The Use of Malay Malaysian English in Malaysian English: Key Considerations

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ABSTRACT

Once, English was thought to be the 'lingua franca', understood by people around the world. This was because British English was introduced by the British Empire during the colonization era. After the myriad of colonies gained independence, however, one 'standard' English has evolved into many different localized dialects; namely Singapore English (SE), Malaysian English (ME) and others. These 'localization' has caused fear among educators and professionals especially the native speakers that English has turned into a corrupt language. With relevance to Clyne's (1992) 'pluricentric' languages, this paper shall highlight the nature of local variations in the context of Malaysian English as well as justify the needs for having standard non-native varieties of the English language used within the confines of the Malaysian socio-cultural context. Suggestions for realizing this issue as a means of encouraging more public acceptance and bridging proficiency gaps in the target language will also be featured.

INTRODUCTION

The learning of English language in Malaysia began during the colonial times as a tool of socio-economic mobility and education enhancement (Venugopal: 2000). However, after independence, the role of the English language in Malaysia has expanded to not only a tool of international socio-political correspondence and involvement, but also as a global medium of interaction and knowledge exchange. Malaysia, a richly multilingual country can be categorised generally as diglossic or polygossic (Platt and Weber, 1980). Therefore the use and development of English is influenced by the national language of Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu and its regional dialects, that co-exists with other languages like Indian and Chinese. These languages have influenced the verbal repertoire of English language in Malaysia.

Since language has many variations, Malaysian English (ME) emerges as yet another variation from parent norms through the process of 'hybridization' (Whinnom 1971), 'indigenization' (Moag & Moag 1979) and 'nativization' (Kachru 1983). This has certainly added up to many of the world's non-native varieties of English or New Englishes. A 'pluricentric' language, English is a language with several interacting centres that each provides a national variety with at least some of its own codified norms (Clyne, 1992). All these varieties have essentially contributed to the emergence of "localized forms of English" (Stevens 1983).

There has been an ongoing fear that the spread of English will only lead to its disintegration and further grow into several mutually unintelligible languages. Native speakers have expressed their concern about the growing acceptance of distinct non-native varieties of English language. This would be in contrast with the official standard practiced in the education sector for the use of English, which is based on British Received Pronunciation (RP). Hence, as means of uplifting those 'ongoing fear' of a corrupt language, this paper intends to highlight the nature of local variations, that is the Malaysian English as well as justify the needs of having such standard non-native varieties of the language within the confines of the Malaysian socio-cultural context.

MALAYSIAN ENGLISH (ME) VERSUS STANDARD LANGUAGE

Most purists and native speakers' fear were based on their definition of a 'standard' language.   What is a specific criterion for a language to achieve its 'Standard'?   The present situation in Malaysia is marked by increasing efforts to elevate the status and standard of English instruction at the school level but this is not felt necessary for societal needs in the home or in work place.   A language becomes 'standard' if the spoken and written language is clearly understood by its users. The language becomes incomprehensible and later leads to major problems if the acquisition of new varieties of English occurs in isolation from their cultural context (Foley: 1998). Therefore, it is important to use the Malaysian English in its own sociolinguistic settings.

As gathered by Syed Hussein Al-Attas (1990), opposition to standardization in the use of English will only promote backwardness especially among Malay Malaysian speakers. However, a point to be considered here is 'what are we standardizing' and 'to whose standard are we prescribing to'. As stated in the preface of Rebaczonok-Padulu (2001), 'Standard English' deals with official language of the entire English-speaking world, and which is also the language of the educated English-speaking people. Indeed, such a universality binding term like the 'entire English-speaking world' carries connotations of colonial superiority that is unlikely of present emergence of New English varieties such as the Malaysian (ME) and Singapore English (SE).

It is also important to note that the status of English in that particular country varies, whether it is the second language (as in Malaysia) or the official language in Singapore. As the Malays, Chinese, Indians have their own mother tongue language, the need for acquiring English vary from the second language for the Malays and the third language for the Chinese and Indians – as Bahasa Malaysia is the official language. Hence, Malaysian English arises to be the lingua-franca (used in an informal setting) to this multiracial society.   For example, a Malay speaker would speak Malaysian English with certain words, phrases, particles understood by the Chinese and Indians.   For instance, instead of speaking a proper English for '*It should be done like that!*' the Malaysian English version would be '*Like that one*'.

