The MALAY LANGUAGE in MALAYSIA and INDONESIA: from lingua franca to national language

Asmah Haji Omar

Professor Emerita of Malay Linguistics,

University of Malaya,

Kuala Lumpur

Historical Background

The Malay language is indigenous to Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Sumatera, and the group of islands south of Singapore, better known as the Riau- Lingga archipelago. In historical times, Peninsular Malaysia was known as the Malay Peninsula, which as a non-political entity also consisted of southern Thailand where Malay is still spoken as a first language by the Malay population. Transmigration , interinsular barter trading, and family as well as institutional relationships between the royal houses of various Malay sultanates in the Malay archipelago, before the coming of the Western powers, had contributed to the spread of the Malay language among the peoples of insular Southeast Asia .This spread took wing towards the second half of the 20th century when national policies, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, instituted a single national language.

The term "Malay archipelago" (the Malay nomenclature being **Gugusan Pulau-Pulau Melayu**) refers to the region comprising Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia (excepting West Irian), and the Philippines. The claim of this region to being a Malay linguistic area (witness the French global term: *Monde Malais*, referring to the entire "East Indies"), although Malay is not indigenous to all the islands, may have had its origins in various premises. One such premise can be attributed to the autochthones whose physical morphology generally conforms to that of the Malays, that is, brown skin, noses which are not too flat nor too sharp, straight black hair, and, when compared to Caucasians, medium height stature. The physical characteristics factor then rules out the peoples of Eastern Indonesia, particularly those of West Irian whose languages belong to the Melanesian subfamily of the Austronesian stock, whereas Malay and the languages of the Malay archipelago belong to the Indonesian subfamily of the same stock.

Flowering of the Malay Language in the Classical Era

The people of the Malay archipelago in the old days could have already been aware that linguistically they were of one group, even if their mother tongues were not identical with one another. Similarities in certain words, and these are usually words that appear in everyday usage, could have acted as an indicator to this effect. But a more powerful indicator than this was the fact that the Malay language became their vehicle of communication, be it in the trading ports as the lingua franca, on in the royal courts and in the communication between the various royal courts, and between these and the foreign powers, such as, the English and the Dutch. From historical records of people visiting the archipelago, e.g., the Chinese and the Arabs, we gather information that Malay was already in use as the language of the Buddhist Srivijaya empire which flourished from the 7th to the 14th century A.D. and which had its centres of influence in Sumatera and the Malay Peninsula.

From the beginnings of time to the 14th century, the role of Malay was not confined to being a language of the market place. It was already **a high language (H-language)**, functioning as the language of governance and diplomacy, and acting as a vehicle in the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. The beginning of its stupendous development which I would like to refer to as the “flowering of the Malay language”, came about with the rise of the **Melaka (Malacca) empire** in the 14th century, and this empire lasted until 1511 with its conquest by the Portuguese. However, the tradition of maintaining the Malay language as an H-language was continued during the time of the **Johor-Riau empire** which rose with the demise of Melaka as a powerful Malay sultanate. This latter day empire consisted of Johor (now a part of Malaysia), Singapore, and territories which now belong to Indonesia, i.e., the Riau-Lingga

archipelago and the Riau mainland which is situated on the eastern coast of Sumatera facing Malaysia and Singapore. At the same time, the **Brunei Malay empire** (which covered the present Brunei, the present Malaysian territories of Sabah and Sarawak, and a large part of Indonesian Borneo, and the Sulu archipelago which now belongs to the Philippines) also played an important role in the flowering of the Malay language.

