English, but not Quite

Locating linguistic diversity

Edited by
Oriana Palusci

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English, but not Quite

Locating linguistic diversity

A *Kampung* is not a Village: Malaysian English, a Linguistic Tapestry

Eleonora Federici

A language is a place
(Elias Canetti)

1. *A glimpse on Malaysian history*

Malaysian English is an emerging variety in the Southeast Asian region, an area that, due to immigration waves through the centuries is a linguistically complex and therefore challenging territory to be explored. The linguistic richness of this geographical area, or borrowing a definition by Joanne Rajadurai, the «linguistic tapestry» (Rajadurai 2004: 54), derives first of all, from the mingling of different ethnic communities, like for example, the Indian (mainly Tamil speaking), Arabic and Chinese merchants and workers who migrated in Malaysia before the European traders who discovered this far away land and its strategical position for commerce. However, the influence of various languages was already felt in the sixteenth century when the British Crown became interested in Malaysia, a country which was previously known to the Dutch and Portuguese struggling for the control of colonies and commercial enterprises in South-East Asia. Because of its ever-shifting geographical and historical setting and political development through the last five centuries, it is important to analyse the use of English in this federation of thirteen states taking into consideration various parameters which are important in acknowledging the presence of wjat is now considered as a global language, firstly as a colonial tool of education, and secondly as the language of business and international communication. We can begin our overview on Malaysian English starting

from the following quotation, a general but fruitful consideration in dealing with a variety of English:

> The basic tenet of world Englishes is that English is no longer the property of native speakers, but a global property of people all over the world, and that the English norms must be pluralized, thus permitting linguistic diversities. (Smith in Tanaka 2006: 49)

Linguistic diversity certainly characterises Malaysia and a glimpse to its history is helpful in order to explore English through time, since, as Foo and Richards (2004) have underlined, the use and importance of this language has undergone many layers in the country. First of all, we must remember that this country is made of two geographical entities, West Malaysia and East Malaysia divided by the South China Sea. What was the Federation of Malaya established in 1948 is today West Malaysia. It obtained independence from the British Crown – which in 1826 had incorporated the area in the British Colony of the Straits Settlements - in 1957. English, however, landed in this area in the eighteenth century when the British intervention in the Malay peninsula began to be more apparent and clear with the colonization of the island of Penang and the settlement of the East India Company in 1786. Clearly, the different phases of European colonization in this area brought ethnic and linguistic diversity which can still be felt in the colloquial varieties of Malay, Malaysian English and the so-called Bazaar Malay,[1] all used according to the speaker's level of education and the context of communication. Even today English is an echo of the colonial past with Baba Malay together with traces of other European languages, such as for example, Portuguese based creoles. Malaysian English is an emerging and still changing variety made of many layers.

Significantly, English in Malaysia is mainly due to the gradual introduction and establishment of the British educational system before independence. Anyhow, the step by step process of British colonization there was an attention regards the major ethnic groups, Malay medium schools for the Malay population, Chinese medium schools for Chinese people and Tamil medium schools for the Indian group. However, imperial officers understood that

[1] Bazaar Malay «is the name of a Malay-based pidgin used in market-places and traditionally used by servants» (McArthur 2002: 334).

it was important to create an élite of fluent English speakers among the local aristocracy which were supposed to be part of the colonial administration. By 1872 it was decided that an English medium school was necessary to achieve this aim. English became the main language of education and it was considered as the language of literacy. Interestingly, «English medium education [...] created interethnic bonds and established a value system that soon thereafter paved the way to a desire for independence» (Schneider 2007: 146).

Together with education religion was, as in many other colonial countries, an important tool to introduce English in the area. Indeed, the missionary movements were equally important of the creation of schools in this enterprise of linguistic colonization, similarly to what happened in Singapore where mission schools played a central role in shaping the colonial national identity, and as Robbie Groh (2001) states, 'composing the modern nation'.

Up to the mid-Fifties as in other South-Asian countries English in Malaysia was the language of the élite. Still nowadays it is the language of the urban middle class, it is taught at primary and secondary schools, newspapers are published in English and some radio and television channels 'speak' English. However, since the National Language Act in 1967 which established Malay as the only official language of Malaysia, English has been given politically a second-class role within Malaysian society. At the end of the Sixties the Malay language changed name and defined as Bahasa Malaysia outlining a nationalistic image of the 1963 born Malaysia inhabited also by non-Malay citizens, a data that is quite influential. Malay is essential for government positions and private jobs. As Abdullah Hassan (2005) outlines, fifty years of language planning shows that Malaysia has achieved this aim. Malay is today a language of education, administration and regional communication. The common tongue for all ethnic groups reshaped to be a symbol of the nation has become an adequate instrument of knowledge, education and information and has worked as a tool for integration between different communities. However, Malay was totally shaped and twisted in order to become the national language. Grammatical and semantic elements including morphological and phonological forms were changed and scientific/technological terms newly coined. Anyhow, in this country bilingualism was always accepted as part of people's

