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Malaysian English: Exploring the Possibility of Standardization

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ABSTRAK

Kertas kerja ini disediakan untuk mempertemukan gagasan tentang Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia dengan gagasan bahasa Inggeris baku dan proses pembakuan bahasa. Petanda-petanda bahasa Inggeris telah dibakukan dapat diteliti melalui: (1) pandangan umum tentang perkembangan variasi Bahasa Inggeris lisan di Malaysia sejak pemerintahan Inggeris; dan (2) penelitian faktor-faktor yang berhubung dengan pembakuan bahasa: (a) penelitian peranan agen pengkodifikasian dalam kebiasaan penggunaan bahasa Inggeris Malaysia; (b) status Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia sebagai Bahasa Inggeris Baru; (c) keperluan terhadap pembakuan bahasa Inggeris Malaysia; dan (d) kerencaman linguistik Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia. Nampaknya, antara 3 variasi Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia, iaitu Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia Jenis 1, Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia Jenis 2 dan Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia Kolokial, Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia Jenis 2 mempunyai potensi dimajukan sebagai jenis Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia yang dapat diterima secara meluas. Kemungkinan Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia dibakukan masih kecil kerana keterbatasan keperluan terhadap jenis Bahasa Inggeris tempatan yang dibakukan untuk dijadikan model rujukan dalam pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris, di samping kedudukannya yang masih pada peringkat awal di dalam proses pembakuan bahasa. Oleh itu kajian deskriptif lanjut dan berterusan terhadap Bahasa Inggeris Malaysia adalah dirasakan perlu.

ABSTRACT

The notion of Malaysian English in relation to the concepts of standard English and language standardization is explored. An overview of the development of varieties of English spoken in Malaysia is discussed and the factors involved in language standardization such as the role of codifying agents in regulating the use of Malaysian English, the status of Malaysian English as a "New English", the need for a standardized variety of Malaysian English and the linguistic complexity of Malaysian English are examined. Of the three varieties of Malaysian English, namely, Malaysian English Type I, Malaysian English Type II and colloquial Malaysian English, Malaysian English Type II has the potential to develop into a widely accepted variety of Malaysian English. Nevertheless, the possibility of Malaysian English being standardized is still remote due to the limited need for a standardized variety of Malaysian English as the reference model in language teaching, and its early stage in the process of language standardization. Further and on-going descriptive studies on Malaysian English are needed.



Leslie, A. *Oddities in Language*

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to explore the notion of Malaysian English in relation to the concepts of standard English and language standardization. The discussion should serve as a take-off point for further empirical studies on Malaysian English, and also as reference for decisions regarding the place of Malaysian English in the ESL classroom.

Purposes of the Study

The purposes of this study are to:

(1) provide an overview of the development of varieties of English spoken in Malaysia;
(2) explore the possibility of Malaysian English being standardized.

Development of Varieties of Malaysian English

In Malaysia, English had a dominant status during the British Administration; it was the language of the ruling class, the Christian religion and the administration (Bhathal 1990). From this setting, several varieties of Malaysian English have developed.

Until 1965 a common variety, Singapore-Malayan English, existed as both Malaysia and Singapore were under British rule (Platt and Weber, 1980). With the independence of Singapore, the development of Singapore-Malayan English reached an impasse due to differences in national policies regarding the status and functions of English.

In Singapore, English is not only the language of science, technology and international trade, but also a language for inter-ethnic communication and a dominant language in the sphere of work. The 1990 Census of Population shows the literacy rate for English is highest (65%), followed by Chinese (61.5%), Malay (16%) and Tamil (3.4%) (Kwan-Terry, 1993). This is partly due to English being a compulsory language in all schools, and is one of the four official languages. Today, Educated Singapore English (EsgE, spoken by English-educated Singaporeans) is used in formal contexts (Tay 1982), and the colloquial variety, Singlish, is used informally.

On the other hand, in Malaysia today, "Malaysian English" can be discerned as a three-tiered continuum. The impetus for the development of these varieties of Malaysian English are the declaration of Bahasa Malaysia as the national and official language, and the change in the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia in 1971 in West Malaysia, 1973 in Sabah and 1977 in Sarawak at Primary One level.