The peak of this "language flowering" phenomenon was the period between the 16th - 17th centuries, as evidenced by the great number of literary products of the era, and these products are now generally referred to **as classical Malay texts**. It was during the period of the rule of the Malay empires mentioned above that Malay epistolary reached its height of sophistication in language form as well as in visual representation or format; hence the term "flowering". A collection of letters of this period is to be found in **Annabel the Gallop, 1994.**

We do not have records of the flowering of Malay during the Srivijaya period, although it was the language of the rulers, as attested by the 7th century stone inscriptions found in Southern Sumatera and the Bangka Island off its coast. The Indian influence in the **Srivijaya** period had brought into the region the **Pallava script** used on these stone inscriptions; other than that there is no evidence of the existence of the script . This leads us to surmise that the script never reached the common people. Furthermore, there is no record of whatever literature that was in the possession of the Malay people of the period**. The stories from the Hindu Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as those from the Buddhist Jataka were transmitted orally from generation to generation, but they were not put into written form until the Malays became Muslims and adopted the Arabic writing system which they indigenised and re-named the "Jawi" script**. **The possession of a writing system, the Jawi script, can be said to be the main factor in making the flowering of the Malay language possible.**

Present Situation

Today Malay is still a common medium of interaction in the Malay archipelago. It is still possible to get by in the various ports, towns and villages by using Malay in interacting with the local people. **The lingua franca acquires the flavour of the locality in which it is spoken.** The lingua

variety in peninsular Malaysia is an identity in itself compared to the one in Sarawak and Sabah. This is due to the racial or ethnic mix of the speakers. The one in use in Kuala Lumpur shows an overlay of Chinese and Tamil influence in structure and the semantic renderings of Malay words, while in Kuching and Kota Kinabalu, elements which contribute to the building of the identity of the lingua franca come from the other local languages as well. In Jakarta, a Malay speaker from Malaysia can still understand the local or "original" dialect of the Jakartans , also referred to as Jakarta Malay or Batavian Malay (*Melayu Betawi)*, after Batavia, the name by which Jakarta was known prior to 1945.

Like any other natural language, **Malay shows that it is characterised by a great number of native-speaker varieties.** In Malaysia, these varieties are generally identified according to the states, and they are referred to as the Kedah dialect, the Kelantan dialect etc. However, the state boundaries are not strictly synonymous with dialect boundaries, because normally one finds that the dialect of one state may spill over into the territory of its neighbour. For example, what is generally known as the Kedah dialect is the variety that flows into Perlis in the north, and covers the state of Penang, and extends south as far as Taiping in Perak. The reason for this can be found in the history of the states involved: Perlis and Penang were once part of the larger kingdom of Kedah, while Perak's contiguity with Kedah is the most natural explanation for the spread of the Kedah dialect to her southern neighbour.

On the other hand, a particular state may be home to more than a single dialect. Perak, as has been shown above, is an area of the Kedah dialect. At the same time it also provides an area of spread in its southern region, i.e., southwards from Ipoh, for the Selangor dialect. The term "Perak dialect" refers specifically to the dialect spoken in the Parit region.

The description of the spread of dialects in Kedah and Perak is also applicable to the other states of Malaysia. Migration form outside Malaysia as well as major migratory movements between states have created pockets of "**other states's dialects**" within particular states. For example, one finds a community of Patani Malay speakers in Larut and Matang in Perak, and in Baling in Kedah. The Endau-Rompin region of Pahang is characterised not only by its native dialect, but also by the Kedah dialect spoken by a small community of people who were originally from Kedah but who went to the area to start *padi* [rice] farming there.

Although Indonesia has its own national language, Indonesian or *bahasa Indonesia*, this variety in its standard form is used in certain situations, i.e., in administration, official ceremonies, and as the medium of instruction in educational institutions. Outside these situations, speakers

precipitate towards their conversational varieties which are characterised by local features as well as those of their mother tongues. Hence, in Java the more common spoken variety of Indonesian would be the one showing a heavy influence from Javanese, the language of the majority of the island's population. The same goes for the other islands.

In Sumatera and the Riau-Lingga archipelago where Malay is a native language, one hears a great number of native varieties spoken. A general impression one gets is that these native varieties are very much akin to those spoken in various parts of Peninsular Malaysia. The variety spoken in the Riau-Lingga Islands and the Riau mainland as well as in Medan, in North Sumatera, bears a close similarity to the dialect spoken in Johor in Peninsular Malaysia. **In the Lingga Island (with a population of about 200)** which is a 6-hour boat ride away from the Bentan Island (immediately south of Singapore), **refined Malay as used in the Malay royal courts still exists**, despite the fact that the institution of the royal family had ceased to exist in the island and in the whole of Indonesia since the beginning of the 20th century. The population of this island consists mainly of **the descendants of the last Sultan of the Lingga group of islands, who in turn were the descendants of the sultans of the Johor-Riau empire**, and their one-time followers. Relics of their past greatness can still be seen in mausoleums and ruins of palaces. Although the people now live like ordinary kampong folk eking out a living in sago industry and fishing, **pride in their glorious past is reflected in their use of language even when they talk among themselves**. In terms of their food and the manner in which they dress themselves, they seem to be culturally closer to Johor than they are to Jakarta. The same can be said of the other islands in the Riau-Lingga archipelago, particularly the Bentan and the Penyengat islands.

