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The Influence of English on the Writing in Malay of Malay  
Singaporean Students

By

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THE INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH ON THE WRITING IN MALAY  
OF MALAY SINGAPOREAN STUDENTS

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Introduction and Background

Literature on individual bilingualism tends to focus on acquisition of a second language by those who have fully mastered a first language, or on the nature of code-mixing and code-switching by individuals living in a bi- or multi-lingual society. Studies of transfer similarly generally assume the primacy of one language and deal with transfer as a uni-directional phenomenon. Studies on societal bilingualism tend to be concerned with changes which the *languages* in a contact situation undergo or on the tendency for one language to lose functions to the other until eventually language shift takes place. Neither type of study focuses on the nature of the overall linguistic competence of bilingual speakers. Terms used to designate the two languages in bilingual studies (*mother tongue, first language, second language, primary language*) always seem to imply that one language has primacy over the other in every respect. It seems to us that this assumption involves an over-simplification. We feel further that, as educators attempting to make our students literate in two languages in a society in which both languages are used for oral communication on a daily basis, we must understand the nature of the distribution of their linguistic skills between the two languages which they use before we can help them to improve in skill areas in which they are weak.

This study is concerned with the ability of young adult bilingual Malay-English speaking Singaporeans to write in Malay. According to 1990 government census statistics Malay is the predominant household language in 94.3% of Malay households in Singapore. However, only 89.3% of Malay parents spoke Malay to their children according to the same census statistics, while 10.6% spoke English. In a recent study of bilingual reading habits among lower secondary students (Hsui & Poedjosoedarmo, 1994b), it was found that 40.9% of those questioned spoke English to their siblings. Thus most young Singaporean Malays at present acquire Malay and at least some English through informal communication in the home.

Most young adult Malay Singaporeans who are at present enrolled in tertiary level educational institutions experienced most of their pre-university education through the medium of English. It has been noted previously that they show weaknesses in their performance in Malay (Bibi Jan Mohd Ayyub, 1994; Poedjosoedarmo, 1994). Due to the environments in which the two languages are acquired the linguistic skills of young Singaporean Malays tend to be distributed between the two languages in almost complementary fashion.

Young Singaporean Malays are generally equally fluent in English and Malay if by fluency we mean the ability to communicate effortlessly by oral means, but while their pronunciation of Malay is completely native-speaker-like, their pronunciation in English often retains a sufficient number of Malay features to allow other Singaporeans who can hear but not see them to identify their ethnic origin. (This was brought out in a study, still in progress, in which BA and Dip Ed students at NIE were asked to identify the ethnic origin of speakers whom they did not know, all actually NIE students in the PGDE programme. Accuracy level varied from 30 to 50%. G. Poedjosoedarmo and V. Saravanan, in prep.).

On the other hand, most young Singaporean Malays, if given a choice, prefer to read in English (Hsui & Poedjosoedarmo, 1994a & b; Hvitfeld & Poedjosoedarmo, 1995) and their vocabularies in English are generally much more extensive than in Malay. (Poedjosoedarmo, 1994; Hsui & Poedjosoedarmo, 1994a & b; 1995).

Though many Malay Singaporeans write flawlessly or nearly flawlessly in English, some do exhibit features in their English writing which may result from transfer from Malay. On the other hand, we have found many instances in their Malay writing of features which we believe may be the result of transfer from English, the language in which they most often read.

It is the purpose of this study to describe and classify those features and to draw preliminary conclusions concerning possible implications for the teaching of reading and writing in both languages.

### **Methodology**

Written work of students from the Malay Language and Culture Unit at NIE who are enrolled in the Dip. Ed. and PGDE programs and work of ethnic Malay students in their 4th year of the BA with Dip Ed program in the Division of English Language and Applied Linguistics (ELAL) were examined. The work of Malay Unit students consisted of original writing in Malay while the work of the BA students from ELAL consisted of translations of English texts.

