

ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: English has been a lingua franca, understood by people around the world. The rapid spread of English around the world has encouraged the growth of localized non-native varieties. Standard English has developed gradually into many different localized dialects; namely Singaporean English, Malaysian English, and others. These 'localization' has caused fear among educators and professionals especially the native speakers because English has turned into a corrupt language. This paper will highlight the cause of local variations in the context of Malaysian English as well as present the examples of non-native varieties of English used within the limits of the Malaysian socio-cultural context. Suggestions for realizing this issue as a means of encouraging more public acceptance will also be featured.

Keywords: localized, non-native, dialect, variation, Malaysian English

INTRODUCTION

It is a common and accepted fact that English is widely used around the world these days, and it will continue to gain more speakers and learners with each passing day. There are many reasons for the increase and extensive use of English universally, and one thing stands out clearly, i.e. English serves various functions to its multiple users who come from different parts of the world.

English as an international language is the most widespread medium of worldwide communication (Brumfit, 1982, p.1). According to Smith (1983, p.7), it is the principle language of international politics, commerce, technology as well as the language of science and technology. It opens the door for modernization in a country in terms of the development of science, technology, trade, diplomacy, etc. Smith further claims that as an international language, it is not bound to one culture, and priority is given to communication. There is also no need for non-native users of English to sound like

native-speakers, but simply to use the language, which is appropriate, acceptable, and intelligible (Smith, 1983, p.8). Thus, English is learnt because of the many benefits that it can give to its learners.

As English is adopted into a country, be it for prestige or modernization, it is inevitable that it should undergo a process of change that is partly linguistic and partly cultural. The rapid spread of English around the world has in turn fostered the growth of indigenous non-native varieties. These varieties of English are used for both international and intranational purposes. Due to its diversified roles, English is used not only as a native language, but also as a second language as well as a foreign language. As a second language, English is acquired after the mother tongue of any group within a region or country that mainly comprises multi-lingual speakers. The functions of English here stretch beyond the limit of a language classroom and a language used in other fields as well, such as politics, law, medicine, and government administration. On the other

hand, English as a foreign language serves a more educational and academic purposes. Be it as a second language or a foreign language, English has found its way into the culture and linguistic diversification of its multi-lingual speakers and with this, new varieties of English have emerged around the world that are distinct from their parent imported variety. For instance, the new varieties of English are found in multi-lingual communities in which several linguistic behaviours take place such as borrowing, code-switching, and semantic shift. These linguistic behaviours of the multi-lingual communities are very much culture-bound.

English is the *de facto* working language of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as set out in the ASEAN Charter introduced in 2007. One thing that is fascinating about Southeast Asia (SEA) is that, historically, the forces of colonization, international trade, and religion are responsible for the spread of English to the region. Today, the region is characterized by its linguistic diversity, and English plays a dynamic role in international communication. The use of English does not only serve as a means of communication with foreigners from outside SEA but also serve as a lingua franca to unify different ethnic groups that live in the region (Low & Hashim, 2012, p.1).

The major issues confronting regional language policy makers surrounding the study of Englishes in SEA associated with the teaching and learning of different languages for different needs include the need for English as an international lingua franca and language of modernization, a local lingua franca for national unity, and a local language for language of identity and community. Choices faced by policy makers include which languages to use as the media of instruction and how to ensure that the languages complement each other rather than compete with each other (Low & Hashim, 2012, p.3).

One of the SEA countries is Malaysia, and English learning in Malaysia began as

a tool of socio-economic mobility and education enhancement (Venugopal, 2000). Now, the role of English in Malaysia has expanded not only as a tool of international socio-political correspondence and involvement, but also as a global medium of interaction and knowledge exchange. Malaysia is a multilingual country. Therefore, the use and development of English is influenced by the national language of Malaysia, Malay language, and its regional dialects, that co-exist with other languages, like Chinese and Indian. These languages have influenced the verbal use of English in Malaysia which produce Malaysian English. This has certainly added up to the world's non-native varieties of English or New Englishes. All these varieties have essentially contributed to the emergence of "localized forms of English" (Stevens, 1983).