The passage of time and social developments in the Malay region have given the Malay language a vast expansion of its domains of use. The domains have increased from those of literature, religion, and native/local laws, to those that belong to the world of the sciences. This has been made possible **by the role Malay plays as the national language of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei**. A planned development of the language undertaken by these three countries in co-operation with one another, **specifically for a common spelling system and a scientific vocabulary** for the various academic disciplines, has helped in the production of texts of all varieties of the academic and professional genres. This has given impetus to **the policy of making Malay a language of academia**.

It has been mentioned that in the classical era the writing system which can be interpreted as the lifeline of Malay as an H-language was the Jawi script. **From the middle of the 20th century, this role has been taken over by the Latin or Romanised script, known in Indonesia as *tulisan Latin,* and in Malaysia and Brunei as *tulisan Rumi.*** This writing system was introduced to the Malay people by the Western powers: the Dutch in Indonesia and the British in Malaysia. Although the Portuguese were the first Western power to arrive in the Malay archipelago, they cannot be accredited with the introduction of

this cultural norm over the people they colonised. Portuguese travellers-cum-scholars, the most noted being Pigafetta, might have used the Romanised script to write the Malay words they heard, but there has been no record of any attempt by them to give a system of spelling to the language. **It was the Dutch and the British who provided systems of spelling the language to the Indonesians and the Malaysians respectively**. More of this will be said later.

The Rise of Malay as National Language

The term "national language" came into being towards the second half of the 20th century, when former colonies of foreign powers were striving for independence from their colonial masters. With colonial rule came the suppression of the native language. **Independence required a national identity, and the search for symbols to reflect this identity became a necessity. An important symbol, besides the national anthem and the national flag, was the national language.**

In the long history of the Malay language, there has not been an indication of the role of politics as we know it today in the choice of its use. If the Buginese rulers in Sulawesi used Malay in their communication with other rulers of the region instead of their own language, the situation arose out of practicality. And the choice was made voluntarily. A similar assumption can be applied when explaining the choice of Malay made by the foreign powers when they communicated with the rulers of the region.

Politics entered language use when the region was colonised. The displacement of the local language in important domains in the governance of the country in which the language was used was **the result of a conscious act on the part of the colonial masters**. **As a result, Malay which was once the dominant language in the archipelago was depleted of all its functions except as a lingua franca in the market places in inter-ethnic communication, and in the social life of native speakers.**

The Indonesian Chapter

The idea of re-elevating the Malay language to its former position of importance in the life of the people of the Malay archipelago was something new, and it came with the struggle for independence from the colonial rule. It first came into light in Indonesia in the first two decades of the 20th century. Life under the Dutch colonial government had turned out to be quite unbearable for the people of the islands which we now know as Indonesia. The handful of Indonesian intellectuals, some of whom studied in Holland and had had access to ideas of self-rule and independence, helped to establish movements which were politically motivated. The most famous of these movements was the *Boedi Oetomo* in Java, but there were also such movements working independently in the other islands. The struggle of these political "parties" was complemented by the youth movements, i.e., associations formed by students for the betterment of their education. Like the movements run by the elders, the youth movements were also localised. As such there were *Jong Java, Jong Batak, Jong Celebes, Jong Ambon, Jong Sumatranen Bond, Sekar Rukun, Pemuda Kaum Betawi,* and *Jong Islamieten Bond.* **In 1928, these movements drew together in a landmark decision, known as *Sumpah Pemuda* (Youth Pledge), which was taken on 28th October of that year in Jakarta. The following is a translation of the famous pledge:-**