The two researchers collected examples of features which might result from transfer from English and classified them as syntactico-stylistic or lexico-semantic. Each category was further subdivided.

Most Singaporean Malays speak a variety of Malay which is similar to that spoken in peninsular Malaysia. However, some of the students involved in the study have parents or grandparents who come from Indonesia. Malay-speaking Singaporeans also have access to both Indonesian and Malaysian radio and TV broadcasts. Since the purpose of the study was not to examine borrowings from English which have already been incorporated into Malay or Indonesian but rather to understand the mental processes by which the students came independently to express new concepts through the medium of Malay, we attempted to eliminate all examples which students may have learnt in Malay from other Malay or Indonesian speakers. A detailed classification of the resulting list of features is given in the following section.

### **The Data**

As mentioned above, the features of Malay students' writing thought possibly to have resulted from transfer from English were classified as either (1) syntactico-stylistic or (2) lexico-semantic. The syntactico-stylistic features will be discussed first.

### **Syntactico-Stylistic Features of Malay Students' Writing**

Syntactico-stylistic features of students' writing in Malay which may have resulted from transfer from English can be further sub-grouped into the following categories:

- (1) inappropriate verb forms
- (2) unnecessary plural marking
- (3) dropping of classifiers
- (4) inappropriate use of pronouns
- (5) inappropriate use of prepositions and sentence connectors

In addition to the above features which may have resulted from direct translation of English structures, there were other features apparently produced by direct translation which resulted in (6) unusual word order or (7) other unusual expressions. Each of these seven categories will be discussed below.

### Inappropriate Verb Forms

Inappropriate verb forms consisted of (a) verbs with dropped affixes, (b) inappropriate choice of aspect and (c) formation of non-conventional verbs from other parts of speech or from compounding.

Examples of verbs with dropped affixes include:

1. *Siapa masuknya?*  
"Who put her in?"

(from translation by BA 4th year student)

where *Siapa memasukkannya?*, with the active transitive prefix *me-* and the transitive suffix *-kan*, would have been the usual form in standard Malay.

2. *Tanpa disadar*  
"... unconsciously. . ."

(from essay by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization)

where *tanpa disadari* with the suffix *-i* would have been the standard form.

Inappropriate choice of aspect falls into two categories, that for which the standard form is syntactically motivated and that for which the standard form is stylistically motivated. Unlike English, in Malay the relative "pronoun" must be the subject of the relative clause. Thus, if the relative pronoun is the object rather than subject of the verb in the relative clause, that verb must

be in the passive form. Aspect choice is thus, in this case, syntactically motivated. Though the verb itself is ambiguous in the following example, the nominative (*aku*) rather than oblique (*ku*) form of the pronoun following the relative marker (*yang*) suggests that the writer was confused about aspect in Malay:

3. *Apa yang aku mahukan ialah fakta.*  
"What I want is Facts."

(from translation by BA 4th year student)

where *Apa yang ku mahukan ialah fakta* would have been better. Although the example here is, in fact, now acceptable in the Malaysian and Singapore varieties of Malay, it is probable that a shift in usage has occurred reflecting a psychological shift from the patient oriented norm, indicated by frequent use of passive or "weak" pronouns such as *ku*, to a more individualistic actor oriented norm, involving the use of more "full" forms of pronouns such as *aku*.

An example of an inappropriate choice of aspect where a more appropriate choice would have been stylistically motivated is:

4. *Perkataan-perkataan itu membentuk setail penulis tersebut.*  
"That form of words constitutes his (a writer's) style."

(from translation by BA 4th year student)

The topic would more appropriately be *setail penulis* (or better *gaya menulis*). Thus, in standard Malay, *Gaya menulis itu diwujudkan oleh bentuk perkataan* would be better or if *bentuk perkataan* were to be made topic then the idea might be expressed in a different manner.

An example of a non-conventional verb form is

5. *mengayat,*

intended to mean



"to form a sentence"

(from essay by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization)

where *ayat* is a noun meaning "sentence" but no standard verb formed from this root exists.

