mean that before the existence of these branches, linguists were unaware of the relationship between language and other aspects of human behaviour. But the existence of the related sciences had increased their understanding and hence their acceptance that these sciences can contribute towards the empowerment of their discipline.

It is a well-known fact that the theory of the context of situation of the London School of Linguistics has its origin in the theory of meaning formulated by

Professor J. R. Firth of the School of Oriental and African Studies. But Firth was driven by anthropological data collected by Professor Bronislaw Malinowski, his close friend and colleague who was Professor of Anthropology at the same institution. On the other hand, there are ideas in linguistics, such as the concepts of *etic* and *emic* (as in *phonetics* and *phonemics*), which have been found to be useful by anthropologists in the study of culture. Systemic and Functional Linguistics has contributed significantly in the analysis of discourse, while Tagmemics and Componential Analysis of Meaning have been applied in translation, specifically the translation of the Bible to various ethnic languages in Asia and Africa.

In addition, psychology has taken linguistics to be its auxiliary science, specifically Noam Chomsky's transformational generative (TG) theory of deep and surface structures, and the postulation of Language Acquisition Device (LAD), which are mentalist in approach. But prior to this, linguistics (through Bloomfield, the well-known American structuralist) had adopted the stimulus-response theory in communication from Behavioural Psychology, and this theory has been applied in language teaching known as the drilling method.

Each of the many branches of linguistics has more than one way of looking at various aspects of language, and the findings of researchers have crystallised into new theories and methodologies which in turn are reviewed through new research studies and experiments. This means that one may get missed out if one does not keep abreast of these developments through up-to-date publications and attending conferences.

Apart from the many branches and sub-branches, linguistics has many schools of thought, all arising from rigorous efforts in the exploration of ideas by researchers on the nature of language. Basically, these schools of thought belong to two major divisions: empiricism and rationalism. This situation does not hamper the growth of the discipline. Friends in other branches of the Humanities have often remarked to me that linguistics has so many *mazhab* "school of thought" (a term taken from the Islamic religious lexicon), and to them this gives a picture of a never-ending conflict of ideas. But I always say to my friends that ideas are to be debated, and the results should be constructive. All in all, linguists have the advantage of having a wide range of choices of the instrument to apply in the course of doing their research.

To the linguist there are many ways of looking at the grammar of a language, and each viewpoint is supported by a methodology and a theory of its own, be it empirical or rationalistic. The theories and the analyses of both the schools of thought, when compared, result in generating ideas on how to deal with particular issues in grammar and language acquisition. If Malaysian linguists take the stand

of just adopting one way of looking at grammar, for example Malay grammar, this means that they have failed to see the many aspects of their own language. Metaphorically speaking, they are able to see only a single tree along the Malaysian highway whereas there are many others which can give them a better perspective of the world around them.

Empowering the Humanities

The meaning of *empowering* in the theme of this conference is given the following senses in the conference brochure, and that is to (re)affirm the functions of the discipline, to explore and generate ideas on the latest trends and theories, and to establish collaboration among intellectuals etc. This is a most comprehensive meaning one can give to the word. The definition, as definitions usually are, provides the answer to the question "*What?*". Our next step in the empowerment revolves round the question "*How?*". That is to say, how do we go about (re)affirming the functions of the Humanities, exploring and generating ideas, and establish collaboration among intellectuals or academicians?

Affirming the Importance of the Humanities

In the effort to achieve the status of developed countries, the newly independent and the less developed nations starting from the post-Second World War period expended most of their resources on the building of an infrastructure which required knowledge and skills in science and technology. There is nothing wrong with this. In fact an efficient infrastructure promises a better standard of living for the people compared to the time when such infrastructure was lacking.

In Malaysia concentration on science and technology started from the school, and was carried over to the universities. In short, the Arts or the Humanities had to play second fiddle to science and technology to the extent that they were considered soft subjects. In other words the Arts were not considered as important as science and technology in nation building. Fortunately, the misconception was soon rectified. The education system has since undergone a change in the school curriculum which indicates a fair balance of the Arts and the Science subjects taught.

Affirming or re-affirming the significance of the Humanities in the life of a nation has to be undertaken by scholars in the various disciplines in the Humanities. Our areas of scholarship does not bring immediate and tangible results as do science and technology, but one must not underestimate their importance and relevance in giving the nation those intangible psycho-cultural aspects of life. Such aspects can contribute in the building of a national edifice where the people can live together in a relatively peaceful atmosphere, and where

there is pride in one's heritage and identity. For this, there must be an awareness of the history of the nation, its treasury of literature, languages and culture. There must also be an awareness of the geo-linguistic and geo-cultural context the nation is in.

