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## 9 Pronouncing the Malay identity

### Sebutan Johor-Riau and Sebutan Baku

*Mukhlis Abu Bakar and Lionel Wee*

*'Eh cakaplah betul-betul, kenapa nak kena cakap macam tu.'*

'Hey, speak properly, why do you have to speak like that'.

—A frequent reaction of the father of a student teacher whenever he sees a youngster speaking with Sebutan Baku on BERITA, a Malay television news programme

#### Introduction

The Johor-Riau dialect constitutes the basis for two social dialects in Singapore – Colloquial Malay and Standard Malay. Colloquial Malay is used in what might be described as 'naturalistic', 'informal' or 'ordinary' settings while Standard Malay is used in more formal settings such as language instruction and the media. Whether one speaks Colloquial Malay or Standard Malay, there is a general tendency to characterize the pronunciation patterns of both social dialects as belonging to *Sebutan Johor-Riau* (Johor-Riau Pronunciation), a naturalized standard pronunciation based on the Johor-Riau accent. In contrast, *Sebutan Baku* (Standard Pronunciation) is an artificially created system of pronunciation, built on the principle 'pronounce as it is spelled' and officially prescribed as the preferred or more appropriate way of speaking 'proper' Malay. Whether such a prescription is feasible from a language policy perspective is, as we shall see, a matter of some controversy.

Singapore introduced *Sebutan Baku* in 1993 as the standard pronunciation for Standard Malay as part of the state's support for the standardisation of the Malay language in the region (*The Straits Times*, 1993). This geopolitical initiative, however, has since fallen through. Malaysia returned to *Sebutan Johor-Riau* in 2000 while Singapore retained *Sebutan Baku* despite opposition from Malay Singaporeans who generally do not see it as authentically indexing their Malay identity (Sakinah, 2019; Berita Harian, 2011a; Osman, 2013). The excerpt at the start of this chapter exemplifies such non-affiliation towards *Sebutan Baku*. In this chapter, we trace the development of *Sebutan Johor-Riau*, provide a critique of *Sebutan Baku* and the state's rationale for continuing its adoption, and discuss the implications this tension between *Sebutan Johor-Riau* and *Sebutan Baku* has on the Malay Singaporean identity.

## Background to the Malay language

Malay (or *Bahasa Melayu*) is an indigenous language of Singapore and the surrounding region which includes Peninsular Malaysia and southern Thailand to the north, the central eastern parts of Sumatra to the west and south, and the western coasts of Borneo to the east (Asmah, 1992). Malay is also a second language for other indigenous communities living beyond its native shores – from Sumatra in the west through to the coastal West Papua in the east – a region commonly known as *Nusantara* or the Malay Archipelago. In this vast maritime area, Malay was once ‘the formal written language of palaces and creeds, like Latin, and at the same time the everyday working language of business and public interaction in markets and harbours, like lingua franca in the Levant’ (Collins, 1998, p. 25). This was attributed to the power and influence of successful Malay kingdoms then, namely the Srivijaya Empire in Palembang, Sumatra, from the 7th to 12th century and the Melaka sultanate around the 15th and 16th centuries. The defeat of Melaka by the Portuguese in 1511 gave rise to smaller sultanates in the Malay indigenous areas including the Johor-Riau-Lingga sultanate (17th – 19th centuries) (Collins, 1998). The local Johor-Riau dialect became the de facto Malay dialect in the territories held by this sultanate. Its dialectal influence reigns over what are now the Malaysian states of Melaka, Pahang and Johor and the central eastern Indonesian provinces of Sumatra including the Riau Islands (Asmah, 1992). The Malay variety spoken in Singapore belongs to this widely distributed Johor-Riau dialect group.

In 1824, the Malay-speaking world was divided politically for the first time in its long history with the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty. Under this treaty, the British controlled the Malay peninsula and the northern third of Borneo while the Dutch the rest of the archipelago. The language of the colonial masters (English and Dutch) began to effect an influence on Malay in their respective areas of control (Alisjahbana, 1976; Asmah, 1993; Collins, 1998). In places under Dutch rule, native Malay speakers were outnumbered by non-Malay indigenous speakers (Javanese, Sundanese, Bugis, and so on), which added another layer of influence to the Malay language there. These sowed the seeds for the emergence of a variety of Malay in Indonesia which grew increasingly different from the variety used in Singapore and Malaysia. The former was later declared the national language of Indonesia and renamed Bahasa Indonesia.

## Johor-Riau dialect in the formation of Standard Malay

A shared colonial past, a similar dialect group, and close proximity between Singapore and Malaysia have kept the Malay language in Singapore on a common path with its cousin in Malaysia for much of its development. Historically, while there existed several Malay dialect groups, it was the Johor-Riau dialect that formed the basis for the standard Malay language, reflecting

the rich literary past of the Johor-Riau sultanate (Asmah, 1988; Asraf, 1984; Winstedt, 1992). Singapore, together with the nearby islands in what is now Indonesia, was the centre for cultural, political and socioeconomic activities before and during the colonial period. Through Singapore, Malaya welcomed its first Malay press in the late 19th century as well as the radio service that commenced operation half a century later. With the establishment of printing – initially using the Jawi script (Amat Juhari Moain, 1996; Hashim Musa, 2006) – the local Johor-Riau dialect which was already then the model of written language became the language of printed materials. Its grammar and vocabulary were further developed, codified and expanded to become what is known as *Bahasa Melayu Standard* (or Standard Malay), a supralocal Malay dialect (Asmah, 1988). Printing helped spread it quickly to schools and government offices throughout Singapore and Malaya.

