

Jyh Wee Sew
CHIJ ST Theresa's Convent,
Singapore

Globalization and a Shifting Malay

Abstract

The lexical composition of a language creates the first impression. A foreign friend reacted to the many English loan words in the Malay news broadcast read on the television. On further listening, the language indeed has many English loan words. The shift of Malay toward English, accelerating through globalisation, began in language contact situations with lexical borrowing from English to Malay in translation. Potential connotation and semantic limitation in the existing Malay lexicon was the reason behind direct lexical borrowing from English. Supporting the borrowing are external factors such as language policy in education and foreign investment in economy expansion expediting the English-over-Malay choice in language use. The language transformation, in the name of growth and progress, is relevant for a sustained prosperous future. Nonetheless, there remains an uneasy group of conservatives, who see the need to safeguard the integrity of Malay. This discussion leads to a lexical coining system in Malay. Malay sound clusters, phonaesthemes, are useful for creating a more natural and authentic lexicon in Malay hence the notion *phonosemantics*. The discussion on the real world events e.g. the current affairs that surround the Malay discourse communities in Malaysia and Singapore, suggests that language choice does not happen in vacuum, nor does it follow idealistic prescription. True to description and relevance, the discussion accepts younger speakers' rights to their language choice in face-to-face communication and ends on an observatory note.

Key words: Globalisation and Malay Language, Lexical borrowing, Translation, Lexical Coinage, Phonaestheme, Sound Strategy

Introduction

In an interesting paper on lexical borrowing from English into the Pacific languages, Crowley identified the onset of language shift in general, arising from language borrowing and attitudes toward the borrowing language, which leads to language loss and language death (2004: 42):

Language shift is invariably preceded by a period of bilingualism. The influence of language contact engendered by societal bilingualism can usually be most readily seen in the form of lexical borrowing between two languages. Because of its salience, this typically attracts a negative, especially with regard to words originating from whatever happens to be the socio-politically dominant – and therefore threatening – language.

Currently, Crowley's observation is true for Malay. There was initially one puristic stand for Malay language engineering in 1978 against borrowing from English directly, before more familiar means within the guidelines of terminology coinage based on the language family have been exhausted. These guidelines include:

1. Use the term in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay, as well as other dialects and moribund languages) with the condition the term carries no bad connotation or obscenity and it is shorter in form.
2. If none is available from Guideline 1 choose from the languages of the family such as Banjar, Sunda, Iban etc.
3. If none from Guidelines 1 and 2, choose from foreign languages. The term should be phonemic to the target language, e.g. *elektron* (electron), *psikologi* (psychology), *struktur* (structure).

As a norm the foremost international language, i.e. English will be the source, unless the expertise is not within the language.

4. Terminology that is maintained in the original forms in all languages are used in Malay in italicised typeface, e.g., *bona fide*, *esprit de corps*, *fait accompli*, *weltanschauung*.

(The above guidelines are my own translation from the original Malay text in *Pedoman Umum Pembentukan Istilah Bahasa Malaysia* (1978: 4-6); the three sub-guidelines on terminology coinage from English into Malay are excluded in the translation)

Furthermore, Asmah (1993: 119) outlined five important considerations before adopting a foreign term in terminology coinage, namely the etymological aspect, the phonological/orthographical aspect, the grammatical aspect, the lexical aspect and the semantic aspect. Etymological and phonological aspects are the reasons the ending *-logy* in English, transliterated as *-loji* in Malay, was later represented as *-logi*. Subsequently, *geology* and *technology* became part of the Malay lexicon as *geologi* and *teknologi*. This is due to the Greek origin of logos for *-logy*, which closely correlates with *-loji* in Malay (Asmah 1993: 121).

Translating English

Tham (1990: 114-115) identifies six strategies of borrowing from English into Malay, which include direct borrowing, direct loan translation, loan rendition, loan creation among others. This discussion examines the strategy of direct translation, as translating English into Malay can be frustrating. Translators must search for the Malay equivalents first, followed by the similar equivalents from other Malay dialects, followed by equivalents or similar designations from languages of the Malayan language family. The following example illustrates two problems behind this translation practice. The word *communication*, translated as *komunikasi*, seems to solve the problem of many translators and editors. But from the purist's stand, the Malay word *hubung* designates the meaning *contact* and the affixation of *hubung* with the nominal affixes *per~~~an*, *perhubungan* can mean things pertaining to *contact making*, which includes communication. *Perhubungan* could then be the equivalent of *communication* in Malay proper. Such means of translating *communication*

uses the existing resources in the target language and avoids bringing foreign linguistic element into the target language unnecessarily.