Malaysian English Type I

Singapore-Malayan English is also referred to as Malaysian English Type I (ME Type I henceforth) by Platt and Weber (1980) and is spoken by English-medium educated Malaysians who were taught a British type of educated English. Baskaran (1987) describes this acrolect which is internationally intelligible as "standard Malaysian English (Gill, 1993).

A distinguishing characteristic of ME Type I is its phonology which resembles ESgE. The intonation is syllable-timed instead of stress-timed, and there is an absence of weak forms and liason (Tay 1982). Like ESgE-speakers too, ME Type I-speakers use a narrower pitch range; and are generally not aware of the fine shades of meaning that can be conveyed by intonation in English (Tay, 1982). In addition, the pronunciation of some words in ME Type I differs from standard British English, possibly due to the influence of graphology; approximation in pronunciation (for example, /siks/ for /siksθ/) and differences in how sounds of English words are perceived. However, the slight variation in phonology may not hinder international intelligibility.

As far as syntax and formal use are concerned, adherence to a standard model of British or American English still prevails to a certain degree (Wong, 1978). For lexis in particular, there are items with a localized context such as *kampung* and *makan*, which are absent in British English. Some lexical items have different meanings. For instance, in Singapore and Malaysian English, *missus* is considered more polite than *wife* whereas the former is a low prestige word in British English (Platt, 1980).

The use of ME Type I is on the decline. From 1962 to 1967, the enrolment in English medium secondary schools decreased from 90% to 69.1% (Platt 1980). Now ME Type I is used only by the older generation of English-medium educated Malaysians, and Malaysians educated overseas. More and more Malaysians are using Malaysian English Type II (ME Type II henceforth).

Malaysian English Type II

ME Type II is spoken by Malaysians who are Malay-educated. With the change in the medium of instruction in 1971, there was a rapid increase in the enrolment in Malay-medium secondary schools: 4.1% in 1956 and 30.9% in 1967. ME Type II has obvious features of interference of

Bahasa Malaysia, thus placing it further away in the continuum of international intelligibility as compared to ME Type I.

In ME Type II, the pronunciation of most words and even the spelling is sometimes influenced by Bahasa Malaysia words which originated from English words, such as *akademik* for *academic* and *biskut* for *biscuit.*

Where syntax is concerned, the word order of noun phrases in Bahasa Malaysia is used often. For instance, *fonkad* for *phone card,* and *not enough tall* for *not tall enough.* Variable marking of past tense in speech, a feature of ESgE described by Platt (1980) is found as well. For example, *"I start working here last year."* It is difficult to ascertain from general observation whether the deviant structures are merely occasional learners' errors, or are fossilized as a feature of ME Type II. There is a high possibility of these structures becoming a permanent feature of ME Type II as they are still intelligible.

ME Type II is making its impact in formal use such as in seminars and news broadcasts because the number of ME Type II-speakers in various professions is growing. Whether it would develop into *the* Malaysian English depends on education and language policies on the use of English.

Colloquial Malaysian English

Colloquial Malaysian English (cME henceforth) is a local dialect having less complex speech forms and exhibiting more deviation from standard English in terms of phonology, grammar and vocabulary (Wong, 1978). cME is used by both ME Types I and II speakers in informal contexts. In more established varieties of English, it is usual for stylistic variations to occur *within* a speaker's sociolect but for "New Englishes", a sociolectal range exists instead. In Malaysia, the speech continuum ranges from ME Type I or ME Type II for formal use to cME for informal use.

The syntax of cME varies substantially from standard English. A feature common in both Malaysia and Singapore is pronoun copying like "My mother, *she* works very hard". The use of fillers also predominates in cME such as "lah" ("Come *lah,* Jurassic Park is a good movie"), "one" ("The bus is always late one)." Tongue (1979) defines fillers as items of language which communicate no particular denotative meaning but which are used to indicate affective attitudes of the speaker, or simply to fill a pause or in the stream of speech. In cME, fillers do fulfil these functions.

Code or language-switching between English and Bahasa Malaysia is a common phenomenon especially for ME Type II-speakers. For instance, "I *nak pergi* bank this afternoon." Language switch is an avoidance strategy used by the learner for two purposes: (1) linguistic, that is, to avoid a difficult target language form or one that has not yet been learned, or (2) social, that is, a desire to fit in with one's peers (Tarone *et al.* 1983). As language switch in casual settings is common even among Malaysians who are proficient in English, it seems that language switch is used more for social acceptability, as has been observed by Lam, a Malaysian broadcaster (New Straits Times, 21 August 1993).