Similarly, with the establishment of *Radio Malaya* in 1946 in Singapore, the Johor-Riau accent was ‘borrowed’ to accompany Standard Malay. It was the natural choice for radio announcers and newsreaders who themselves were native speakers of the dialect (Asmah, 1988, 1992). The accent developed as it fulfilled its wider function including accounting for the pronunciation of new words from other languages. This accent spread to Kuala Lumpur when *Radio Malaya* moved to the city and further north when Penang established her own radio station (Asmah, 1992). Over time, this Johor-Riau-based accent evolved to become the naturalized standard Malay pronunciation which this chapter refers to as *Sebutan Johor-Riau*, the term ‘Johor-Riau’ being used to recognize its origin. Asmah (1992) names this accent *kelainan /ə/* (or */ə/* variety). The printing and broadcasting media thus played an important role in the formation of Standard Malay and its accompanying accent, *Sebutan Johor-Riau* (SJR), and establishing for them an influence that was far beyond the reach of their parent dialect, the Johor-Riau dialect. That Standard Malay and *Sebutan Johor-Riau* evolved from an existing dialect with its large base of native speakers was crucial to their development.<sup>1</sup> Note that standard Malay pronunciation is dual centred in that there are two living standard Malay pronunciations. Other than *Sebutan Johor-Riau* (the */ə/* variety), there is also *kelainan /a/* (or */a/* variety) spoken in northern Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. Between the two, *Sebutan Johor-Riau* is more widespread as it is the variety adopted by the media and the schools. It is quite normal for speakers of the */a/* variety to switch between the two standard accents. On the other hand, native speakers of *Sebutan Johor-Riau* are familiar with the */a/* variety only in songs and in poetry recitals (Asmah, 1992).

### **Efforts at standardisation**

The increasing non-uniformity of Standard Malay within the Malay Archipelago, namely between Indonesia and the rest of the Malay-speaking countries (Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore) prompted a move by Malay language activists in the 1950s to unify the language across the region (Mohamed

Pitchay Gani, 2004). Starting with reforms in spelling, these were followed by reforms in terminology, grammar, and lastly pronunciation (Asmah, 1992). Success, however, has been elusive, as is expected of any move towards language standardisation across political boundaries especially with regard to pronunciation (Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Several factors served as impediments to standardisation (Asmah, 1993; Alisjahbana, 1976). First, external influence: Bahasa Indonesia's spelling and morphology involving foreign words and affixes followed Dutch grammar while Malay looked to English as its reference. Second, internal influence: Bahasa Indonesia is the common language of speakers of different languages which influence the lexicon of Bahasa Indonesia; Malay interacts only with dialects of the same language. Third, limited contact between speakers aggravated by the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation in the 60s: radio and television broadcast rarely cross political borders; so too were printed materials published in these two countries. Fourth, pride and identity: Bahasa Indonesia and Malay have become a marker of identity for their respective speakers who over time developed the tendency to maintain their own system. Today, Bahasa Indonesia continues to diverge from Malay. The increasing polarity between the two varieties is evidenced by the publication of a 'bilingual' Bahasa Melayu-Bahasa Indonesia dictionary (Rusdi Abdullah, 2016).

The attempt at standardisation of pronunciation since the late 1980s has been particularly controversial. *Sebutan Baku* was proposed as the pronunciation to unify the Malay language speakers in the region. An artificially created system of pronunciation based on the principle 'pronounce as it is spelled', *Sebutan Baku* (SB) requires its speakers to pronounce words as they are spelled and all the letters that appear in a word must be pronounced (Ismail, 1994).<sup>2</sup> By this principle, *Sebutan Baku* differs from *Sebutan Johor-Riau* primarily in relation to the position of certain letters in the word unit: 1) the letter 'a' in open final syllable is pronounced /ə/ in *Sebutan Johor-Riau* but /a/ in *Sebutan Baku*; 2) the letters 'i' and 'u' in closed final syllable are pronounced /e/ and /o/ respectively in *Sebutan Johor-Riau* but /i/ and /u/ respectively in *Sebutan Baku*; and 3) syllable final 'r' is silent in *Sebutan Johor-Riau* but pronounced in *Sebutan Baku* (see Table 9.1).<sup>3</sup>

