
Code-switching in Kuala Lumpur Malay

The “Rojak” Phenomenon

HUSNI ABU BAKAR

University of California at Riverside

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Husni Abu Bakar received his M.A. in Linguistics and Cognitive Science from the University of Delaware and is currently a graduate student in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Southeast Asian Text, Ritual and Performance program at the University of California at Riverside. Husni’s research interests include classical Malay literature, Buddhist literature, language documentation, sociolinguistics, literary translation and comparative religious studies.

Introduction

In this study, code-switching in Malay is investigated by isolating and concentrating on Kuala Lumpur Malay (KL Malay). Native speakers of KL Malay were interviewed and recorded, and their responses were transcribed and glossed. Analysis of these responses suggests a significant percentage of English words have been imported into the KL Malay lexicon and are being used in various contexts to replace their KL Malay counterparts. Moreover, it is found that morphemes from KL Malay can attach themselves to borrowed English words. It is also discovered that female speakers use more English words than male speakers. Overall, this study provides concrete evidence of the occurrence of code switching in KL Malay. The results of this study raise significant questions about the acquisition of KL Malay as a native language, as well as whether KL Malay has transformed into a creole. From a language planning standpoint, this may be related to the superimposition of English as a second language for all Malaysians, as mentioned by Hassan (2005). Other issues that are connected to this matter are the premature selection of Malay as the instructional medium in schools despite the lack of certain terminology and widespread bilingualism in the

society. This paper invites a reexamination of the current linguistic situation in Malaysia, especially in the peninsula where KL Malay is spoken.

Kuala Lumpur Malay and Bahasa Rojak

In Peninsular Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur specifically, there is uncertainty when referring to the spoken Malay variant, as it is laced with lexical items from other languages. The Kuala Lumpur speech community is multi-ethnic and polyglossic,¹ consisting of speakers of various languages such as English, Cantonese, Hokkien, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and many more. Since the Malay variant spoken is not the one taught in schools, the term *bahasa rojak*² (lit. “rojak language”) is used among the speech communities in Malaysia to refer to the eclectic nature of the spoken language, using the metaphor of the local mixed fruit and vegetable salad.

However, the term *bahasa rojak* in the Malaysian context is also used to refer to any mixture of two or more languages in communication, with any of the languages being the base language. A famous example is Manglish (Malaysian English), in which words and phrases from Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese, Tamil and a few other languages are juxtaposed with English

words. The target of much negative attention, *bahasa rojak* has been banned from national TV stations, labeled as “undisciplined” language use and deemed a threat to the national language and national identity.³ Ironically, local scholars and linguists have kept it at arm’s length, never examining the linguistic traits of the widely spoken variant so as to ascertain the nature of this so-called threat. Thus, the Malay variant examined in this study has not been analyzed extensively, as linguists have focused more on the standard Malay variants. Another possible reason for this exclusion is the transcription of data into the standard orthography that leads to the assumption that it is standard Malay being spoken and not KL Malay.

Part of the problem is also a larger, more general trend of obscuring non-standard variants of a particular language and treating them as “incorrect.” Proponents of this view tell us how a language should be spoken, instead of how it is spoken. An example of this in English usage is the rule against prepositional stranding (ending a sentence with a preposition) taught in grammar school, which does not always apply in everyday speech. We hear sentences such as “What is he talking about?” or “Who did Genie give the present to?” on a regular basis, and they sound natural and comprehensible. Prescriptive rules, such as the one mentioned, are often determined by an authority and must be explicitly learned by the speakers. More importantly, these rules do not depict how language works and how it is spoken in speech communities, such as the Malay speakers in Kuala Lumpur.