For lexis, many items are only used in the Malaysian context, such as *"Please off the fan"*. Many idiomatic expressions have been directly translated from the mother tongues of speakers, such as *shaking legs* (having a relaxing time), and *spend someone* (giving someone a treat). Some other slang expressions comprising Bahasa Malaysia words and phrases found in cME are *koyak-lah* and *finish-lah* to mean "I'm done for". These features make cME internationally unintelligible.

Thus far, cME has only been used in friendship and transaction domains. It has not been used in the mass media as in the case of Singapore. Singapore Broadcasting Corporation has banned the use of Singlish in its commercials for fear of the detrimental effects of Singlish on the standard of spoken English (New Straits Times, 2 August 1993).

CONSIDERATIONS IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF MALAYSIAN ENGLISH

The preceding overview of the three varieties of Malaysian English provides a background for the discussion on the possibility of standardization of Malaysian English. To explore this possibility, the following factors are considered: (1) the role of codifying agents for Malaysian English, (2) the status of Malaysian English in relation to "New Englishes", (3) the linguistic nature of Malaysian English, and (4) the need for a standard Malaysian English.

Before proceeding with the discussion, it is necessary to define "standard English". Standard English with a non-localizable accent usually refers to Received Pronunciation (RP), also known as Educated Southern English, Oxford Pronunciation or Queen's English, in Britain and General American in the United States (Strevens, 1981). However, in Gill's (1993) study on attitude towards suggested pedagogical models for English language teaching in Malaysia, only 49.9% of the respondents chose RP as a suitable model whereas "English spoken by an educated Malaysian with an unmarked accent, that is, an accent, which is neither strongly Malaysian nor strongly RP, and almost without grammatical mistakes" is considered suitable by 79.2%. This favoured model of English is comparable to ME Type I, but whether it could develop into the standardized variety of Malaysian English for general use depends on a multitude of other factors, which will be discussed below.

Role of Codifying Agents

For a language to maintain its standard usage with some allowable deviance, language norms have to be enforced by various codifying agents. Examples of codifying agents are a central body like the *L' Academie Francaise* of France, the education system, publishers and broadcasters.

Malaysia does not have a central body set up expressly for the purpose of maintaining the standard of English. Neither does Britain. However, the education system and the mass media play an important role in propagating RP (Standards and Correctness in English Open University, 1982).

Where the Malaysian education system is concerned, the standard of spoken English imparted to students ranges from native-like English to cME depending on the educational background of teachers, in spite of the fact that textbooks and teaching materials are written in standard English. In Britain, teachers correct students who use language other than the prescribed norm but this is not so in Malaysia. Wong (1978) states that as there are no materials for teaching functional [Malaysian] English, standard English is still used as a model. However, this may no longer be true since the introduction of the Communicational English syllabus in 1975 (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1975).

Besides the education system, the community in Britain exerts a form of standardizing pressure on schools to teach standard English. Parents want their children to speak proper English, and not slang or local speech (Ellis, Standard and Correctness in English Open University 1982). There is evidence that Malaysian parents are just as concerned. In a letter to New Straits Times dated 5 August 1993, a Malaysian parent expressed her concern over a trainee teacher who taught students to pronounce "leopard" as "lio-pat" and "thirsty" as "twisty".

Educators may impart a variety of English to students, but the English spoken by Malaysian broadcasters is more uniform. It may serve as a model. However, like the education system, the Malaysian mass media is not prescriptive in propagating standards of oral English. In Britain the mass media plays a prescriptive role whereby agreed-upon pronunciation of place names, uncommon literary or scientific words, and words in common use were published in *Broadcast English* (Leitner 1982, p.96).

The use of written English is regulated to a certain extent by publishers, often using the dictionary as the reference source for standard usages of English terms and words. Nettle of Heinemann Educational in "Standard and Correctness in English Open University" (1982) states that non-standard forms in manuscripts are often edited as the publishers do not want to appear "uneducated" to the reading populace. This is true of Malaysian book publishers as well.

Is Malaysian English a "New English"?

Malaysian English is briefly described in "The New Englishes" by Platt *et al.* (1984) but it is not cited among the list of well-known "New Englishes" such as the developing varieties of English spoken in India, Nigeria and Singapore. To find out if Malaysian English has the characteristics of "New Englishes", the criteria put forth by Platt *et al.* (1984), and Foley (1988) are used.