### Inappropriate Plural Marking

In English all nouns are either countable or uncountable and countable nouns must be marked explicitly as singular or plural. In Malay most nouns can be doubled to indicate plurality, even ones for which the English equivalent is uncountable. However, not marking a noun as plural in Malay does not necessarily indicate that it is singular. In well-written Malay, once plurality is established for a given entity it is no longer marked. Also if plurality is implied by the context or not relevant it need not be marked. Many examples were found in the data examined here of redundant or inappropriate plural marking. They include example (4) above, where *perkataan-perkataan* need not be plural. This sentence might better be rendered as suggested above or as *Bentuk perkataan tersebut merupakan inti gaya menulis (seorang pengarang)*.

Another example

6. *Prinsip inilah yang aku pegang untuk membesarkan anak-anakku.*  
"This is the principal on which I bring up my own children . . ."  
(from translation by BA 4th year student)

A better translation would have been *Prinsip inilah yang ku pegang untuk membesarkan anakku sendiri*. More examples are:

7. *... untuk menentukan **aktiviti-aktiviti** kegemaran **murid-murid**, **jenis-jenis** habuan dan pandangan mereka ...*  
... to determine the students' favorite activities, kinds of treats, and opinions . . .  
(from translation by BA 4th year student)

where *untuk menentukan aktiviti kegemaran murid, jenis habuan dan pandangan mereka* would have been adequate, clear and less cumbersome.

8. ... *di akhir-akhir pengajaran* . . .  
... at the conclusion of instruction (repeatedly or habitually) . . .  
(from essay by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization)

where *di akhir pengajaran* would have been adequate.

In addition to instances of unnecessary plural marking there are also cases where doubling is required in Malay but students failed to use it. An example is

9. ... *mengajar kedua darjah dua dan empat* . . .  
... teach both grades two and four  
(from essay by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization)

where *kedua-dua* is required for clarity since *kedua* normally means "second".

#### Dropping of Classifiers

One feature of Malay which has no equivalent in English is the use of classifiers before nouns, particularly upon introduction of a new entity in a text and/or when number needs to be specified. Classifiers generally indicate something about the shape or nature of the entity in question, *orang* "person" being the classifier for humans, *ekor* "tail" being the classifier for animals, *batang* "stick, branch" being the classifier for long, thin objects, *helai* "sheet" being the classifier for sheet-like objects, *buah* "fruit" being the classifier for objects of amorphous shape, and so on. Another feature of the data which was examined for this study was a tendency not to use classifiers in places where they would be expected. Examples include:

10. *Ini saya dapati dari beberapa murid.*  
I received this from several students.  
(from essay by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization)

where the classifier *orang* has been inappropriately dropped.

11. ... *mengajar dua kelas Menengah Satu.*  
... teach two Secondary One classes.  
(from essay by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization)

This should have been *mengajar dua buah kelas Menengah Satu.*

12. *Fikiran itu ...*  
An idea ...  
(from translation by BA 4th year student)

where *sebuah ide* or *sebuah gagasan* would have been more appropriate.

13. *di kad berukuran 3" x 5"*  
on a 3" x 5" card  
(from translation by BA 4th year student)

where *pada sebuah kad kecil (berukuran 3" x 5")* would have been more appropriate.

#### Inappropriate Use of Pronouns

In English personal pronouns are used to refer to established topics whether or not they are animate, the appropriate singular or plural form must always be used and, for third person singular, a distinction must be made between masculine, feminine or inanimate. In Malay there is only one third person singular pronoun (*dia/ia*) [ There is in fact an honorific form *beliau*, but this distinction is not relevant here.] and the third person plural pronoun *mereka* is generally only used to refer to humans. In fact, since the distribution of use of the Malay demonstratives *ini, itu* "this" "that" vs. personal pronouns is not related to newness of topic as it is in English, inanimate objects are often referred to by demonstratives rather than personal pronouns. If there might be any question about the referent, then it is usual in Malay to simply repeat the noun with an added demonstrative. Furthermore, even when referring to humans, other structures are often available in Malay so that, in well-written text, the incidence of personal pronouns is generally less

frequent than in English. In the data examined a tendency was noted to use personal pronouns in a manner identical to English usage. Some examples are given here:

14. ... *murid-murid lemah di dalam penguasaan Bahasa Melayu mereka*  
... students are weak in their mastery of Malay  
(from essay by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization)

where *penguasaan Bahasa Melayu murid-murid kurang memuaskan* or *kurang memadai* would have been better, where no personal pronoun is used at all. Another example:

15. *Perkataan-perkataan itu membentuk setail penulis tersebut dan ianya dibatas oleh akal fikiran si penulis.*  
That form of words constitutes his style, and it is absolutely governed by the idea.  
(from translation by BA 4th year student)

The pronoun *ianya* refers to "style", but it would be much more usual in Malay to simply repeat the noun with an added demonstrative *gaya itu*

In addition to inappropriate selection of pronouns, inappropriate placement is also found.

An example of this is:

16. ... *tanpa disadar(i) saya telah dua minggu meninggalkan sekolah.*  
... without me being conscious (of the time), two weeks had slipped by since I'd left school.  
(from essay by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization)

where the more usual form would be *tanpa disadari telah dua minggu saya meninggalkan sekolah.*

#### Inappropriate Use of Prepositions and Conjunctions

Of all word classes, prepositions and conjunctions are probably the ones which are most difficult to translate accurately from one language to another. In the translation data examined students tended to translate all English locative prepositions as *di* or *di dalam* and all

occurrences of English "but" as *tetapi*, regardless of sense. Dip Ed students with Malay specialization also showed confusion in their writing in the selection of lexical items in these two word classes. An example of inappropriate use of a preposition (cited earlier with reference to the pronoun) is found in sentence (14).

*murid-murid lemah di dalam penguasaan Bahasa Melayu mereka*

Another example is:

17. . . . *agar tidak lagi cuai di masa hadapan*  
. . . so as not to be careless in future  
(from essay by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization)

*Pada* would be a more appropriate preposition to indicate time as *di* generally denotes location.

An example of inappropriate use of a conjunction follows:

18. *yang tidak mengganggunya tetapi hanya membunuh tikus-tikus*  
which never did him any harm but killed the mice ...  
(from translation by BA 4th year student)

Here the English "but" means "to the contrary". A more appropriate translation would have been *yang tak pernah mengganggunya malah menangkap tikus ...*

#### Unusual Word Order

In focusing on other issues, we have already given several examples of unusual word order in Malay resulting from literal translation of the English expression. Some of these examples included sentence (14):

*... murid-murid lemah di dalam penguasaan Bahasa Melayu mereka*

where *penguasaan Bahasa Melayu murid-murid kurang memuaskan* or *kurang memadai* would have been better. Another example is sentence (4):

***Perkataan-perkataan*** itu membentuk setail penulis tersebut.

A better translation, as suggested earlier, would have been *Bentuk perkataan tersebut merupakan inti gaya menulis (seorang pengarang)* or *Gaya menulis itu diwujudkan oleh bentuk perkataan*.

#### Unusual Expressions

Some unusual expressions which result from an attempt to translate English expressions include (all from essays by Dip Ed student with Malay specialization):

19. *berbuat bising*  
making noise
20. *seberapa mana mungkin*  
as much as possible
21. *kepuasan yang lebih*  
greater satisfaction
22. *diberi mengajar*  
given to teach

which is usually expressed as *diminta mengajar* or *disuruh mengajar*.

23. *berlagak sebagai . . .*  
acting as

The usual way of expressing this in Malay is *menjadi* or *diminta menjadi*.