A similar disjuncture is apparent in Malay linguistics in Malaysia. There has always been a strictly imposed good-bad dichotomy between Standard Malay and *bahasa rojak* by the linguistic authority, with the latter being considered as not the “real” Malay and the former being considered as the variant spoken in Kuala Lumpur and the southern part of the Malay peninsula. Here, I suggest that the Malay variant spoken in Kuala Lumpur is distinct from Standard Malay. While retaining some of the features such as the final /a/ → /ə/ alternation in the word-final position, Kuala Lumpur Malay (henceforth KL Malay) is not identical to the Standard Malay defined by Teoh (1994), Nik Safiah Karim (1986) and Asmah Haji Omar (1977), who assume that the variant is free from any code-switching and only includes words from the prescribed lexicon, the official dictionary of the Malay language, *Kamus*

Dewan. Code-switching, as well as other features shown in the findings, is an inevitable phenomenon for most speakers of KL Malay.

A possible reason for the lack of acknowledgement of the prominence of code-switching in spoken Malay is the prescribed bad reputation of code-switching by *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (translated by Hassan [2005] as “Language and Literacy Agency,” henceforth DBP) through academic articles published on and in the Malay language. Below is an excerpt from one of them:

Maggi 2 minute noodles
Maggi 2 minit mee

3 jam servis
3 hour service

Dalam hubungan dua contoh yang akhir ini, dapat dipertanyakan mengapa BM yang mesti diperkosa? Apakah tidak mungkin mereka beranggapan bahawa bahasa Inggeris ialah bahasa yang utama sedangkan BM bahasa sambilan atau bahasa yang boleh diperlakukan begitu sahaja.

(Junus, 1996: p.33)

Translation:

With regard to the two examples above, it is reasonable to question why is it the case that BM [*Bahasa Melayu*, lit. “Malay language”] must be raped? Is it not the case that they think English is the prominent language, while BM is a trivial language or “the language that can be used or abused.”

The examples given in the article above illustrate how English has “corrupted” the structure of Malay through structural borrowing via direct translation. As a large portion of Malay vocabulary is borrowed and incorporated from other languages, synchronically and diachronically, the process is often over-generalized beyond lexical borrowings to structural patterns, resulting in the lament of the linguist mentioned above.

Far from being objective, some research papers published by DBP on Malay adopt a preachy tone, and are chiefly concerned with preserving the “purity” and “quality” of the Malay language and shielding it from

undesirable polluting influences, including colloquialisms and unassimilated lexical items from other languages (mainly English), instead of giving an unbiased account of the linguistic situation. Spoken Malay in the Kuala Lumpur area is perceived to have remained unaffected by any language change or contact and is almost always equated to Standard Malay. Both dialects are seen as free from any unprecedented phonological, morphological and syntactical alternations. The closest attempt at describing the real complexity of spoken Malay is the diglossic categorization of Standard Malay and Bazaar Malay, the latter being the low variety with its main characteristics being mispronunciation by non-Malay speakers and simplified pidgin-like structures.⁴ Bazaar Malay, however, is a vast category, referring to numerous non-standard regional variations of Standard Malay, not only the colloquial language used in the Kuala Lumpur area. KL Malay does not fit into either the Standard Malay or Bazaar Malay categories, one is too constrained and the other is too broad. High-low distinctions which conventionally have been used in Malay linguistics are now becoming obsolete. In order to accommodate KL Malay, the descriptions and categorizations mentioned above have to be revised in order to consider how the Malay language is really spoken in contemporary Kuala Lumpur, based on concrete linguistic data.

Malay-English code-switching in context

Malay and English are both Subject-Verb-Object languages (referring to sentential word order). There are a number of studies that have been done on code-switching in Malay. Nik Safiah Karim (1981, 1986) has cited the examples below for Malay-English code switching, for which I have provided glossing/word-by-word translations:

You nampak I
2sg. see 1sg.⁵
You see me.

I panggil you.
1sg. call 2sg.
I call you.

Pilihan yang best.

choice rel.⁶ best

The best choice/The good choice.

Nik Safiah Karim, 1981 & 1986

In the examples above, we can see that Malay is the base language as the English pronouns used were not conjugated to object pronouns in direct object positions (the second example does not specifically show this, however, as the 2sg form for subject and object pronouns are the same). Another sign is the preservation of Malay word order apparent in the third example (the same phrase with English as its base and an imported Malay word would be “the best *pilihan*”). Below are examples showing more imported English words in longer sentences:

Saya start kerja pukul tujuh...