However, *hubung* suffixed with *-an* designates *relationship* and to have *hubungan* may refer to a relationship or an affair in the common Malay usage. Most speakers of Malay have the tendency to glean over the difference of *per~--~an* and *-an* hence *perhubungan* can easily be construed as having a similar meaning with *hubungan*. *Komunikasi* seemed to bypass all potential ill associations of *hubungan* from *perhubungan*. A translator needs to ponder upon the choice of *komunikasi* over *perhubungan* from an external perspective pertaining to cultural norms of the discourse community beyond the translation techniques. The language's agglutinating complexity and the speakers' norms in language use are two concerns of any intelligent translator.

Bearing in mind the semantic and grammatical considerations of borrowing from another language, searching for a Malay equivalent in the practice of English-to-Malay translation becomes tedious. The pan-Malay lexical discovery was discreditable with connotations that mar and render the translated text ambiguous. This was not strong enough a reason to discourage hard-nose translators from preventing pidginisation. An English-Malay pidgin might occur if cross-language borrowing and code switching continued to flourish rapidly in the speech communities. Crystal (2003: 166) identified Malenglish between two educated Malaysian women and a fragment of their conversation is provided with my addition in brackets:

Lee Lian: What you looking for? Furnitures or kitchenwares?...you wanted to *beli* (buy) some *barang-barang* (things) for your new house.

Chandra: Yes *lah!* Might as well go window-shopping a bit at least. No chance to *ronda* (loft) otherwise. My husband, he got no patience one!

Sweeney (1987: 143) called the similar English-Malay variety Malayish and equated the mixture of Malay and English with *rojak*, a mixed Malay salad. Language erosion

became worrying to some Malays as they noticed the rampant use of *rojak* Malay (Hassan Ahmad quoted in Sew 1996: 858, the English translation mine):

Perbincangan mereka hampir seluruhnya dalam bahasa Inggeris ... Kemudian datang seorang wanita Melayu berpakaian baju kurung dan bertudung kepala lalu rakannya yang berbaju kurung juga berteriak, "I sayyyy, apahal, we have been waiting long time lah. What happen? Come, come sit down, meet..."

Almost all the discussion was in English... Then came a Malay women dressed in traditional Malay dress and head veil to her friend in the group who was also adorned the traditional Malay dress that called out, "I sayyyy, why, we have been waiting long time lah. What happen? Come, come sit down, meet..."

The discussion further examines the rise of English in Singapore and Malaysia and highlights the difference and similarity of the language situations in both countries. The analysis concerns the social and educational intricacies in the respective language situation.

Globalisation and Language Choice in Singapore

English has been the first language of the country's education system. Equipped with a modern infrastructure, its strategic position at the east end of the Straits of Malacca, and the English speaking ability of its workforce Singapore has always been a choice for international investment and relocation among foreign investors. The country has topped the survey among international investors in successive years (Channel News Asia 2004).

English is useful in achieving specific utilitarian goals in Singapore and the emphasis on economic development treats English language proficiency as necessary for attracting foreign investment and providing access to scientific and technological know-how (Wee 2003: 213-214). In other words, English is instrumental to Singapore's economic success as explicated in Chua (1995: 65):

Without the English Language, we might not have succeeded in teaching so quickly a whole generation the knowledge and skills, which made them able to work the machines brought in from the industrialized countries of the West.

All students of the national education system need a credit for English in the Primary School Learning Examination (PSLE), O-level and A-level for General Paper, to qualify for certification. English has been a major concern in all graduating classes as the dip of English result in a particular year also means the fall of the school from the parents' list of favourite schools. This in turn is critical to the school as its reputation is at stake and the quality of students who attend in the immediate future is affected.

Mastering English is relevant to success. The western medical system is the health model of the country. This means medical students must be proficient in English medical terminology and English usage to achieve medical qualification. Lawyers-to-be must be familiar with the British legal system, as that is the model of legal practice. This also means people who cannot speak English will need legal interpretation and hence may experience a lack of communication for their case.

The relevance of English exemplified in the Singapore Idol competition, which had the most viewers in Singapore's television history, was obvious. There were no Chinese or Malay songs used in the competition (not until the last four shows where participants could include a different song choice to add some novelty to the English song singing competition).

In various analyses of English accent gathered in Pakir (1994: 108-109) the most preferred English variety is that of a British accent. The local respondents seemed to believe that Received Pronunciation is associated with socioeconomic success, and prestigious, more competent, and thus desired language norm. The summary of English accent preference furthers language situation in Singapore as encompassing a variety of Englishes and a preference for a certain accent.

Malay on the wane

Malay became the national language of Malaysia in 1957 and it has been the language of instruction and the official language of dissemination ever since. Malay is one of the four

official languages in Singapore, along with Mandarin, Tamil, and English. Against these backgrounds, Malay is not only part of the cultural identity of the Malay communities but a proud political inheritance that has been an accepted means of communication and the symbol of sovereignty. The Fern-Wu report used as the Memorandum of Education in the 1950s stipulated the use of Malay as the language of instruction from primary to tertiary education in Malaysia (see Asmah 1979). Malay became a compulsory subject to in all national education failing which will render the academic results as inadequate for certification.