Based on the three features, *Sebutan Baku* is identical to Bahasa Indonesia pronunciation while *Sebutan Johor-Riau* is different from both of them. As such, asking a Malay speaker from Singapore and Malaysia to speak with *Sebutan Baku* is akin to asking him/her to sound like an Indonesian. He/she would have to pronounce *pada* ('to') as /pada/ and not /padə/; *sakit* ('pain') as /sakit/ and not /saket/; *takut* ('frighten') as /takut/ and not /takot/; *tukar* ('change') as /tukar/ and not /tuka/. Imagine asking a British English speaker to give up his pronunciation of 'car' (/kɑː/) and 'ask' (/ɑːsk/) in favour of the American model (/kɑːr/ and /æsk/ respectively). Such a proposal is not likely to go down well for it means giving up part of one's identity as a British, which, among others, is indexed by pronunciation or accent (Lippi-Green, 1997). Unlike *Sebutan Johor-Riau*, *Sebutan Baku* has no native speakers. It is

Table 9.1 Major features of standard pronunciations in Malay

<i>Pronunciation system</i>	<i>SJR (/ə/ variety) pronunciation</i>	<i>SB pronunciation</i>	<i>Bahasa Indonesia pronunciation</i>	<i>Northern (/a/ variety) pronunciation</i>
<b>Letter position</b>				
1. 'a' in open final syllable	/ə/	/a/	/a/	/a/
2. Syllable-final 'r'	silent	/r/	/r/	/r/
3. 'i' & 'u' in closed final syllable:				
a. before 'n', 'ng';	/e/ & /o/	/i/ & /u/	/i/ & /u/	/i/ & /u/
b. before other consonants	/e/ & /o/	/i/ & /u/	/i/ & /u/	/e/ & /o/

a created phenomenon, a pronunciation model based on the prescriptive rule 'pronounce as it is spelled'. This system of pronunciation is named *Sebutan Baku* with the word *baku* (translated as 'standard' or 'accepted') ostensibly placed in the name. This, however, does not automatically qualify the pronunciation to be 'baku' or standard (Pairah, 2007; Awang, 2000).

The geopolitical initiative to unify the pronunciation across the archipelago fell through eventually. Malaysia switched back to *Sebutan Johor-Riau* in 2000 after adopting *Sebutan Baku* for 12 years. Explaining Malaysia's decision to drop *Sebutan Baku*, the Minister for Education was quoted to have said that *Sebutan Baku* 'is different from the pronunciation commonly used by the people of this country' (Utusan Online, 2000a). Malaysia's relinquishing of *Sebutan Baku* could be due to the realization that giving up *Sebutan Johor-Riau*, and with it, Malaysia's Malay identity, is not worth the sacrifice when Bahasa Indonesia as a linguistic system continues to develop into a variety (and linguistic identity) of its own.<sup>4</sup> In Singapore, the standardisation efforts were spearheaded by the Malay Language Council, Singapore (*Majlis Bahasa Melayu Singapura* or MBMS).<sup>5</sup> Following Malaysia, MBMS, through the Ministry of Communications, Information and the Arts (now Ministry of Communications and Information) proposed to the Ministry of Education (MOE) the use of *Sebutan Baku* in the formal education system. In June 1990, MOE approved the MBMS' proposal, and in August 1990, the cabinet decided in principle to accept *Sebutan Baku* for implementation in schools starting in 1993 (Pairah, 2007). Unlike Malaysia, Singapore did not retract its *Sebutan Baku* policy despite the idea of a pan-Malay standard pronunciation being a lost cause.

### ***Sebutan Johor-Riau* and Malay social dialects**

When Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965, it inherited the standard variety of Malay, both in print and spoken form. Standard Malay was, and is,

one of four social dialects of Malay spoken in Singapore; the other three being *Bahasa Melayu Basahan* or Colloquial Malay,<sup>6</sup> *Bahasa Melayu Pasar* or Bazaar Malay,<sup>7</sup> and Baba Malay.<sup>8</sup> Of the four dialects, Standard Malay and Colloquial Malay are the more widely spoken. Standard Malay has evolved into a primarily educated/formal variant and is used in formal occasions (classroom settings, parliamentary sittings, news broadcasts) while Colloquial Malay is a largely unwritten form of Malay, an everyday variety used in a wide range of situations, particularly informal ones (conversations with family, friends, or colleagues). Standard Malay is characterised by a complex system of affixation (the addition of prefixes and suffixes to a root word – *menolak* from *tolak* ('to push'), *berlari* from *lari* ('to run'), a feature that is largely absent in Colloquial Malay (Benjamin, 1993; Koh, 1990). Discourse markers and some lexical items also differ between the dialects. In Colloquial Malay, frequently used function words appear in a shortened form (*tidak* /*tidaʔ*/ ('no') becomes *tak* /*taʔ*/, *hendak* /*həndaʔ*/ ('want') becomes *nak* /*naʔ*/); the intervocalic /h/ is deleted (*mahu* /*mahu*/ ('want') becomes *mau* /*mau*/, *kasihan* /*kasihan*/ ('pitiful') becomes *kesian* /*kəsijan*/); and the glottal stop is added to words ending in 'i' and 'a' (*nasi* /*nasil*/ ('rice') becomes *nasik* /*nasiʔ*/, *bawa* /*bawə*/ ('bring') becomes *bawak* /*bawaʔ*/). Both Standard Malay and Colloquial Malay in Singapore, however, share the same pronunciation features, namely *Sebutan Johor-Riau*. Whether one uses the truncated *tak cukup* ('not enough'), as in the colloquial variety, or *tidak cukup*, in the standard variety, *cukup* is pronounced the same way, that is, /*tʃukup*/; similarly, the syllable *pa* in *tidak apa* (Standard Malay) or *takpa* (Colloquial Malay) ('it doesn't matter') is uttered in the same way (/*tidaʔ apə*/ and /*taʔpə*/ respectively). Therefore, the distinction between Standard Malay and Colloquial Malay is largely neutralized at the level of pronunciation. This means that whether a Malay Singaporean speaks Standard Malay or Colloquial Malay, he or she speaks with the naturalized *Sebutan Johor-Riau* accent.