education and needs. Chinese and Indians were even trilingual but Malays from rural areas remained monolinguals failing to achieve any rudimentary level of English. Therefore, even today some communities can speak more than one language including English, while others suffer the disadvantages to communicate only in one idiom. Moreover, notwithstanding fifty years of this policy English surfaces in many fields.

2. *Malaysian English, or English in a linguistic tapestry*

From a sociolinguistic perspective ethnic diversity in Malaysia stands at the basis of languages mingling. Phases of colonization and settlement have made the linguistic frame of contemporary Malaysia, a pattern of dialects from different populations. Bahasa Malaysia, Tamil and Mandarin are the main languages in the territory used in parallel with English in its various forms, official and unofficial, 'broken English' or as it is called by Malaysian, "half-past six English" (an idiomatic adjective for something below standard). We can speak of a diglossic speech community where a language is used for interethnic communication and Bahasa Malaysia and English are chosen for interethnic communication. As I have already highlighted, English was the official language before 1967 but is now considered as a second language utilised for verbal communication between different ethnic groups or in official contexts. As in many other Asian countries it is the language which possesses an international appeal, the status of English is still central for its importance as an international language, it is the tongue to speak in order to get a graduate education abroad but also to have a better job qualification in the internal market.[2] Today Malaysians acquire English as a second language in primary, secondary and tertiary education, however, to a formal style of English Malaysians prefer Malaysian English (M.E.), which is a variety often correlated to Singapore English.

[2] In 2002 the Government changed language policy recommending the teaching of sciences and mathematics in English at all leveles of education. The reason was clearly the influence of globalization and the use of English in the domain of science and technology. See Kaur Gill 2005.

If in the past some scholars have underlined the connections between Malaysian English and Singapore English, recent studies have outlined the phonological, syntactic and lexical features of the first as a distinct variety. R. K Tongue has described ESM (English of Singapore and Malaysia) in his touchstone book of the Seventies, Platt and Weber have developed the study of Malaysian English in the same direction while in a recent volume Loga Mahesan Baskaran presents three different categories: Official Malaysian English (Standard M.E.), unofficial Malaysian English (dialectal M.E.) and broken Malaysian English (patois M.E.). Similarly, a volume by Lisa Lim has focused only on Singapore English not including Malaysian English as part of this variety. A language shift is occurring in M.E., the more colloquial variety is emerging thanks to younger generations and acquiring a status as an expression of cultural identity to be proud of. The use of a 'nativised variety', as Shanta Nair Venugopal outlines referring to Kachru's definition of a localised linguistic variety, projects a sense of shared membership between speakers. The workplace becomes the context where the emergence of speech forms clearly identifies a local notion of language and identity. The use of M.E. is thus perceived as an "act of identity" (Nair Venugopal 2000: 206). Similarly, M.E. is considered as an informal language, «English which is Malaysian in identity – and this is reflected by the distinct phonology influenced by their ethnic tongues, lexical items which are socioculturally grounded and syntactic structures which are distinctly Malaysian in form» (Gill in Schneider 2007: 150).

In such a complex linguistic tapestry pronunciation in English is marked and code-switching is very common. M.E. is used in media, education, government where the influence of substratum languages is not so strong as in the colloquial register of spoken language. In lexicon the major character is the evident and repeated codes from other languages such as Malay, Tamil and Chinese words are inserted in spoken language but also retraceable in media texts. Loga Mahesan Baskaran reports various examples, both of nativization in lexicon and syntax, as for example from a radio bullettin:

> four men were arrested in a *dusun* (orchard) off Kuala Ketil for allegedly having murdered the *kadi* (judge) who rebuked them for previous

instances of *khalwat* (close proximity with members of the opposite sex) (Baskaran 2005: 19).