English in Malaysia

Just as it did in the other regions in Southeast Asia, English arrived in Malaysia as a result of colonization during the late eighteenth century. English played a dominant and important role in British colonialism in Malaysia. It was the main medium for government administration and law. The local people who were equipped with a sufficient level of English proficiency could also seek employment as lower-ranking government administrators. Thus, private secular and mission-supported schools were set up where English was taught and used as the medium of instruction. As a result of these entirely English-based schools, English ultimately became the dominant language in Malaysia, reflecting power and status. Gradually, the use of English extended to other areas in the government and private sectors, such as transportation, commerce, and foreign trade.

After independence, the role of English in Malaysia has expanded 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 developed gradually to the point that it is no longer owned by its native speakers. Therefore, the global enrichment of English has built the adaptability in the use of English outside the British Isles. In relation to globalization, English acts as a 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. Simultaneously, these features have also brought on the 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. As society influence is becoming more powerful, influential, and progressive, the status of English is also changed slightly.

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, 2002). Nevertheless, there is a tendency to view the growth of Malaysian English as something that is 'corrupted' and has lower prestige than British English. As Malaysian English speakers and sociopolitical state are bilingual in nature, this does not need to be the case. Even though bilingualism promotes a sense of esteem and pride in cultures and languages learnt (Ovando & Collier, 1985, p.2), still it may involve equal competency or unequal competency (Talif & Nadzimah, 2000, p.201) among its speakers. In addition, it will indeed be idealistic to demand equal command of two languages. Thus, it is similar to the case of using Malaysian English.

With regards to socio-cultural settings, such as the urban centers, people feel comfortable to use English in their own English-speaking environment. English is

not only restricted to the home and school but also used among friends in social intercourse and in both official and non-official transactions among government bodies (Wong & Thambyrajah, 1991). The type of English that they use will vary from a standard Malaysian English to a colloquial one depending on the situation (official/formal vs. unofficial/informal). Malaysian English displays the distinguishing features of simplification and reduction of non-native variety, as well as the effects of localization variety. This Malaysian English is spoken by the speech community (Gumperz, 1972) and fellowship including educated speakers as well as slightly proficient speakers of English, while the employees of business organizations, for instance, may also be viewed as members of the same 'discourse community' (Swales, 1990). Therefore, Malaysian English appears as an informal lingua-franca among Malaysians that accept the role of English in their lives as English needed not only in academic and work environment but also in social environment. As a result, a great amount of interference from the mother tongue may be found. In addition, Taliff and Hie (1999, p.63) say that code or language switching among Malaysian English speakers is of a common occurrence. Code switching refers to a verbal strategy employed by bilingual speakers through the change of linguist codes within a similar speech event as a sign of cultural solidarity or distance (Kramsch, 1998, p.125).

All of this provides some information that become the cause of local variations in the context of Malaysian English.

Malaysian Language Policy

A country's language policy is usually formed to react to the current demands as well as to ensure the future of the nation's development. However, before demands are posed on forming a co-existence between Malaysian English 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 Yusoff (1998), the Malaysian policy-implementation process usually involves three important channels, i.e., the political channel, the administrative channel, and the integrated channel. These channels act as gatekeepers of policy formation. In most cases, the needs and action of the gatekeepers are in tune with public who use it.

In the case of the Malaysian education system, the placing of Malay language as the national language and English as the second language acts as a nation building tool after independence from colonial rule. With the implementation of this policy, the role of English as the main medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary education was gradually taken over by Malay language, the national language of Malaysia. Nonetheless, Gill (2002) points out that earlier divergent language policies and implementation has retarded the steady growth of English proficiency in Malaysia. In relation to this, the Malaysian language policy for English has revealed the influence of communicative model of teaching English as a means of encouraging communication in certain daily activities and job situations (Munby, 1978). Another clear example of the language policy is in the sudden introduction of the teaching of Science in English (Selangor Education Department, 2002). As a result, this has grown a need for the development of English teaching to cater for these disciplines-the fields of Science and Mathematics.

Malaysian English versus Standard English

Since the arrival of English in Malaysia during the late eighteenth century, the ineluctable process of language change or "nativization" has taken place in English to accommodate the needs of its speakers. English in Malaysia has "deviated" from its parent variety with its myriad of "nativized" and "acculturated" linguistic elements, so that it has emerged to become

a new variety of English, joining the ranks of other new Englishes, such as Indian English, Philippine English, and Singaporean English and is thus fondly known by Malaysians as "Malaysian English".