In diglossic terms (Fishman, 1972), Standard Malay is typically regarded as a 'High' variety while Colloquial Malay a 'Medium' variety (Asmah, 1986). *Sebutan Johor-Riau* is thus both 'High' and 'Medium' given its association with both Standard Malay and Colloquial Malay. With the introduction of *Sebutan Baku*, *Sebutan Johor-Riau*'s association with Standard Malay is severed and it is reduced to a 'Medium' status only. From the point of view of the state, *Sebutan Baku* is to be used with Standard Malay in formal or 'High' situations while *Sebutan Johor-Riau* with Colloquial Malay in informal or 'Medium' situations. The decoupling of *Sebutan Johor-Riau* from Standard Malay is lost on the Malay community. There has been a tendency to demonise those who do not speak Standard Malay with *Sebutan Baku* as speaking Colloquial Malay, or worse Bazaar Malay (Berita Harian, 2004), when in fact they are speaking Standard Malay with *Sebutan Johor-Riau*. The older generation (40 years old and above) did not go through school learning *Sebutan Baku*. They speak Standard Malay with *Sebutan Johor-Riau*, some impeccably so such as the Mufti and President of Singapore. Those who speak

Standard Malay with *Sebutan Baku* tend to be students and those tasked with the implementation of *Sebutan Baku* such as newsreaders, Malay language teachers and government leaders. There is reason to believe that except for television newsreaders who are specially trained to read in *Sebutan Baku*, other speakers of *Sebutan Baku* are not as proficient especially in spontaneous speech (Maisarah, 2019; Sakinah, 2019).

### **Accent and identity**

As alluded to earlier, accent is an important linguistic indicator of identity. While a speaker's vocabulary range may index her professional identity, in the case of ethnic or national identity, it is accent, understood as 'loose bundles of prosodic and segmental features distributed over geographic and/or social space' that serves to identify the speaker as belonging to a particular communal grouping (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 42). This is not to say that speakers may not want to identify with an external group. Sung (2016), for example, notes that whether non-native speakers of English want to speak with 'a native-like accent' depends on whether they want to be seen as linguistically competent:

In terms of identity-related reasons, participants' desire to speak English with a native-like accent was found to be related to their wish to express their identities as competent L2 speakers of English, whereas participants who indicated a preference to speak English with a local accent tended to emphasize the need to project their lingua-cultural identities and avoid native speaker associations.

(Sung, 2016, p. 55)

However, in the case of Malay Singaporeans, the adoption of *Sebutan Baku* (as opposed to *Sebutan Johor-Riau*) for use with Standard Malay is not about coming across as being more competent. Moreover, whether or not a speaker uses *Sebutan Baku* or *Sebutan Johor-Riau*, he or she is still clearly acknowledged to be a native speaker of Malay. The issue, then, revolves around the motivation for adopting what seems to be a non-natural accent as opposed to one that is considered more natural. This is a point of some importance. While there are native English speakers of British and American models of pronunciation, there are no native Malay speakers of *Sebutan Baku*. Furthermore, as argued earlier, the phonological features of *Sebutan Baku* are closer to the standard Indonesian pronunciation than to *Sebutan Johor-Riau*. This means that Malay Singaporeans who adopt *Sebutan Baku* tend to sound more like their Indonesian counterparts than their Malay brethren in Malaysia.

### **Motivations for retaining *Sebutan Baku***

Here, we present and comment on two of the motivations for the retention of *Sebutan Baku* in Singapore as expressed by Malay political leaders

and past chairmen of MBMS over the years (Berita Harian, 2004; Berita Minggu, 2018).