1. We the young men and women of Indonesia affirm that we have one birth place, and that is Indonesia.

2. We the young men and women of Indonesia affirm that we belong to one nation, that of Indonesia.

3. We the young men and women of Indonesia revere one language of unity, and that is the Indonesian language.

[Trimurti 1983: 111 – 134; Bachtiar 1983: 94 – 110]

It is the third part of the pledge that concerns language. This pledge from the point of view of

language choice is important because this was the first time the term *bahasa Indonesia* was used "officially", **official not in the sense of a recognition given by the Dutch colonial government, but by the people themselves as a consolidated group**. Hence, the language of unity, not the national language. Undoubtedly, what was meant by *bahasa Indonesia* was Malay as used by the people in intergroup communication. The term "national language" (*bahasa kebangsaan*) had not surfaced, most probably due to the fact that what was uppermost in the minds of the progenitors was the **unity or rather the unification of people** who until that moment were looking at themselves as belonging to their original provinces rather than as members of a bigger group. At the proclamation of the independence of Indonesia on 17th August 1945, the term ***bahasa persatuan*** was replaced by ***bahasa negara*** (state language). ***Bahasa kebangsaan*** as a label for the language came into use much later, most probably **as a translation of the English term "national language"** that was being used all over the world by countries seeking independence during the period, such as India, Pakistan, the Philippines, to name a few.

There is no documented evidence that in their choice of Malay to be the language of unity, the freedom fighters of Indonesia sat down and discussed the merits and demerits of the language, vis-à-vis the other languages of Indonesia, many of which were already in possession of high literature and had had a long tradition of being a language of the provincial rulers. The most notable among these was **Javanese, the language of the most populous group of Indonesia even to this day**. The choice was made in the face of reality, that Malay was the language shared by everybody, regardless of which ethnic group they belonged to. It was a practical choice which fitted in with the political ideology of the time. In other words, **Malay was able to fulfill the political needs of the people**.

Students of sociolinguistics and language planning can in hindsight debate and provide justifications for the choice. The question that always arises is : Why not Javanese? It had the largest number of speakers, and a wealth of high literature which was most probably much more than what Malay had, while a majority of the freedom fighters were Javanese. **Indonesia has shown that in the choice of the language of unity, the majority rule does not apply, nor does history.** What mattered at the time when they made their choice was unity in the real sense of the word. **A group of people cannot be unified if they speak different languages and cannot comprehend one another**.

Why did Malay appeal to the people of the archipelago and not Javanese? The answer for this can be found in the sociolinguistic and microlinguistic features of the two languages concerned. Relatively speaking, **Malay has less sociolinguistic rules differentiating the social levels of the speakers, compared to Javanese**. In Malay, one has to remember the differences between the language of the royal court and that of the commoners. Even then, the differences are confined to certain lexical items and phraseologies. In the commoners's language one has to remember the different honorifics to

be used when speaking to or of people holding certain ranks. [Omar 1987: 83 – 97; Omar 1988].

Javanese on the other hand has four main social levels of speech, and each level may again be subdivided to show a more refined differentiation. Differences between the levels and the sublevels are not confined to the use of different lexical items but extend to the choice of the appropriate affixes. Javanese is also heavily loaded with honorifics which have to be used correctly in the right situation. All this makes Javanese a more cumbersome language to learn.

Another microlinguistic feature which could have made Javanese less appealing compared to Malay lies in its phonetics. The sounds of Javanese are said to be "heavy" compared to the "light" sounds of Malay. When I was a student in the University of Indonesia, and learning Javanese as a prerequisite to getting my degree, my non-Javanese friends used to say to me, "Now you are learning to explode like a machine-gun."