We hear from time to time of nations re-writing their history, and defining what they mean by national culture and literature. Experts in culture and literature are all the time putting on their thinking cap in the effort to define "national culture" and "national literature". This is where academicians in the relevant disciplines in the Humanities can contribute.

While the national language is defined and explained in terms of status and role in the nation's Constitution, the development of the language to be able to play its role in every aspect of the life of the nation requires proper planning. Although this area of expertise is usually identified with linguistics, scholars in the Humanities as well as in the Sciences have given invaluable assistance, specifically in the development of the terminologies in the various branches of knowledge.

To illustrate the fact that research in the Humanities takes time to be considered useful to society, allow me to relate my own personal experience in this matter. When I was a junior lecturer in the Department of Malay Studies, University of Malaya, I introduced field linguistics by doing research on Kintaq Bong, an Orang Asli language spoken by a group of the same name in Baling, Kedah. This effort was soon followed by a series of field work on Iban language in various parts of Sarawak. The material gathered in this field work was to become data for my Ph.D. thesis submitted to the University of London. This event took place in mid-1960s.

While the Department was supportive of my venture, there were others among the academic staff who thought that I was either mad or wasting my time working on these languages. They were of the opinion that I should focus on the study of the Malay language, the national language. They could not see the usefulness whatsoever of working on these languages. But history showed that the study of these languages and others in the same category of ethnic languages can contribute in the upholding of 1Malaysia.

The Department of Malay Studies had introduced the Iban language as a compulsory course to students majoring in Malay linguistics in early 1970s, long before United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) made the world aware of language endangerment. This means that Iban had entered the university before it ever went to school. It was only in the 1980s that it was introduced as a Pupils' Own language in schools in Sarawak.

For some years now, students can take the language as a subject in their SPM examinations. A programme for the training of teachers of Iban for the schools has been mounted by the Ministry of Education, and the responsibility has been given to Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI).

I am glad that young linguists of Malaysia are taking an interest in the rich heritage of Malaysian indigenous languages. I also gather that they are more fortunate than I was in acquiring funding for their researches, specifically in terms of the size of the research funds. I consider this as *rezeki*, and as things are with *rezeki*, their findings should not be confined to linguistics, but should be made available to related fields of study: anthropology, sociology, history, and politics. The study of these languages can lead to research in various aspects of the cultures and histories of their speakers.

Exploring and Generating Ideas

Exploring and generating new ideas is the most effective way of making the Humanities, and the scholars involved, visible to others—other academicians, the authorities and the public.

Theories and trends of thought within a particular discipline have their own histories of development. It is important that students especially those in the Masters' program are introduced to the ideas that have become the pillars in their discipline. This will give them a firm grounding in the subject matter to prepare them for further research.

Generating ideas can only be achieved when there is research. Research, as well as an understanding of the theory to be applied, and supported by knowledge of the history of ideas are important instruments in the generating of new ones. Research provides data, theory provides the means to the analysis of the data, while a knowledge of the history of ideas gives a picture of how, for what reason, and in what context the ideas develop.

At the same time, one has to keep abreast of developments in other institutions and in other parts of the world. This means keeping up with publications in one's own area of specialisation and related disciplines no matter where they come from. If a linguist says to me that her field is dialect study and she would not want to bother with any other sub-branch of linguistics, not to mention the sciences not directly related to linguistics, I would say that she is doing herself a disservice.

Dialect study, or dialectology, began as a study of language variations in rural settings. Now it has come to be known as Traditional Dialectology due to a

relatively recent development of a new sub-branch which focuses on the study of variations in urban settings, where the community is not only found in horizontal establishments, but also in vertical ones, i.e. in high rise buildings. This new branch, known as Urban Dialectology, employs a type of methodology and analysis different from that of Traditional Dialectology. On this basis, if the linguist just mentioned does not wish to see into what is happening in Urban Dialectology, she will be left behind in the slow moving lift.

Establishing Collaboration

It is clear that from what I have previously said that there must be collaboration between disciplines and sub-disciplines in the Humanities, because comparing methodologies and findings engenders new ideas. There is also the possibility that theories may be adopted and adapted across disciplines and sub-disciplines. We will be the richer, not the poorer, for doing this.

Conclusion

After almost half a century of involvement in university affairs, I have been able to observe and participate in the development of the disciplines in the Arts, the Humanities, or the Social Sciences or whatever you wish to call it. It has been the most enriching experience for me, and I am glad that I am able to share this experience with you through this keynote address.