#### Lexico-Semantic Features of Malay Students' Writing

As noted earlier, the vocabularies of Singaporean Malay students in Malay tend to be quite limited. Two tendencies were noted in the data in instances where students wished to express an idea for which they did not know a Malay word. The first was to adapt the spelling of

an English word to the Malay sound system. Examples of this are: *setail* for "style" where a Malay term *gaya (menulis)* already exists; *expressi* for "expression" where a Malay term *pengungkapan* already exists; *mempraktikkan* where the Malay term *mengamalkan* has already gained currency; *kelas* rather than *darjah*. The latter two examples may result from contact with Indonesian, as these borrowings are commonly used in Indonesia.

The other tendency was to extend the meaning of an existing Malay word. An example of this is the use of *perkara* which actually means "matter" or "problem" to mean "idea". The usual means of expressing "idea" in standard Malay is *gagasan, ide* or *buah fikiran*. Another example is *pengawalan* which originally meant "to control" and which is now often extended to mean "discipline".

It is true, of course, that language changes and that borrowing and semantic extension are common devices for developing ways of expressing new concepts. The examples presented here, however, serve to indicate that the present generation of students make frequent use of these devices because they do not know a word which in fact exists in the standard language.

### **Implications for the Teaching of Reading and Writing**

The findings of this study may be useful for the identification of so-called "errors" in pupils' writing. Awareness of the foreign structures will enable teachers to focus on the correct forms during their lessons in order to minimize pupils' mistakes.

It is the goal of the Ministry of Education to produce a nation of biliterate bilinguals. What can be done to improve the results of these efforts? Research on writing in English has shown

that students who read extensively are better writers. (Krashen, 1984). Malay Singaporean students readily admit that they do not read in Malay. Some comments made by lower secondary students include:

"I don't read much of my second language books. For English there are a wide range of books. Books of mysteries, tragedy, friendship, romance and many more where else (*sic*) I can only find romance in Malay books."

"Most of the Malay language books were written for the age group of 20 - above. I can't relate to it at all. The storyline is sometime boring, too."

(From data collected for Hsui & Poedjosoedarmo 1994a & b, 1995)

The first step, therefore, it would seem, to improving the writing of Malay students in Malay should be to develop in them the habit of reading in Malay. In order to do this schools should acquire more Malay books for their libraries. The production and distribution of appealing books for young people should be looked into. If necessary, the Ministry of Art and Information or other institutions should provide some form of subsidy to enable quality books to be published, as the potential market for such books is small and uneconomical.

Another factor might be the way in which writing is taught in schools in both English and Malay. English is taught by English language teachers and Malay is taught by Malay language teachers. The two subjects are very much compartmentalized. It might be helpful if at some place in the system an explicit comparison of the two language systems was carried out and translation was taught as a necessary and useful skill. Our students do translate, so perhaps we ought to teach them to translate accurately so as to improve the quality of the results.

Coming back to the classroom situation, it may be appropriate here to consider the feasibility of introducing a bilingual method of teaching Malay-English as proposed in K. Abdullah



(1994). In this approach the planning of both Malay and English lessons should be integrated so that the themes of units taught during reading - writing and oral lessons in both languages are more or less similar. Reading materials like the Big Book should be available in both English and Malay and used simultaneously during English and Malay lessons. As the narrative schema of the pair of story books is the same, pupils will be free to focus on the language forms and structures used in the written texts rather than on understanding the story. In such a situation the meanings of words and structures used in specific language contexts could become more transparent.

Singaporean students learn to read and write better in English than in Malay because all of their academic subjects are taught through the medium of English. This gives them far more opportunity to acquire English vocabulary and structures. To increase the input of Malay vocabulary Malay versions of science and social studies books might also be made available for students to read after they had done a particular academic lesson. Being familiar with the material they could then focus on acquiring the new vocabulary in Malay.

For older and more advanced pupils syntactic and stylistic differences between the two languages could of course be taught directly or indirectly through language exercises. Hopefully the use of such an approach would lead to the development of more effective Malay-English bilinguals where transfer from one language to another would be enriching to the individual and to the language itself.

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