Although Malay was accepted without any problem as *bahasa Indonesia*, a reference to Malay being another nomenclature for the Indonesian national language is another story. From the time of the Youth Pledge, Indonesians have been debating over this, and the majority voice says that *bahasa Indonesia* is a language different from Malay although it was based on the latter language. The argument has always been the same : since its inception as the language of unity of Indonesia, *bahasa Indonesia* has charted a different path of development from Malay. **There is this general opinion that *bahasa Indonesia* is more modern and dynamic than *bahasa Melayu* of Malaysia.**

The name Malay or *Melayu* appears to bring out a particular perception among Indonesians, specifically the educated ones. It gives them **the pejorative idea of non-progress, old-fashioned, backward, and coming from the upstream region** (*udik* as the term is in their parlance). Such a perception emerges not only in informal conversations but also in conferences. As an example, in 1987 when I was a Fullbright scholar in a university in the US giving instruction on Malay and Malay linguistics, there was at the same time an Indonesian professor teaching Indonesian culture. In a discussion, an American professor asked us the difference between Malay and Indonesian; my Indonesian colleague was quick to respond by saying that the Malaysian variety was old-fashioned (*kolot*), conservative, and had not developed much, while *bahasa Indonesia* was modern, dynamic, and had undergone tremendous development. When he was asked to justify his statement, he said that the Malaysians took a lot of loanwords from Arabic, while the Indonesians resorted to Sanskrit, Dutch, and English! Any language user of Malay is able to spot the flaw of the judgement made.

The different socio-political milieu that the Malaysians and the Indonesians have been in especially from the time of their colonisation by the Western powers had undoubtedly affected the language spoken within their different environments in dissimilar ways. However, whether the two are separate languages or varieties of a single language is something that has to be looked at carefully. More of this will be said later on.

The Malaysian Chapter

The rise of nationalism and the fight for independence in Indonesia had awakened the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia from their erstwhile stupor. They started to follow the developments going on in the south very closely. Two main factors had spurred the Malays to work for a united Malay nation which spoke the Malay language and professed the religion of Islam. The first was **the threat of being overpowered by the Chinese and the Indians** who were becoming increasingly involved in the economic progress of the Malay states. The second was **the weakening power of the traditional Malay government** with a more pronounced intrusion of the British. [Omar 1979: 1]

Nationalism in Malaysia began with the Malays, with the idea of uniting all the Malays in the peninsula, and subsequently in the hope of uniting with Indonesia. The first political parties to exist legally in the Malay Peninsula were formed in 1937. These were *Persatuan Melayu Perak* (Perak Malay Association), followed by *Kesatuan Melayu Selangor* (Selangor Malay Association). Soon similar associations were formed, all based on the states they were in. [Yaacob 1951: 59]. Just like in Indonesia, political thinking at the beginning had not reached a wider level covering the whole of the peninsula. But nationalism in and for a wider geographical context came in the name of ***Kesatuan Melayu Muda*** (Malay Youth Organisation) or *KMM*, in 1938. KMM was fighting for a greater Malay nation, the ***Melayu-Raya*****, comprising the Malay Peninsula (or Malaya) and all the islands of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago.** To the KMM, Malaya and Indonesia were essentially one nation which was separated by the British and the Dutch . [Yaacob 1951: 60]. History has shown that KMM failed in their attempt.

It was another political party that succeeded in uniting the Malays. This was **UMNO** (United Malays National Organisation), which with its partners the **MCA** (Malaysian Chinese Association) and the **MIC** (Malaysian Indian Congress), in the bigger **Alliance Party**, managed to unite the three main races of Malays, Chinese and Indians, in their struggle for independence, which was achieved in 1957, the official date being 31st August 1957.

The Reid Commission, i.e., the committee which drafted the Constitution of independent Malaya recommended in **Article 152 of the Constitution that Malay be the national language**. The status of the language as the sole official language was to be attained ten years after independence, i.e., after the use of English in official situations had been phased out. This recommendation fulfilled the wishes of the Malays. However, there were dissensions from other sectors. The Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce of Malaya, for instance, wanted Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil to be on a par with one another. The status and the use of Chinese and Tamil became the subject of lengthy debates in and outside the Federal Legislative Council prior to independence. (For a more detailed discussion on this, see Omar 1979, Chapter 1). To solve the problem of acceptance among the non-Malays, the leaders resorted to "barter trading", by granting citizenship based on the principle of *jus soli* to non-Malays, if they accepted Malay as the national language (together with the special rights of the Malays). This meant that non-Malays automatically became citizens of Malaya if they were born in the country. [Ed.: Non-Malays born in the Federation of Malaya before Independence were required to furnish prove of residence "for periods amounting in the aggregate to not less than five years" in the seven years immediately preceding their applications (Art.16 of the *Federal Constitution*); in the case of the latter having left the country for further studies, proof of their bona fide studentship had also to be adduced.] In a nutshell, Malay in Malaysia had to tread a thorny path when its sister variety in Indonesia had taken a smooth ride some years earlier to become the national language.