Malay ME has more of dialectal influence on the use of English language. This can be seen clearly through the usage of dialects in Kelantanese English, Kedahan English and

Perakian English. As a result, the dialectal deviations nativise the use of English to the point that makes it more comprehensible to fellow Malay interlocutors of the state. In short, Malay ME is a sub-variant of ME that acts as an intra-state communication tool of English. On the other hand, Malaysian English functions on a wider range of interlocutors; namely that the Malays, Chinese and Indian. With these dominant influences, this language variety consequently acts as an intercultural communication tool of English that is more comprehensible within the domains of Malaysia. This as emphasized by Gill (1994), Malaysian English consists of lectal manifestations that enable international and intra-national communication to take place.

Among the features of Malay ME are as the following:

    a. particle 'lah' usage
    b. particle 'kan' usage
    c. direct translations of English to BM
    d. nativized intonation, speech rhythm and pronunciation

In ensuring the acceptance of this language variety (Malay ME), it is necessary for its speakers to employ codifying agents. Such in the case of American English, when Noah Webster and Dr. Franklin codified its usage and spread its usage within the education system, the status of American English has become solidified (Baugh; 371:2002).   In addition, the standardization of the variety needs to also fall in place to gain acceptance within its socio-linguistic context and with the British English RP that acts as model of Standard English. In relation to Malay ME and ME though, this has yet to be seen.

LANGUAGE CHOICE AND VARIETIES

After independence, the role of the English language in Malaysia has expanded to not only as a tool of international socio-political correspondence and involvement, but also as a global medium of interaction and knowledge exchange. English has evolved to the point that it is no longer owned by its native speakers. Hence, the global enrichment of English has helped built the adaptability in the use of English outside the British Isles. In relation to globalization, English acts as means of promoting cross-cultural awareness, and cross-cultural expression (intellectually, politically, and artistically) that widens its context variety (Winters; 1996).

Consequently, with its global users, English is enriched with a multiplex range of socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-linguistic features. For instance, the borrowing of words like 'Amok' from the Malay culture and 'Haiku' from the Japanese culture have expanded English's vocabulary to foreign worldviews. However, simultaneously, these features have also brought on the emergence of varieties of English that are not anymore subjugated to the dominance of its native speakers, namely the British. Thus, its widespread usage has brought about a tidal wave of enrichment and complexity.

A good instance can be seen in the dominance of American English over British English. With America's independence from the British Empire and winning role in World War II, their dominance grew more than their British colonizers (Baugh; 351- 408: 2002). Thus, as a society evolves in becoming more powerful, influential and progressive; the status of its language is also altered. This was added on by their growing role in global media development, printing and science and technology. Due to this, the Americans grew equally and even more dominant in language and power compared to the British colonizers themselves. In fact, their contribution to English has become more prominent.

A country such as Malaysia, however, still relies on the use of English as a second language. Undeniably, Malaysia still adopts Standard British English as the pedagogical model (Gill; 19: 1994). Nevertheless, there is a tendency to view the growth of ME as something that is 'corrupted' and of lower prestige than British English. As Malaysian English speakers and sociopolitical state are bilingual in nature, this need not be the case. Therefore, the use of ME would breed differently than English used by the native British speakers.

Even though bilingualism promotes a sense of esteem and pride in cultures and languages learnt (Ovando and Collier; 2:1985), still it may involve equal competency or unequal competency (Rosli Talif and Ain Nadzimah; 201: 2000) among its speakers. In addition, it would indeed be idealistic to demand equal command of two languages. Thus, it is similar with the case of using Malaysian English.
With regards to sociocultural settings, such as the urban centers, we are exposed to people who are comfortable in their own English-speaking environment. English is not restricted to the home and school but can be used among friends in social intercourse and also in transactions both official and non-official, among government bodies (Wong & Thambyrajah, 1991). The type of English that they use will vary from a standard ME to a colloquial one depending on the situation (official/formal vs. unofficial/informal).

ME displays the distinguishing features of simplification and reduction of a non-native variety, as well as the effects of localization of an acculturated variety. This variety (ME), is that spoken by the speech community (Gumperz, 1972) and fellowship includes the English-educated speaker as well as the marginally proficient speaker of English, while the employees of business organizations, for instance, may also be viewed as members of the same 'discourse community" (Swales, 1990). Henceforth, ME emerges as an informal lingua-franca among Malaysian that only accept the role of English in their lives as needing English in academic and work environments but not necessarily for social needs.