***Sebutan Baku is ‘more systematic and consistent’ than Sebutan Johor-Riau***

Proponents of *Sebutan Baku* perceive it to be more ‘systematic and consistent’ than *Sebutan Johor-Riau* (Berita Harian, 2004). In *Sebutan Johor-Riau*, there are seen to be many exceptions to the rule (Asraf, 1984; Suratman, 1989). For instance, while the phonological rule that governs the realization of word-final /a/ as /ə/ applies to words like *suka* (/sukə/, ‘when’) and *bahasa* (/bahasə/, ‘language’) but not to words like *bola* (/bola/, ‘ball’) and *wanita* (/wanita/, ‘lady’). Similarly, the phonological rule that lowers high vowels /i/ and /u/ in closed word-final syllable to /e/ and /o/ respectively applies to *bukit* (/buket/ ‘hill’) and *lanun* (/lanon/ ‘pirate’) but not to *aiskrim* (/aiskrim/ ‘ice cream’) and *kasus* (/kasus/ ‘case’). *Sebutan Baku*’s prescriptive rule of ‘pronounce as it is spelled’ was designed to ‘put right’ these seemingly inconsistent pronunciations.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that the endearment towards *Sebutan Baku* has to do not only with the frustration at seeing the imperfect letter-sound correspondence of *Sebutan Johor-Riau* but also with the supposed confusion these ill correspondences may present to speakers and learners of the language. However, native speakers of *Sebutan Johor-Riau* have no difficulty pronouncing the words mentioned earlier. They pronounce *suka* as /sukə/ and *bola* as /bola/ no matter how inconsistent that appears to be. Similarly, they require no conscious effort to pronounce the letter ‘i’ in closed syllable-final position differently in *bukit* (/buket/) and in *aiskrim* (/aiskrim/). They also pronounce the letter ‘u’ differently in *lanun* (/lanon/) and in *kasus* (/kasus/) without batting an eyelid (Asraf, 1984). There is high uniformity among *Sebutan Johor-Riau* speakers in how these words are pronounced even if current phonology has yet to properly account for these irregular pronunciations.

*Sebutan Johor-Riau* is a living, naturally occurring pronunciation governed by phonological rules that are descriptive of speakers’ linguistic behaviour. While the rules that account for the three features that distinguish *Sebutan Johor-Riau* from *Sebutan Baku* are quite robust in that it accounts for a large amount of phonetic data (Farid, 1980), there are still data, as shown earlier, that run counter to these rules. The apparent inconsistency in pronunciation perhaps reflects the state of scholarship in Malay phonology. The way forward is to respect *Sebutan Johor-Riau* as a system to be further studied in order to gain a better understanding of the ‘defects’ reflected in native speakers’ pronunciation rather than, as proponents of *Sebutan Baku* would have it, change these speakers’ pronunciation on the basis that it is not ‘systematic and consistent’. Nonetheless, scholarship in phonological studies of Malay may not necessarily be in dire need of an overhaul. Exceptions to descriptive rules are not unique to Malay. For instance, in English, there are many verbs that do not follow the usual tense inflectional patterns. There are regular verbs

(‘jump’-‘jumped’; ‘reel’-‘reeled’; ‘brew’-‘brewed’) but there are also irregular verbs (‘buy’-‘bought’; ‘eat’-‘ate’; ‘throw’-‘threw’). These irregular inflections have been accepted as part of the English language and there has been no attempt to ‘regularise’ them.

***Sebutan Baku is ‘easier to learn and teach’ than Sebutan Johor-Riau***

As mentioned earlier, native speakers of *Sebutan Johor-Riau* have little difficulty pronouncing words in Malay. However, there is genuine concern that the ‘inconsistencies’ inherent in *Sebutan Johor-Riau* present difficulties to young children learning to read in Malay (Pairah, 2007; Suratman, 1989) especially those without adequate exposure to the language at home and are learning it for the first time in school. This is essentially a learning or pedagogical issue. The common practice of teaching reading in Malay is the use of phonics – decoding sounds of printed words by syllables. Students are taught that each consonant and vowel has one sound, for example, ‘k’, ‘t’ and ‘a’ are pronounced /k/, /t/ and /a/ respectively. Combining each consonant with ‘a’ produces /ka/ and /ta/ syllables, and stringing the two syllables together yields /kata/ (*kata*, meaning ‘word’ or ‘say’). This does not work if *kata* is to be read as /katə/ as in *Sebutan Johor-Riau*. Unfortunately, instead of reviewing the teaching method and developing a pedagogy that would help students read *kata* as /katə/, it is the pronunciation of the word that is deemed to be the problem and in need of change. Malay has an apt way of describing this phenomenon: *tak tahu menari dikatakan lantai jongkang-jongket* (‘one does not know how to dance but blames the floor for seesawing’). It is thus not surprising that having ‘fixed’ the pronunciation, Malay is ‘easier’ to read. In a survey of 300 Secondary 3 students and 76 secondary school Malay teachers, Pairah (2007) found that 88.3 per cent of student respondents reported that *Sebutan Baku* helps them in reading and spelling. In addition, 92.1 per cent of teacher respondents believe that *Sebutan Baku* has successfully facilitated students’ reading and spelling. The study, however, did not examine the students’ accent. It can be rightly assumed that they speak in a ‘sanitised’ Malay that is different from their parents and grandparents.