Malaysian English is a variety of English that is distinct from Standard English in terms of its linguistic features such as grammar, phonology, and lexicon. Since the emergence of Malaysian English, controversies and conflicts have cropped up on the part of researchers and applied linguists. There are mixed views and reactions on Malaysian English. Some have commented that it is an incorrect version of Standard English. However, many have also pointed out that Malaysian English is not "pidginized" or broken English since many educated Malaysians speak it. One needs to realize that Malaysian English is usually used in informal situations, and it is in these situations that Malaysian English can be seen in its most creative and unique forms.

English is used in Malaysia as the language used for international purposes, a tool to gain access to science and technology and to keep abreast with developments in the west. As English becomes increasingly crucial for these international purposes, steps have been taken by the Malaysian government to promote and accelerate the usage of English but without overshadowing the importance and usage of Malay language.

On a more informal level, English is used in speech, in daily conversations among Malaysians. It is the speech (especially the informal one) of Malaysians that has triggered the emergence of localized features in English, and these come in many forms such as grammar, phonology, and lexical items. As more Malaysians become increasingly comfortable with the use of a Malaysian form of English, questions and views have emerged from different parties, namely researchers of applied linguistics, educators, and academics as to whether or not it

is feasible for Malaysians to continue speaking in English that is distinctively Malaysian. Malaysian English has become increasingly popular among Malaysians so much, so that it can even be heard in the media. Linguists view Malaysian English or Manglish (as some would call it) as bad or broken English that is only spoken by uneducated Malaysians. They fear the worst for the standard of English in Malaysia. They have this notion that if drastic action is not taken to curtail this phenomenon, the standard of English in Malaysia will deteriorate further, and the development of the nation in terms of science and technology and the economy will be at stake.

Thus, in recent years, policies have been implemented by the Malaysian government to raise the standard of English in Malaysia as well as to churn out a new batch of educated English speakers who can communicate well in English. Although the educators mean well and the effort of the Malaysian government is admirable, they need to come to a realization that as much as Standard English is fundamental for national progress, Malaysian English is just important (especially in its spoken form) amongst Malaysians to strengthen ties and build relationships. Most importantly, however, Malaysian English stands out as a new variety of English that is able to represent the identity of Malaysia as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Malaysian English must be regarded as a distinctive variety of English that is creative since English is used differently by Malaysians as compared to its native speakers. English has been assimilated into the Malaysian context. Linguistic features that are distinctively Malaysian have been adopted into English. This aspect of Malaysian English should be taken into consideration as well by researchers of applied linguistics, educators, and academics when reviewing the standard of English in Malaysia.

In spite of regarding Malaysian English as a distinctive variety of English, there is

still a need to know what Standard English is. Most native speakers' fear is based on their definition of 'standard' English. What is a specific criterion for a language to achieve its 'standard'? The present situation in Malaysia is marked by increasing efforts to elevate Standard English instruction at the school level, but this is not felt necessary for society needs at home or in work places. English becomes 'standard' if the spoken and written English is clearly understood by its users. English 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 Malaysian English in its own sociolinguistic settings.

A point to be considered here is 'what we are standardizing'. As stated by Rebaczonok-Padulu (2001), 'standard English' deals with official language of the entire English-speaking world, which is also the language of the educated English-speaking people. 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 (as 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 Malay language is the official language). Therefore, Malaysian English arises to be the lingua-franca (used in an informal setting) to this multiracial society. For instance, instead of using proper English for *It should be done like that*, a Malay speaker tends to use *Like that one*, so that the Chinese and Indians can easily understand it.

Malaysian English functions on a wide range of interlocutors; namely, Malaysian, Chinese, and Indian. With these interlocutor influences, this language variety consequently acts as an intercultural communication tool of English that is more comprehensible within the domains of Malaysia.

Over the years, Malaysian English has undergone the process of nativization which is reflected in the different discourse strategies both in spoken and in written texts manifesting their unique registers. On the level of vocabulary, even for the near-native speakers of English, there is an inevitable departure from other varieties of English due to the different life-style of the people of this multicultural and multi-lingual country. Hence, there are words which are English in origin, but which may be used in ways unfamiliar to native speakers of English. As an illustration, the terms *auntie* and *uncle* are used not only to express kinship relations but also to express marks of respect in addressing the ones who are older than the speakers. Thus, salespeople would use these terms to address their customers as well as individuals who they perceive as older than themselves. Children throughout Malaysia are taught to address most adults as either *auntie* or *uncle*.