The turn of the twenty first century sees the return of English usage to Malaysia in big leaps. The use of English as the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics in the primary schools has created an unease among the Malay communities in Malaysia. The protest was indirectly couched in the reissue of the *Keranda 152* (152 Coffin) in 2002, first published in 1968. The book has added an epilogue written in the question-answer format. The answer as to why the rejection of English as medium of instruction was a syllogistic denial (p. 99):

Mengubah bahasa pengantar di sekolah daripada bahasa Melayu ke bahasa Inggeris akan mengancam dan memusnahkan kedudukan bahasa Melayu baik dalam jangka pendek mahupun panjang. Inilah yang mereka tentang.

To change the medium of instruction in school from Malay to English will threaten and destroy the status of Malay, either in the short or long term. This was their actual rejection (my translation).

Nationalistic pride and the fear of losing the sovereign status of Malay as the national language to English seems obvious. The road to independence, although peaceful, was not without struggle and much negotiation with various ethnicities and the communists in the 50s. The thought of going back to being an English-speaking nation is unbearable for some senior grass-roots Malays who have had this defence mechanism developed in them some forty

years ago. Their deep love for their mother tongue, which has been decreed as the official language in the Constitution under Article 152, seemed less secure with English marching ever so swiftly again into the hearts of younger generation who readily embraced her arrival. However, Asmah has observed the continuous presence of English throughout the history of patriotism to nationhood and internationalism in Malaysia (1992: 64-65):

Even when nationalism was the order of the day, the language of the colonial rulers was never relegated to the background. The Constitution of Malaya 1957, specifically its Language Act, placed English as an official language in Malaysia for 10 years after Independence; the other official language was Malay. Even when the Revised Act of 1967 made Malay the sole official language of Peninsular Malaysia, English was still allowed to remain as the language of legal domain. It is still so even to this day.

The actual paradigm shift, if there was one, from Malay to English had already begun when English became a medium of instruction at institutions of higher learning in 1994 (see Asmah 1987 for a second opinion). Alias (1997: 60) recorded the reaction of the Malaysian public on the matter:

It is unfortunate that the action taken by the government received lukewarm responses from the Malaysian public, especially teachers, lecturers and educationists in institutions of higher learning who have voiced their disagreements towards such a drastic action...in the search for modernisation and industrialisation, the role played by Bahasa Melayu should not be sidelined.

Interestingly, Shaharir (2004: B23) has provided insightful data indicating that the top ten countries that had done well in the International Olympiad in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology were those using their mother tongue as the medium of instruction. Thailand ranked first in Biology IBO2003, and none of the top ten countries, e.g. South Korea and China, in Mathematic Olympiad used foreign languages to teach Mathematics in the IMO 2003.

This demonstrates Malay or any other languages other than English do not encumber the understanding of Science and Mathematics in secular education. There is a reason to keep the mother tongue languages even though they might be less instrumental or less global compared to English. The symbolic function of a mother tongue or a national language like Malay needs acknowledgment, both from the speech communities and the authority.

On the other hand, English is becoming the new mother tongue. For example, the child of a German industrialist and a Malaysian who courted through English speaks English first (Crystal 2003: 6). The younger generation have adopted English as their first language and they grow up comfortably speaking English. Western pop and television cultures, such as Atomic Kitten, Destiny's Child, The Charmed and Friends are their favourite pastimes. The success of Block Busters like *Harry Potter*, *Lords of the Ring*, *Brigitte Jones' Diary II*, *Constantine*, and *Princess Diary* in Singapore and Malaysia reflects the language choice of younger generation. Their mother tongue interactions are limited to the classroom. Unsurprisingly, speaking English is accepted as modern and well-educated (cf. Crowley 1997: 157).

Briefly examined in Crowley's spirit (2004: 44-45) are the interrelated considerations including the socio-political and demographic position of the Malay speech community in general as well as the common attitudes of the Malay speakers in relation to Malay erosion. Lexical borrowing from English will expedite the language shift from Malay to English. Malay will grow more distant from its younger speakers in time.

Globalisation and Language Choice

The need to be part of the global system is a trend of post-modern progress after the financial crisis of Asia and Southeast Asia in 1997. In the midst of international investment and the rise of multinational companies, English has become the foremost language of communication and medium of instruction in the business and working world (cf. Crystal

2003: 14). In the face of globalisation, English is no longer a colonial language with a negative slant but a useful means to economy development and redevelopment, as the ability of workers to speak English is an attractive factor for foreign investment. English-speaking domestic helpers from the Philippines, for example, commanded higher wages in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan, compared to their Indonesian counterparts. Their English command is able to provide an English edge to their wards.