Without *Sebutan Baku*, Malay is already easier to read (in terms of decoding) compared to English. While Malay orthography is not completely phonemic, it has a more transparent letter-sound correspondence than English. If teaching *kata* is difficult because the letter ‘a’ in the first and second syllable represents two sounds (/a/ and /ə/ respectively), consider teaching the letter ‘a’ in English. It represents not two but four sounds – /æ/ (man), /ɑ:/ (can’t), /ɜ:/ (sofa) and /eɪ/ (ancient). Likewise, ‘c’ represents four sounds – /s/ (city), /k/ (cotton), /ʃ/ (species) and /tʃ/ (cello), and the string /ʌf/ is represented in spelling as ‘uff’ (‘stuff’) and ‘ough’ (‘enough’). English teachers have to grapple with a lot more ‘inconsistencies’ but they teach the language as it is, warts and all. Tinkering with the pronunciation has never been an option.

In teaching reading in English, letters that are not amenable to phonics are taught by sight or word recognition. Students learn that the letter 'b' represents the sound /b/ in 'bee', 'bus', 'boot'. On the other hand, words such as 'once' and 'cough' that are not easy to decode are taught as whole words. The two approaches – phonics with an emphasis on decoding, and word recognition, on meaning – are often integrated in English reading programmes (Jones & Deterding, 2007). In teaching reading in Malay, there is no urgent need to using the word recognition method, suffice that the phonics method is expanded to accommodate letters that represent more than one sound. Children learning to read can be taught that most letters in Malay represent one sound but there are a few that represent more than one sound.

### ***Sebutan Johor-Riau as an index of Malay identity***

For Malay Singaporeans who oppose the state's push for *Sebutan Baku*, the issue is that of sounding less like their ancestors. Consider the following extracts from a plea by Guntor Sadali, then Editor of *Berita Harian*, a Malay daily newspaper. Speaking at an award presentation dinner organized by *Berita Harian*, he was reported to have questioned the need to create a new way of speaking (*Berita Harian*, 2011a):

After almost two decades since *Sebutan Baku* was introduced in schools, I think it's time for *Majlis Bahasa Melayu Singapura* to review the objective of the move seriously and whether it should be continued.

*Sebutan bahasa Melayu Johor-Riau* now used by the Malay community should be accepted as standard or *baku*. We do not have to have a new way to talk.

Members of the Malay community generally find that *Sebutan Baku* is very awkward, and that is why they do not use it in their daily lives.

Malaysia, which embarked on this venture with Singapore, also no longer uses *Sebutan Baku* in their broadcasting media. So the question is, should we continue to teach *Sebutan Baku* in school? To me, it's a waste of effort.

Let's talk in a way that allows words to leap off our tongues easily without being rigid or forced.

(Our translation)

Guntor was not the first to voice his concern as there were many others before him (Mohd Zulkifli, 2003; Awalludin, 2007). His speech triggered debates in the mainstream newspaper, on social media and even at social gatherings. Maarof Salleh, former President of the Muslim Religious Council of Singapore, in a commentary in *Berita Harian*, suggested that 'as long as a policy or regulation is man-made, it is desirable that it be revised from time to time,

amended if necessary, and even revamped if that is what is needed' (Maarof, 2011). The debate has put pressure on MBMS to issue a preliminary statement (Berita Harian, 2011b):

[T]he decision on the teaching of *Sebutan Baku* in school cannot be based on whether the speakers are comfortable with it. The decision must be based on comprehensive considerations covering education and the development of the Malay language.

(Our translation)

In the absence of a robust defence of *Sebutan Baku*, voices continue to call for a review of, or critiquing, the *Sebutan Baku* policy (Annaliza, 2013; Yurni Irwati, 2015; Rawi, 2019). In a letter to the press, a Malay Singaporean parent shared his concern about how his daughter would sound if she were to, as insisted by the state, speak with *Sebutan Baku*, which he refers to as 'Melayu Baku' (Osman, 2013; cited in Yurni Irwati, 2015):

Putting 'Melayu Baku' to the test at the dinner table one evening, my school-going daughter sounded different from me, my wife, our parents and grandparents. . . . Like the Malays of old, we speak with a pronunciation known as 'Melayu Johor-Riau'. . . . While I can understand what my daughter is saying in 'Melayu Baku', . . . the question is why our education system want to make her Malay sound different from that of her parents and ancestors? If it is for the sake of a pan-Malay linguistic unity, it does not seem logical because this effort is actively undertaken only in Singapore, where the Malay population is miniscule compared to that of the wider Malay-speaking world.

The wider Malay world continues to be proud of its spoken heritage and values the diversity in pronunciation and accents, as well as region-specific slangs and colloquialisms as part and parcel of a living, dynamic heritage.

Singapore's 'Melayu Baku' venture betrays an obsession to sanitise a complex heritage for convenient teaching purposes. Eventually it will lead to Singaporean Malays' loss of their vocal heritage. Please rethink this policy before this development becomes irreversible.