As ME positions itself on the lectal continuum, the greater amount of interference from the Mother Tongue (MT) will be found. In addition, Rosli and Ting Su Hie (63;1999), stipulated that code or language switching among ME II speakers are of a common occurrence. Code switching refers to a verbal strategy employed by bilingual or bidialectal speakers through the change of linguist codes within a similar speech event as a sign of cultural solidarity or distance (Kramsch; 125: 1998). Consequently, constant exposure to Mesolect and Basilect usage of English from the media and society will

further fossilize these forms of usage. 'Fossilization', as defined by Ellis (1997), is a process that responsible for impeding target-language (TL) competence.

THE MALAYSIAN LANGUAGE POLICY

A country's language policy is usually formed as a reaction to the current demands as well as ensuring the future of nation's development. However, before demands are posed on forming a co-existence between ME with its sub-varieties and macro varieties, understanding needs to be placed on the intricacies involved in the Malaysian policy-implementation process. As gathered by Azman Mohd Yusoff (1998), the Malaysian policy-implementation process usually involved three important channels: the political channel, the administrative process and the integrated channel. These channels act as gatekeepers of policy formation. In most cases, the needs and action of the gatekeeper of knowledge are in tune with public who use it. Unfortunately, there are cases too whether the individual needs of the public cannot be entertained due to a higher agenda. In the case of the Malaysian education system, the placing of Bahasa Malaysia (BM) as the national language and English as its second language acts as nation building tool after independence from colonial rule. Nonetheless, Gill (1994) pointed out that earlier divergent language policies and implementation had retarded the steady growth of English proficiency in Malaysia.

In relation to that, the Malaysian language policy for English till the year 2002 reveals the influence of Munby (1978) communicative model of teaching English as means to encourage communication in certain daily activities and job situations. Another clear example of the language policy would be in the sudden introduction of the teaching of Science in English (Selangor Education Department: 2002). As observed by Gill (1994), such action was reflecting the status of Malaysia then which was progressing in the fields of technology and industrialization. Consequently, this grew a need for the development of English teaching to cater for these new economic disciplines – the fields of Science and Mathematics.

Whereupon national policies emphasizing the national language for the sake of national unity is concerned (Report of the Education Committee: 1956) and gradual attitudinal change towards English and the need to adhere to British RP (Gill: 1994), had somehow affected the production of English that is internationally intelligible. As a result, the motivation to use English language lessened with decreasing meaningful role at the national level (Azman Mohd Yusoff, 1998).

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Speakers of ME are being parallel to children using the 'protolanguage' (Halliday: 1979) in their language-acquiring stage. Children and users that acquire a non-standard variety of a language are educationally disadvantaged. To the former, when they enter school, they must learn the standard variety and this becomes an added burden. As for the latter,

speakers of non-standard varieties are labeled as those who come from rural, of low-status in society, uneducated, as well as other derogatory terms.

Since ME and the 'protolanguage' share the same structure of having a phonology and a semantic element but lacking in grammatical or lexical element, the survival of 'protolanguage' among growing children is gradually being abandoned. This is due to the language's limited role as a resource for learning. ME would share the same fate if positive and aggressive efforts on restructuring and reestablishing the language are not being done immediately.

As English is a universal language and belongs to everyone, Asian countries like Malaysia, Singapore, etc. can follow the Americans and Australians in adapting the language according to their own circumstances and cultures. ME has a sentimental touch to the Malaysians, it "belongs uniquely to them". (Wong & Thambyrajah, 1991) With the publication of the dictionary of Malaysian and Singapore English by (Times-Chambers Essential English Dictionary, 1997), it is hoped that a set of distinct grammar that is adaptable to the sociocultural need will be published soon. Further extensive research such as this is welcome as means to improve ME from its basilectal, masolectal varieties to being acrolectal and accepted by majority of people locally as well as internationally.

Nonetheless, the Malaysian Media (the press, advertising agencies) and Malaysian English literature are still tied to a more conventional RP British and Americanized model of spoken and written communication. This is duly contributed by the growth of English an international language of trade (Dudley-Evans and St. John: 1998). Hence, any transactions need to be internationally intelligible, and the usage of ME is not appropriate.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, the development of ME need not be hindered by any assumptions on Native Speakers' (NS) records of standardization. What has been implied as 'Manglish' or 'Mangled English' or 'Broken English' by McArthur (11: 1998) is totally unacceptable. ME, like other existing varieties can be standardized to cater the present needs of the speech community and global development. In fact, it can be an equally important partner in the expansion and enrichment of English. Therefore, a mutual sense of acceptance and respect, and cooperation is needed in forming a localized standard that co-exists with the RP British English model.

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