In 2003, the then Malaysian Prime Minister proposed the inclusion of English as the medium of instruction in the education system. After much discussion with various quarters, including the vernacular school governing boards, language professors, intellectuals, grass-root leaders, and patriots of Malay languages, the nation began a shift in the medium of instruction as English, along with Malay, are used to teach Science and Mathematics (Sew 2005). In 2004, the Malaysian Minister of Foreign Trade and International Investment, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz has made it clear in the national daily that to challenge the use of English as the medium of teaching for Science and Mathematics is to stir trouble.

The worldwide use of English as the medium of learning reinstates the functional hegemony of the language. Australia, Canada, England, and New Zealand require a score of 6.5 and above in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as part of the university entrance. Likewise, students must meet the required TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language) and SATS (Standard Aptitude Test Score) standards set by the American universities. Universities around the world have set up English Centres to cater to the needs of foreign learners who speak little English. It is not outrageous to claim that many people love to learn English in Asia and that business has been good for many English language service providers (Sew 2005).

Some expatriates in Malaysia from the non-English speaking worlds had to sit for English examination too, despite the fact that they are working for a branch of a company

from their home country. Japanese executives, for example, prepare for TOEIC (Test of English as International Communication). One of them was informed that he might get a raised if he passed the examination. Obviously, English enhances one's educational and working standing and definitely a factor for vertical mobility in society or company of the current world.

Concluding remarks

During an interview with the reporter of Channel News Asia on the issue of maintaining mother tongues in Singapore, a Malay woman suggested a *Speak Malay Campaign* as well as a *Speak Tamil Campaign*. English loan words have comfortably blended into the Malay lexicon via a realignment of phonology with the Malay sound system. Young speakers have adopted the expanded Malay lexicon. The English influence on Malay after a long history of borrowing is obscure to the point of being common. The younger generation has the right to their language choice, which is now an economic, education, international and interracial related decision. Consequently, the parents have to decide as to how much English over a Mother Tongue is required for their children (Channel News Asia 2004). It is under such circumstances that the *Speak Mandarin Campaign* becomes relevant for Singapore to maintain the Chinese cultural identity, although the approaches have changed somewhat (engaging pop singers and rappers) to suit the current mass. Perhaps, my foreign friend who asked why Malay sounded quite like English will now understand that external factors are the reasons for the waning Malay sound.

References

- Alias Mohammad Yatim. 1997. Language, Technology and Education: 200 Years On: English in the Malaysian Education System. In Zaniah Marshallsay (ed.) *Educational Challengers in Malaysia: Advances and Prospect*, 39-67. Clayton: Monash University.
- Anonymous. 2002. *Keranda 152 (Coffin 152)*. Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Linguistik Malaysia.
- Anonymous. 1978. *Pedoman Umum Pembentukan Istilah Bahasa Malaysia (A General Guideline to Terminology Coinage in Bahasa Malaysia)*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Asmah Haji Omar. 1979. *Language Planning for Unity and Efficiency*. Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya Press.
- Asmah Haji Omar. 1987. *Malay In Its Sociocultural Context*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Asmah Haji Omar. 1992. *The Linguistic Scenery in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Asmah Haji Omar. 1993. *Essays on Malaysian Linguistics*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Chua, Beng Huat. 1995. *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London: Routledge.
- Crowley, Terry. 1997. *An Introduction of Historical Linguistics (Third Edition)*. Auckland: Oxford.
- Crowley, Terry. 2004. Borrowing into Pacific Languages: language enrichment or language threat? In Jan Tent and Paul Geraghty (eds.) *Borrowing: A Pacific Perspective*, 41-53. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Crystal, David. 2003. *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge.
- Sew, Jyh Wee. 2005. Falsafah Pendidikan Bahasa Kedua (Second Language Education Philosophy). *Dewan Bahasa* 5:2, 10-15.
- Sew, Jyh Wee. 1996. Hakisan Bahasa Di Malaysia (Language Erosion in Malaysia). *Jurnal Dewan Bahasa* 40:9, 855-860.
- Shaharir Mohamad Zain. 2004. Peranan Bahasa Sendiri Dalam Pembangunan Sains Sepanjang Zaman (Local Language Role in the Development of Science throughout the Century) B1-B42. *Seminar Bahasa Dan Sastera MABBIM ke 43/MASTERA ke 9*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

- Sweeney, Amin. 1987. *A Full Hearing: Orality and Literacy in the Malay World*. Berkeley: California University Press.
- Tham, Seong Chee. 1990. *A Study of the Evolution of The Malay Language: Social Change and Cognitive Development*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.
- Wee, Lionel H. A. 2003. Linguistic Instrumentalism in Singapore. *Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 24:3, 211-224.

Jyh Wee Sew

CHIJ ST Theresa's Convent

160 Lower Delta Rd, Singapore 099138