That *Sebutan Johor-Riau* is a cherished index of Malay identity resonates with the undergraduate community (18–25-year-olds). In a survey of 100 Malay respondents spread across six local universities, Sakinah (2019) found that 94 per cent of respondents reported that *Sebutan Johor-Riau* (rather than *Sebutan Baku*) represents Singaporean Malays, 91 per cent thought that *Sebutan Johor-Riau* accurately describes how they themselves speak Malay, and 86 per cent prefer to use *Sebutan Johor-Riau* when communicating in Malay. It is worth noting that in Malaysia, the issue of identity also figured in the

country's decision to abolish *Sebutan Baku* in 2000. A prominent linguist, Asmah Haji Omar, a professor at the University of Malaya, was quoted as saying (Utusan Online, 2000b):

The *Sebutan Baku* system of pronunciation practiced since 1988 can eliminate the identity of the original Malay language. . . . *Sebutan Baku* does not reflect the Malay identity when spoken. . . . [It] . . . does not at all reflect the Malay language, a language that is known for its beautiful melody and rhythm. . . . *Sebutan Baku* when used does not sound like Malay; moreover, it is a created language and its intonation when spoken is rather rough. . . . *Sebutan Baku* does not at all represent the authentic Johor-Riau Malay whose model have been used since long ago.

(Our translation)

### Impact of *Sebutan Baku* on the Malay 'tongue' and identity

A subtle effect of the 'pronounce as it is spelled' approach to pronunciation is the potential loss of the natural 'tongue' of the speakers and their identity.

#### *Odd pronunciations*

Words that are not spelled phonemically in one language can sound strange if pronounced as they are spelled in another language. In English, /bɜːgə/ is represented in spelling as 'burger' which is also how it is spelled in Malay. Proponents of *Sebutan Baku* would pronounce 'burger' as /burgə/ which instantly renders it unrecognisable. In contrast, *Sebutan Johor-Riau* speakers base their pronunciation on how the word is pronounced in the source language and adapt it to the Malay tongue. In the case of 'burger' it is pronounced as /bəgə/, a similar sound sequence in existing Malay words such as *peta* (/pətə/, 'map'), *kena* (/kənə/, 'must') and *teka* (/təkə/, 'to guess').

*Sebutan Baku* also brings about pronunciations that flout phonotactic constraints in Malay. In the case of the word 'video', *Sebutan Baku* requires it to be pronounced as it is spelled (/video/) but the /eo/ sequence is alien to Malay. What is common is the sequence /io/ such as found in *bersiul* (/bəsijəl/, 'whistle') and *biola* (/bijoləl/, 'violin').<sup>10</sup> *Sebutan Johor-Riau* speakers thus pronounce 'video' as /vidijə/ which is close to how it is pronounced in English. The attempts at imposing *Sebutan Baku* merely exacerbate the 'problems' that are associated with any spelling system that is in active use. The very fact that language is a form of social practice and moreover that this practice necessarily also involves borrowings and innovation means that the supposed 'dilemma' that arises from not having an ideal phonemic spelling system cannot, and will not, ever go away.

**Hybrid pronunciations**

In her study, Sakinah (2019) undertook a phonetic analysis of the spontaneous speech of 10 of her respondents and their reading of a text and word list. The findings reveal less than perfect *Sebutan Baku* despite overt instruction for them to speak and read using *Sebutan Baku*. In the reading of the text and word list, the consistency in pronouncing ‘a’ as /a/ in open final syllable and in voicing ‘r’ in syllable-final position is high (90 per cent). Pronouncing ‘i’ as /i/, and ‘u’ as /u/, in closed final syllable is also high (80 per cent). In spontaneous speech, on the other hand, where there is less time for the respondents to monitor their pronunciation as compared to when they read, consistency level in the pronunciation of ‘i’ and ‘u’ falls sharply to around 30 per cent. For the other 70 per cent of the time, the respondents lapse into *Sebutan Johor-Riau* pronouncing ‘i’ and ‘u’ as ‘e’ and ‘o’ respectively. This suggests that the respondents are practicing a hybrid pronunciation, that is, the *Sebutan Baku* is limited to pronouncing ‘a’ and ‘r’ while the pronunciation of ‘i’ and ‘u’ follows the *Sebutan Johor-Riau* model.

Similar findings were obtained by Maisarah (2019) in her study of 20 respondents that comprised professionals namely Malay political leaders, television and radio newsreaders, and radio deejays. She analyzed the read speech of political leaders, the reading of the news by television and radio newsreaders, and the conversation of radio deejays. Television newsreaders were found to be the more proficient users of *Sebutan Baku* while political leaders, radio newsreaders and deejays clearly could only afford a hybrid pronunciation. The professionals learned *Sebutan Baku* in their adult years while the undergraduates were among the earliest batches of students to be taught using *Sebutan Baku*. Both could only manage a hybrid *Sebutan Baku*.<sup>11</sup> It appears that after 25 years of *Sebutan Baku*, the ability to speak in proper *Sebutan Baku* is limited to only a handful of speakers. There are consequences if this continues. Singapore could witness the emergence of a new model of Malay pronunciation that is neither *Sebutan Baku* nor *Sebutan Johor-Riau*, a situation best described by the proverb *yang dikejar tak dapat, yang dikendong berciciran* (‘what one pursues is out of one’s reach, what one possesses is lost’).