According to Platt *et al.* (1984,)"New Englishes" are unique in the way they develop. ME Types I and II have developed in a manner similar to other "New Englishes" as follows:

(1) they have developed through the education system, through English-medium schools be-

fore independence (ME Type I), and later through Malay-medium schools (ME Type II);
(2) they have developed in an area where a native variety of English is not spoken by most of the population; Bazaar Malay was the *lingua franca* of Malaysians;
(3) they are used for a range of functions *among* those who speak or write it in a particular region, such as for communication with family members, friends and colleagues, in transactions, educational system, media, law and religion (Platt and Weber 1980);
(4) they have become localised by adopting certain phonological, lexical, syntactic or idiomatic elements from the mother-tongue languages of the region such as Bahasa Malaysia, and Indian and Chinese dialects, especially ME Type II.

Apart from the manner in which a local variety of English develops into a "New English", the particular variety of English must have attained a position of linguistic prominence in the community before it can be termed as a "New English". Based on Foley's (1988) criteria, ME Types I and II can be termed as a "New English" because they fulfil the criteria in the following manner:

(1) English is only one of two or more codes in the linguistic repertoire of Malaysians, the others being Bahasa Malaysia and the Chinese and Tamil dialects,
(2) English has acquired an important status in the multingual community of Malaysia. Though not as widely used as in the 1970's, English still retains a place of importance in international relations, tertiary education, law and as a second language in schools.

Evaluating Malaysian English according to the criteria of Platt *et al.* (1984) and Foley (1988), it seems ME Types I and II have developed sufficiently for them to acquire some form of acceptance of the language norms within its community of users such that it can be accorded the status of a "New English". Even then, the more crucial factor to consider in the standardization of Malaysian English is its linguistic property.

Linguistic Nature of Malaysian English

The characteristics inherent in the language itself which differentiate it from dialects and even variants of the same language, also determine the possibility of the language being standardized to a certain extent. In this section, Malaysian English is examined to find out its standing in the process of language standardization as described by Agheyisi (1988):

(1) Codification is "the process by which the language becomes enriched, stabilized and rendered comprehensively adaptable to the immediate and potential communication needs of its community of speakers" (Agheyisi, 1988). People who use language professionally and consciously are responsible for codification, and codification is presented to the speech community via grammars, dictionaries and spellers (written or oral), and finally the "standardized" variety is advanced via the government, education system and mass media (Fishman 1970).
(2) "Intellectualization" of its lexicon and grammar takes place through a three-step scale, namely, (i) simple intelligibility as in conversational register, (ii) definiteness as in "workaday technical" register, and (iii) accuracy as in scientific register. Malaysian English has simple intelligibility but the domains of "workaday technical" register and scientific register are dominated by standard English. Garvin and Mathiot (1968) observe that languages which have yet to be standardized usually lack phases of the second and all of the third registers (Agheyisi 1988).
(3) The formulation of a written norm for the language, with a tradition of literary expression. In Malaysia and Singapore, it was only in 1945 that locally written English literature began to develop, the most common genre being poetry (Platt 1980). Platt observes that the majority of writers have used standard English with few or no examples of typical Singapore-Malaysian features. Hence Malaysian English is just in the process of making its mark in the literary tradition.

It seems that Malaysian English has not undergone the essential steps in the process of language stand-

ardization. Thus at this moment in time, it does not have the linguistic properties of a standard language, as described by Svejcer (1978). A standard language:

(1) has a complex interrelationship of written and oral forms. Without any systematic attempts at codification, there has only been a notion of what Malaysian English is;
(2) is the language of culture, science and journalism. In these domains standard English is used providing no room for usage and "intellectualization" of Malaysian English;
(3) possesses a norm for selected linguistic facts. Systematic codification of Malaysian English has yet to take place apart from an attempt by Wong (1978).

It can be tentatively concluded that Malaysian English does not possess the linguistic properties and status of a standard language as yet. However, there is a potential for a standard Malaysian English to develop should there be a pressing need for it because it has developed far enough for it to be termed a "New English". Ultimately, it is the language users who decide which variety of English they wish to speak, and not the standardized variety which is propagated through government policies, the education system or the mass media.