1sg start work hit seven

I start work at seven o'clock.

Kita menaip skrip, stensilkan, check stereo recording before rakaman.

1pl. meN-type script stencil-kan check stereo recording before recording.

We type the script, stencilize it, and check the recording stereo before recording.

Wong Khok Seng, 1987

The examples above are interesting in the sense that they have both borrowed and imported words. Here, I provisionally use the term “borrowed” to refer to words which have been assimilated into the Malay lexicon, often with significant phonological and spelling changes. The term “imported” is used to refer to words which still retain the phonological and orthographic features of the source language, in this case English. In the second sentence, we can see a string of imported words, “check,” “stereo,” “recording,” and “before,” in the same sentence as borrowed words, such as *skrip*, *taip* (*menaip*), and *stensil* (*stensilkan*). The word “stereo” may be confusing to classify, as it is both a Malay word and an English word, and it retains its spelling and

pronunciation from English. However, from the word order prevalent in the sentence, it seems more likely that it is an imported word as it modifies the noun “recording” while preceding it. Also noteworthy are the occurrences of the word “recording” and its Malay counterpart *rakaman* in the same sentence, which shows that the English words are not imported due to the unavailability of words with the same meaning in Malay.

Figure 2:
Location of
respondents’
hometowns



phonologically and morphologically.

Findings

In this section, I present all the imported words tabulated and categorized according to their parts of speech, the two types of code-switching that occur, and some phonological and morphological processes that follow the import of the English lexical items. The imported lexical items consist of verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions and prepositions. Table 1 shows the imported English words and their parts of speech and that nouns are the most commonly imported lexical items, followed by verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and determiners. There were no pronouns found in the responses, as all the subjects refrained from using pronouns in

answering the questions. All the words in Table 1 have counterparts in Malay, with some of them being borrowed from English such as *nota*–‘note’, *nasional*–‘national’, *sesi*–‘session’ and *informasi*–‘information’.

There are two types of code-switching found in the data: individual words and strings of words⁷. Below are some of the responses for each type⁸:

individual words:

a) *...zaman sekolah dulu macam pressure sikit sebab apə...*

era school former like pressure little.bit because what

...school was more pressuring because...

b) *Oh kat sini tido buat homework, layan komputer stay kat sekolah*

oh prep. here sleep do homework serve computer stay prep.⁹ school

Oh, here (I usually) sleep, do homework, use the computer and stay on campus.

c) *kat universiti ni lain sikitlah sebab culture die lain so macam biasənyə kalau kat Malaysia...*

prep. university this other little.bit-lah because culture 3sg. other so like normally if prep. Malaysia

In this university it is a little different because its culture is different, so, like, usually in Malaysia...

The imported English words in the examples above are “pressure,” “homework,” “stay” and “culture.” All these words have counterparts in Malay.

strings of words

d) *...form four sampai form five kat Perlis.*

form four until form five prep. Perlis

(I studied from) form¹⁰ four until form five in Perlis.

e) ...*bangun pagi pukul tujuh cam tu and then mandi.*

get.up morning hit seven like that and then bathe

(I) get up at around seven in the morning and then (I) bathe.

f) ...*tengah hari pagi lunch after that pagi prep.*

middle day go lunch after that go prep(aratory class).

go to lunch at noon, after that I go to preparatory class.

The imported English words in the examples above are “form four,” “form five,” “and then,” “lunch after that” and “prep,” all of which have respective Malay counterparts.