or from a University Dean's opening address at an international seminar: «It is with great pleasure that I extend a very warm welcome to all of you to this seminar» (Baskaran 2005: 19). The use of terms from local languages in Malaysian English is mainly due to a non correspondence of the word in this variety. Cultural elements are not always translatabale in another language. For example, some institutionalised concepts cannot find an equivalent in standard English, even using a paraphrase. The term *klawat* mentioned in the above example that is, the idea of a too close proximity with a person of the opposite sex in a Muslim society has no equivalent in English and is not easy to explain without a biased standpoint. Similarly the term *gotong-royong* referring to cooperation among different ethnic groups which is a feature in Malaysian society is totally cultural-bound and not easily translatable in English. Likewise, always referring to the previous example, the word *dusun,* which can be translated as orchard, is kept to add local colour to the news. Other cultural-bound terms are usually maintained in newspapers in English in order to refer to local society and culture: *kampung* (village), *penghulu* (village chief) or *bomoh* (medicine man). These terms do not only add local colour but acquire a specific denotation. For example, the English idea of a village with cottages is clearly very far away from a Malay village with wooden houses raised above the ground on land or water. Similarly, the Malay orchard is full of exotic fruits and a luxuriant vegetation, a totally different atmosphere than the English apple orchard. In a *dusun* unique to South-East Asia, we will find *durian* – the king of fruits - or *rambutan*. These are unknown fruits for a European and so is the organization of the land totally different. The other two terms, denoting not an object but two persons are also not translatable into English, or at least not totally equivalent in the possible translation because they refer to two important roles in Malay society. The *bomoh* in a Malay village is believed to be a healer with supernatural powers, a translation with the term doctor will hide many connotations of this medicine man The *penghulu* is considered not only an institutional guide but a spiritual one, a sort of 'father' for all villagers, not a mere village chief. His role

is not only an institutional one but is charged with other meanings connected with the importance given by Malay to old people considered as wise and a touchstone in society.

Another type of lexical indigenization is the presence of hyponymous collocations such as for example, *batik cloth*, *bersanding cerimony* (Malay wedding) or *meranti wood* (wood used for furniture). Morphological processes have also produced compounds such as *satay-house* (a place where you eat satay) or *toddy-can* (can of toddy that means fermented coconut water) and the use of local terms as nouns or adjectives (or vice versa) through conversion like for example the term *kacang* (peanuts): "I don't like kacang", "Luckily the exam was kacang" (meaning easy).

Malaysians have a tendency to use English lexemes in a characteristic way, for example through semantic extension. One example can be the term 'aunt/aunty' referred not only to a family member but used in terms of respect for an old person to whom the person speaking has been acquainted for a long time. This is connected to a wider notion of family. Similarly, the word *bungalow* refers to a detached and elegant house not to a simple accommodation, while the term 'condominium' (shortened in 'condo') refers to a high-cost flat. In a similar way, some English lexemes are used in a more formal or informal manner according to the situation, for example 'my residence' used instead of 'my house'. As Andrew Preshous underlines, some verbs have assumed distinct uses in M.E., for example the use of 'to stay' instead of 'to live', 'to borrow' instead of 'to lend', 'to hear music' instead of 'to listen to'. Similarly, if someone take us to the airport in M.E. he will say 'I will send you to the airport' or if they say to us 'you are so sensitive' it will mean 'you take offence very easily'.

Malaysian English syntax is also marked by the influence of substrate languages retraceable in the use of uncountable nouns utilised as countable, article ellipsis before abstract nouns, innovation in phrasal verbs, an emphatic use of reflexive pronouns or the addition of the particle 'lah' which adds an informal touch to the sentence. The interrogative in Malaysian English presents an ellipted copula "Where she?" or the wh- element can be inserted in the sentence final position "She is where?". Another feature easy to recognize is the yes or not tags to mark interrogatives: "She

can come, or not?".[3] As Schneider (2007) highlights, many grammatical innovations intertwine lexis and syntax: variant complementation patterns, pluralization of mass nouns, missing articles and progressive use of stative verbs. Anyway, there is not yet a grammar or a dictionary of Malaysian English, it has not been codified. On the contrary, many examples of M.E. in literature have been documented by Platt, Weber and Lian Ho (1983) or more recently by Mohammad Quayum (2003).[4]

Malaysian English remains a territory to be fully explored, a territory which continuously changes shapes and local colours.

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[3] An exhaustive panorama on M.E. syntax can be found in Baskaran 2005.

[4] Quite interesting are some websites dedicated to Malaysian English and Manglish. If Wikipedia dedicate some pages to M.E., especially vocabulary see also: www.whatthefreek.com/manglish/ (Manglish For and Against); www.geocities.com/MotorCity/Dowsn/2163/tales/redhood.html (which presents a funny rewriting of Red Little Hood in M.E.), www.ecncylopedia.com/doc/1029Malaysianenglish.html (with extracts from the *New Strait Times*), even humouros pages, such as for example, www.macvaysia.blogspot.com/2004/manglish.html.

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