Is there a need for a Standard Malaysian English?

In order to examine whether Malaysians perceive a need for a standard variety of Malaysian English, the functions of English in Malaysia are compared with the functions expected of a standard language.

A standard language plays the following roles in the linguistic community:

(1) as a shared linguistic system for communication on codes of social conduct (Crewe 1977). English is used for a wide range of functions but only by a relatively small group of ME Type I- or ME Type II-speakers. Bahasa Malaysia is used more extensively for inter-ethnic communication.
(2) as a Prestige Variety for unifying speakers of various dialects, and for preserving the uniqueness of the language and its community of speakers *vis-a-vis* other related languages and their communities (Agheyisi 1988). In relation to this, Gupta (1988) states that the pre-requisites for standardization of "New Englishes" are: (i) local prestige usage (written, not informal); (ii) usage not locally stigmatized; and (iii) usage not internationally stigmatized (Foley 1988). It is uncertain whether there is prestige attached to the use of Malaysian English locally, needless to say, internationally. Instead, Bahasa Malaysia being the national language plays the role of a prestige variety in Malaysia.
(3) as a Reference Model in the Education System. During the British rule in Malaysia, RP was the official norm, and the model in the education system (Platt and Weber 1980). With the adoption of the communicative approach in the teaching of English, the aim is merely to enable students to speak *intelligibly* such that the communicational intent is successfully conveyed (English Language Syllabus, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia 1975,). In the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM) syllabus for English language (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia 1987), students are expected to speak and read using correct pronunciation, and with correct intonation, word stress and sentence rhythm. Although there is no prescriptive guideline as to what correct pronunciation and intonation is, pronouncing dictionaries like Gimson (1980) and Jones (1977) are reference sources which are easily available. These sources are still useful even though according to Gill (1993), it is English spoken by an educated Malaysian with an unmarked accent (possibly ME Type I) which is favoured as a pedagogical model.

From the foregoing discussion on the perceived need for a standard Malaysian English, it is clear the need only arises in language teaching, but not as a prestige variety or for communication. Where English language teaching is concerned, English spoken by educated Malaysians with ethnic accents are considered unsuitable: 52% for Malay accent, 63.4% for Indian accent, but surprisingly 65.1% considered English spoken with a Chinese accent suitable (Gill 1993). However, Gill qualifies that this could be because the

taped sample did not reflect a speaker with a strong Chinese accent, whereas the Malay and Indian speakers had strong ethnic accents.

Although Malaysian English with an unmarked accent is favoured as a pedagogical model in ELT, it is more likely for Malaysian English with ethnic accents (ME Type II) to develop into *the* standard Malaysian English, taking into consideration the trend of development of the *adoptive* variety of English in Jamaica (comparable to ME Type II). The *adoptive* variety is not overtly Creole but lacks international intelligibility due to differences in structure and meaning (Shields 1989) who argues that the 'adoptive' variety is likely to become the *de facto* target rather than the traditional Standard English (comparable to ME Type I) since mono-style speakers of the 'adoptive' variety are prominent opinion makers, the press and the teaching profession. As ME Type II speakers are found in all sectors of the society, they too have the power to propagate the use of this variety of Malaysian English by consensus.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

By virtue of the manner of its development, its characteristics and its role in the multilingual community of Malaysians, Malaysian English Types I and II may justify a claim to the status of a "New English". However, the utilitarian value of English has diminished considerably with Bahasa Malaysia becoming the language of inter-ethnic communication and the nation's prestige language. Thus the perceived need for a standard Malaysian English arises only in the education system.

As it is, the absence of a specified model for English language teaching has only drawn diffused concern due to the availability of various models of English, which are nationally intelligible. However, total public acceptance, especially among educationists, towards the use of Malaysian English in language teaching is still low.

Where international intelligibility is concerned, it might be necessary to standardize a variety of Malaysian English so that changes in the language can be regulated for the benefit of Malaysians who are involved in international communication. However, due to the limited usage of English in Malaysia, the processes of language standardization such as codification, "intellectualization" of the language and formulation of a written norm are still rudimentary. Therefore the actual characteristics of Malaysian English are still unclear, resulting in a lack of uniformity in the variety of English imparted by the broadcasters, publishers and educational practitioners. The setting is such that standardization of Malaysian English is not possible, or even necessary as yet.

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