Rojak Phonology

Phonologically, there are several characteristics of imported English words that have been observed in KL Malay:

Consonant cluster simplification

Deletion of final consonant in word-final consonant clusters.

e.g. “predict” - ['predik]

“breakfast” - ['brekfəs]

Deletion of non-stop consonant in word-medial consonant clusters

e.g. “library” - ['laɪbəri]

ii) Vowel weakening

e.g. “management” - ['menedʒmən] æ -> e

“responsible” - [rɪspɒnsɪ 'bəl] ɒ -> o

iii) Stress shifting

e.g. “responsible” - [rɪspɒnsɪ 'bəl] (second syllable to final syllable)

Although the processes above are by no means exclusive to imported English words in KL Malay, it might be the case that they are influenced by the phonology of KL Malay in which stress and tense/lax vowels are non-contrastive. Further research is needed to make phonological statements as to how much the sounds of imported words are affected by the phonemic inventory of KL Malay from a theoretical standpoint.

Rojak Morphology

It is found that imported lexical items can attach to KL Malay morphemes, mainly ‘-kan’ and “-lah,” as shown in the examples below:

the verbal “-kan”

lepas tu kənənsurəkan səmuə orang masuk

after that must ensure-kan all people go.in

After that (I) must ensure everyone goes in.

The morpheme ‘-kan’ turns adjectives into verbs and verbs into imperatives in KL Malay. The first function is the same as the English morpheme “en-” in “ensure,” which makes the form ‘*ensurekan*’ redundant morphologically.

ii) the emphatic “-lah”

Bezə diə aku rasə macam basically ko punyə time, time managementlah

difference 3sg 1sg feel like basically 2sg own time time management-lah

The difference, I think, like, is basically your time management.

...pas tu continuelah.

after that continuelah

...after that (I) continue.

The emphatic “-lah” is often added at the end to utterances when the speaker expects the listener to empathize. Sometimes it is also added for emphasis. In the examples above, the attachment of “-lah” to imported English words which happen to be at the end of the utterance show that the morpheme usage transcends codes. This morphological feature might

Figure 3:
Consonants of
KL Malay.

	labial	dental/alveolar	postalveolar	palatal	velar	glottal
stop	p b	t d			k g	
fricative	f	s z	sh			h
affricate						
nasal	m	n		ny	ng	
lateral		l				
rhotic		r				

also be an indicator of a creolization process within KL Malay, by the incorporation of English words into Malay morphology.

Other Findings

After tabulating the data and calculating the frequency of imported words from male and female respondents, it is found that female speakers import more English words in their speech than male speakers, who produced longer responses. Below are the total number of imported English words and KL Malay words and the calculated average percentage of imported words in the responses:

Males, 157/1278 words, average 8.5%

Females, 121/872 words, average 11.75%

Several definitive features of KL Malay also surfaced in the responses, such as contractions of certain forms of Standard Malay, e.g., *lepas* to *pas* and *macam* to *cam*, and diphthong simplification, e.g., *kau* to *ko*.

Figure 4:
Vowels of
KL Malay.

	front	central	back
high	i		u
mid	e	ə	o
low		a	

Some respondents also used *macam*, which means “like,” as fillers, reminiscent of the Southern Californian “valley girl” sociolect, which has now become widespread among English-speaking teenagers.

Discussion

a) Code-switching in the Malay Historical Context

Code-switching is by no means a new linguistic phenomenon in the Malay speaking world. Since the days of the ancient Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Srivijaya and Langkasuka in the seventh century—and possibly some earlier kingdoms—language contact has occurred between Sanskrit (and other Indic languages) and the indigenous languages spoken in the Malay archipelago. After the establishment of a Sanskrit-influenced substratum, Perso-Arabic influences brought by Muslim merchants from the Middle East in the late fourteenth century began to permeate the Malay language. The interaction of Sanskrit and Perso-Arabic influences can be seen in Malay *hikayats*, such as *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and *Hikayat Indraputra*. Many of these *hikayats* exhibit extensive usage of fantastic elements from Hindu and Buddhist texts and Sanskrit vocabulary side-by-side with Persian and Arabic words and sufistic elements from Persian literature.