**Conclusion**

This chapter examines the concept of standard language and standard pronunciation with a particular focus on *Sebutan Johor-Riau* and *Sebutan Baku* as two contending standard pronunciations for the Malay language. While the written and spoken forms of the language – Standard Malay and *Sebutan Johor-Riau* – have evolved naturally from a regional dialect into a supralocal dialect, *Sebutan Baku* is a created model of pronunciation that was enforced through legislation. It is neither defensible as a concept nor can it stand as a legitimate standard from a linguistic, socio-historical standpoint. Tinkering with the pronunciation has also skewed the Malay tongue. The hybrid

*Sebutan Baku* spoken by the professionals and undergraduates (Maisarah, 2019; Sakinah, 2019) may be reflective of the way Malay Singaporeans adapt to *Sebutan Baku*. Even if younger Malay Singaporeans pick up *Sebutan Baku* in the classroom,<sup>12</sup> they would in all probability sound like the youngster in the excerpt at the beginning of this chapter and the girl who spoke to her parents in *Sebutan Baku* which the latter could not identify with (Osman, 2013). Either way, *Sebutan Baku* or its hybrid could distance the Singapore Malay community from its linguistic and cultural heritage that is anchored to *Sebutan Johor-Riau*.

## Notes

- 1 Native speakers include people from other parts of the Malay Archipelago (Java, Bawean, Sulawesi, and so on) who migrated to Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia before and during the British colonial period. They settled there and assimilated to the Malay way of life (see Benjamin, this volume) embracing the *Nusantara* creed ‘*di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung*’ (wherever we live, we must embrace the local language and custom).
- 2 This needs unpacking. *Sebutan Baku* assumes that Malay spelling is phonemic in that each letter corresponds to one sound which, in reality, is not. For instance, the letter ‘k’ does not represent one but two sounds, /k/ and /ʔ/, as in *kakak* (/kakaʔ/) (‘sister’). On the other hand, the letter ‘e’ represents three sounds, /e/, /ə/ and /ɛ/, as in *sate* (/sate/, ‘a meat dish’), *emas* (/əmas/, ‘gold’), and *sel* (/sell/, ‘cell’). *Sebutan Baku* proponents regard these as exceptions. But unknown to them, there are more exceptions which only careful phonological analysis would reveal. For instance, *Sebutan Baku* speakers could not but pronounce the suffix ‘an’ in at least four different ways: /ʔan/ in *duga-an* (‘test’), /jan/ in *tepi-an* (‘edge’), /wan/ in *tiru-an* (‘imitation’), and /kan/ in *tepu-an* (‘pity’) (Asmah, 2008; Farid, 1980). For more discussion on the linguistic anomaly of *Sebutan Baku*, see Mukhlis (2019).
- 3 IPA (International Phonetic Association, 1999) alphabets are used to represent sounds (or phonemes) and these are enclosed in tilted brackets (/ /). Symbols within single quotes (‘’) represent letters of the Latin alphabet.
- 4 The decision may have political undertones. *Sebutan Baku* was associated with Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who promoted it while holding office as Malaysia’s Minister for Education in the 80s (Nik Safiah Karim, 1989). The retraction of *Sebutan Baku* in 2000 came not long after he was sacked from office in 1998.
- 5 MBMS, a council in the Ministry of Communications and Information was established in 1981 to standardise Malay spelling in Singapore. Its strategic role expanded to encompass the promotion and development of the Malay language. Its present objectives focus on promoting the use of the Malay language in the community, to build a community of Singaporean Malays with a strong command of the Malay language and an appreciation of Malay heritage and culture (National Heritage Board, 2019).
- 6 According to Asmah (1986), Colloquial Malay is spoken across the native Malay-speaking areas and is subject to the phonological patternings of the regional dialects, which in Singapore is the Johor-Riau dialect. Colloquial Malay may thus be regarded as a lexical-grammatical system with no phonological form of its own. Koh (1990), however, is of the view that the different varieties of Colloquial Malay across the dialect groups share a common core of phonological properties other than their own.
- 7 This is a Malay-lexified pidgin spoken in the marketplace of Singapore and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Bao & Aye, 2010). It was once a lingua franca in Singapore but has since lost this status after English was made the primary medium of instruction in schools. A new variant of English, Singlish, has since emerged as the main language of communication between ethnic groups in Singapore.

- 8 See Pakir, this volume.
- 9 As shown in footnote 2, *Sebutan Baku* too is not free of inconsistent pronunciations.
- 10 /j/ is the phonemic representation for the letter 'y' in *saya* /sajə/ ('I/me/my') or *juran* /juran/ ('fee'). In Malay phonology, the sound /j/ is inserted between two adjacent high vowels such as /i/ and /u/ in /iu/, or /i/ and /o/ in /io/ (Farid, 1980).
- 11 Research on second dialect acquisition shows that after the age of 7 years, the capacity for perfect learning of a new accent diminishes and it is virtually absent after the age of 14 (Chambers, 1992).
- 12 This is a likely scenario given the rapid shift to English as the dominant home language in Malay households (Cavallaro & Serwe, 2010; TodayOnline, 2013).

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