Other examples indicate the frequent confusion between the words *follow* and *accompany*, or *chop* and *stamp*. *Follow* is often used in the sense of *accompany*, and *chop* is used to *stamp* or *seal*. Also, other examples include the use of the question tag *isn't it* for all types of structure regardless of the subject and verb used in the main sentence, e.g., *She was quite young, isn't it?*, *You are not doing anything now, isn't it?*, *Are you Mrs. Moho, isn't it?*. These are commonly found in English used by average educated Malaysians who are generally ignorant of the fact that such usage is considered deviant as far as Standard English is concerned.

What is more interesting here is the use of, what Tongue (1979) called, *fillers*. This term is used to indicate those items of language which communicate no particular denotative meaning, but which are used to indicate the emotive, affective attitudes of the speaker, or sometimes simply to fill a pause or a moment of hesitation or reflection in the stream of speech. The most well known is the particle

lah (Ali, 2000). The occurrence of *lah* would be interpreted by Platt and Weber (1980) as a marker of rapport, solidarity, familiarity, and informality. On the other hand, Wong and Thambyrajah (1991) have argued that these markers have a discourse value of affirming the preceding utterance. In Malay language, *lah* is a particle that is highly characteristics of the spoken discourse of speakers of the language. As a particle, *lah* or sometimes pronounced *la* realizes different pragmatic functions as illustrated below from actual interactions (Ali, 2000):

a) Emphasizing support

A: Form Two / Form Two syllabus / we have the reproductive systems and all that to study / as what Eng Seng says / I agree lah

b) Listing out points

B: I think the first thing / I don't agree with what David and er / er / it's easy to say / it's not as simple to give counseling because all of us / erm / erm / I don't think so / it's not as simple saying / ah / ah / counseling la / talk la

c) Persuading

C: I strongly disagree / with / with / counseling / it is not just asking him / how he / he / got it and all that / counseling is ...

D: Counseling means / he should open up and tell us / not to ask him / how / how did he get it / he should tell us / asking him using professional bodies / you must do it in a proper way lah

d) Avoiding conflict

E: For example / you see the place of women / ah / ah / is always in the kitchen / girls are often seen in pictures / cooking

F: I see the situation is not like that anymore / anyway not so la / there are also cases of working women la

e) Compromise

G: Okay / okay lah / what if the mother is too young?

H: And you have an unwanted child?

- I : In that case / we should accept lah / the child / the birth of a child as another human being
- f) Complimenting
- J : No more pampering / that's it / my point here is we should give extra help
- K : That's a good idea / good lah

The examples above show six ways of using the *lah* particle and the pragmatic realizations of the article in each context. It should be pointed that the use of *lah* is not only limited to the six functions mentioned above, there are other functions depending on the context in which it is used.

With the changing role and the decline in the standard of English in Malaysia, it is found that instances of deviation from Standard English have increased in frequency. Though there is an attempt to use the correct form of English, inadequate exposure and knowledge results in many basic deviations which are found even in the speech of educated users of the language. As such, there is a lot of tolerance for aberrations in the language, even in the wider speech-form. Aberrations are usually tolerated and overlooked as long as they do not interfere too greatly with communicative purposes.

At present, indication of these aberrations may be observed in the spoken mode as many Malaysians seem to feel quite free to incorporate features of the local dialect into their speech whether it is in formal or informal situation.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

As a whole, the development of Malaysian English does not need to be hindered by any assumptions on native speakers' records of standardization. What has been implied as *Manglish* or *Mangled English* or *Broken English* is totally unacceptable.

Malaysian English, like other existing varieties, can be standardized to provide the present needs of the speech community and global development. In fact, Malaysian

English can be an equally important tool in the expansion and enrichment of English. Therefore, a mutual sense of acceptance, respect, and cooperation is needed in forming a localized standard that co-exists with the British English model.

As English is a universal language and belongs to everyone, Asian countries like Malaysia and others can follow the Americans and Australians in adapting English according to their own circumstances and cultures. Malaysian English has a sentimental touch to the Malaysians; it belongs uniquely to them (Wong & Thambyrajah, 1991).

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