In the fifteenth century, the arrival of Portuguese, Dutch, British and Japanese colonizers marked another episode in the linguistic development of the Malay language. Among the colonizers, the British were the most prominent as they established a formal education system in Malaya in the early twentieth century. The British education system initiated mass borrowings of English words in the academic domain, especially in translated academic texts. Throughout the twentieth century, English loan words became more common, following the change of the standard orthography of Malay from Arabic-based Jawi to Roman alphabets which made it easier to incorporate new English words. The British colonization period also saw the establishment of Chinese and Indian communities in Malaya, both of which have had significant impacts on the diverse nature of the Malay vocabulary, especially the so-called Bazaar Malay.

Historically, code-switching has long been a major linguistic process affecting the Malay language, albeit without facilitation by a prescribed lexicon and grammar from an official institution such as the DBP, which was only established in 1956. Hence, it is crucial for us to have an informed diachronic view so as to recognize that the code-switching currently happening is a tiny part of the bigger linguistic picture of Malay language change.

b) Code-switching in the Academic Context

Following Malaysia's independence in 1957, Malay was established as the national language and medium of instruction in national schools, while national-type schools still used other languages like English, Tamil and Mandarin as the media of instruction. Eventually, English schools were incorporated as national schools. Instead of being used as a medium of instruction, English was taught as a second language in all schools. This implementation led to English being the more prominent common language between ethnic communities, and thus more widely used than Malay in communication between speech communities, especially in urban areas.

English was then further elevated as an academic language through the implementation of ETEMS (English in Teaching Mathematics and Science) educational policy. Its proponents argued that

reference materials for these subjects in Malay were limited, and therefore English was the more appropriate language to use as a medium of instruction. Hassan (2005) states that there were acute shortages of academic reading materials in Malay at the tertiary level, which justified the use of English to teach science and mathematics at school. English also became the medium of instruction in a majority of private colleges and institutions, and some public universities. Through the implementation of education policies, English has acquired prestige—especially in the academic domain. In contrast, Malay is slowly losing its reputation as an academic language, and only enshrined as a national language with no practical appeal. Hence, the high level of sophistication connected to English as well as the extensive use of borrowed and imported English terms in education may underlie the motivations of code-switching in Malay.

c) Word Borrowing

As pointed out above, word borrowing is one of the main catalysts for the expansion of Malay vocabulary. This mechanism is often used by scholars in fields such as science, mathematics and engineering, with the borrowed (usually English) words used in the Malay context—regardless of the existence of corresponding Malay words. Consider the example below:

“genre” - *genre* (academic), *jenis* (colloquial)

“discussion” - *diskusi* (academic), *perbincangan* (colloquial)

The English word “genre” already has a Malay word with the same meaning, *jenis*. However, there is also the Malay word *genre*, which is frequently used in academic contexts. The same goes with *diskusi* and *perbincangan*, both of which translate to “discussion” in English. The favoring of borrowed words from English may be caused by the prestige associated with the language discussed earlier, and as a result, Malay speakers import English words outside the prescribed lexicon.

In KL Malay and Manglish, there is a growing compendium of words imported from various sources, namely English, Cantonese, Hokkien, Tamil, Telugu and a few other languages, which have yet to be included in the official dictionary. These words are also

used as telltale signs to identify *bahasa rojak*. Amir Muhammad¹¹, in his essay *Unwelcome Words*, lists 100 words used in KL Malay from diverse origins which are not found in *Kamus Dewan* and their meanings. The essay serves as evidence of the linguistic catch-22 in Malaysia, where imported words that are considered pollutants of the language are not included in the official dictionary, which itself contains a huge amount of borrowed words.

d) The Creolization of KL Malay

Asmah Haji Omar (1982) cites examples of the creolization of Bazaar Malay in other variants of Malay, such as Baba Malay and Ambonese Malay, in which the former pidgins were learned as native languages by new generations of speakers. The current state of KL Malay, although strictly neither a pidgin nor a creole, begs the question of what will happen when native speakers of the variant—with all its features (contraction and diphthong simplification, to name a few) and imported words are born, if there are not any such speakers already. Clearly, this requires serious attention from linguists, as the emerging language is going to be a fortified variant of KL Malay, far from being just a regional dialect, with its own structure and importing/borrowing mechanisms.

Conclusion

Code-switching occurs in Malay, specifically KL Malay, a previously neglected Malay variant distinct from Standard Malay and Bazaar Malay. In the process of code-switching, individual words and strings of words are imported from English, and are assimilated through a range of phonological and morphological processes. The occurrence of code-switching in KL Malay is related to socio-educational conditions such as the implementation of education policies and the superimposition of English in schools. It is necessary for KL Malay to be researched further, as it has serious implications on future policies, second language education, and Malay linguistics.

Bibliography

- Abdullah Hassan. "Language Planning in Malaysia: the First Hundred Years." *English Today* 84 Vol. 21 No. 4 (2005): 3-12.
- Amir Muhammad. "Unwelcome Words." In Amir Muhammad (ed.) *New Malaysian Essays 1*. Kuala Lumpur: Matahari Books, 2008.
- Asmah Hj. Omar. *Language and Society in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan dan Pustaka, 1982.
- Goddard, Cliff. "The Meaning of Lah: Understanding Emphasis in Malay (Bahasa Melayu)." *Oceanic Linguistics* Vol. 33 No. 1 (1994): 145-165.
- Nik Safiah Karim. *Beberapa Persoalan Sosiolinguistik Bahasa Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1981.
- Nik Safiah Karim. *Bahasa Melayu: Persoalan dan Pergolakan*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1986.
- Nik Safiah Karim (ed.). *Unsur Bahasa Asing dalam Bahasa Melayu*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1996.
- Nilep, Chad. "Code Switching in Sociocultural Linguistics." *Colorado Research in Linguistics* Vol. 19 (2006): 1-22.
- Teoh, Boon Seong. *The Sound System of Malay Revisited*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1994.
- Tham, Seong Chee. *A Study of the Evolution of the Malay Language: Social Change and Cognitive Development*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990.
- Umar Junus. "Pengaruh Bahasa Asing dalam Bahasa Melayu: Kata dan Yang Berhubungan Dengannya." In Nik Safiah Karim (ed.). *Unsur Bahasa Asing dalam Bahasa Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1996.
- Wong, Khok Seng. *Persilihan Bahasa di Kampung Kerinci*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1987.

End Notes

¹ see Teoh (1994), p.5

² *rojak* is an adjective that means 'mixed' and/or 'eclectic' according to *Kamus Dewan* (2005)

³ "Gag Order on Using Bahasa Rojak" 02 April 2006. *The Star Online*, <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2006/4/2/nation/13849132&sec=nation>; "'Bahasa Rojak' Is Out, Says RTM" 03 February 2000. *Utusan Online*, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=1998&dt=0704&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=rencana&pg=ot_01.htm&arc=hive&arc=hive; Ku Seman Ku Hussein. "Stesen TV dan Bahasa Melayu," 05 November 1998. *Utusan Online*, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=1998&dt=1105&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=rencana&pg=ot_04.htm&arc=hive&arc=hive; Noor Hazani Musa. "Bahasa Rojak Melayu Hamburger" 04 July 1998. *Utusan Online*. http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=1998&dt=0704&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=rencana&pg=ot_01.htm&arc=hive&arc=hive

⁴ see Nik Safiah Karim (1986), p. 126.

⁵ 1sg. = first person singular pronoun; 2sg. = second person singular pronoun

⁶ rel. = relative pronoun

⁷ Comparable to intersentential and intrasentential categorization. I find it more pragmatic to avoid using sentences to define the categories as it is not very clear where the sentential boundaries are in the recorded responses.

⁸ All words are transcribed phonetically, except for imported English words which are written with the standard spelling. 'ə' represents the mid-central vowel (schwa).

⁹ prep. = preposition

¹⁰ 'form' has the same usage as 'grade' in American English. It is used to refer to the levels in secondary schools in Malaysia.

¹¹ Amir Muhammad is a writer and independent movie-maker. His previous movies include the banned *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* (*The Last Communist*) and *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (*Village People Radio Show*). He also published the local best-seller *Malaysian Politicians Say the Darndest Things* (2007).