Unlike the situation in Indonesia, the Malay language in Malaysia had been given the label "national language" from the very beginning. **The Constitution was written in English**, and the Malay term *bahasa kebangsaan* appears to be an accurate translation. Although the underlying objective was to make the language a unifying factor, the term *bahasa persatuan* was never used, as the ethnic mix was not similar to that of Indonesia. **The national language was seen to be a symbol of sovereignty, with which the citizens could identify themselves in the way they react to the flag and the national anthem**. Unlike Indonesia, Malaysia in her Constitution had also defined what was meant by "official language" as opposed to "national language". While the latter denoted the feeling of nationalism, the former related to situations in which the language was to be used, i.e., official ceremonies, government administration, the law courts, and for communication between the government and the people.

The main reason for the choice of Malay above English, Chinese, and Tamil was the **endoglossic**

nature of Malay. That is to say, Malay is indigenous to the Malaysian soil, while the others are not. In Indonesia, this kind of reasoning never came to the fore, because they did not have any **exoglossic** rival to contend with.

Language Flow

The institution of *bahasa Indonesia* as the dominant language in Indonesia since 1928 was immediately supported by activities which enhanced the development and the use of the language. Schools started to use it as their only medium of instruction, and this function of the language was extended to the universities. Scholars and educationists embarked on the production of books, teaching manuals, and the creation of technical terms to meet with the needs of the sciences.

As early as the 1920's, writers began to produce literary works which conformed to the genres imported from the West, such as novels, short stories, and the modern form of poetry. Prior to this, literary works written in the Malay language were those of the genres existing in classical Malay literature, such as, the romance (*hikayat*) and various traditional forms of poetry, like the *pantun*, and the *shair*. **Indonesians do not accept the classical works as Indonesian, because to them these belonged to a different world and a different age. They are Malay, and what is Malay is not Indonesian**. An Indonesian inventory should only reflect modern thinking. As such, of the literary works that were written before 1928, the only one that is accepted is *Hikayat Abdullah*, written by Abdullah Munshi, who was the Malay scribe of Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore, in early 19th century. This is because Abdullah shows individualism in his writing. Again, there are dissensions to this opinion mainly because Abdullah hailed from Melaka in Malaysia. [Rosidi 1964: Ch. 1].

Indonesian pride in what is Indonesian, and hence modern, had rendered a positive effect on the growth of their literature. Malaysia had benefited from this development, because when the national language policy was implemented in the schools in Malaysia after 1957, there was a lack of modern literary writings to be used in teaching Malay literature. **Indonesian works were used in the Malay literature classes in the schools as well as in the universities. This went on until the end of the 1970's when Malaysia was well equipped with her home production**. Even after this period, and

during the period when the two countries were at war with one another (1963 – 1966), interest in Indonesian literature had not faded from the Malaysian scene. This interest extends to works of other genres, such as academic and journalistic writings. There has always been a free flow of Indonesian publications coming into Malaysia.

The flow mentioned above can be seen as a one-way traffic of the passing of knowledge and experience between the two countries. Malaysian works of any kind do not reach Indonesia easily. **First and foremost, until recently there was a law in Indonesia which prohibited the importation of publications written in Indonesian produced in other countries**. For the law to be effective, Malay in Malaysia was deemed to be *bahasa Indonesia.* This bone of contention had been taken up by successive Ministers of Education of Malaysia with their counterparts in Indonesia since the early 1980's, but it was only a couple of years ago that **a ban on Malaysian books was lifted by the Indonesian government**.

The second factor which could have been responsible for the one-way traffic under discussion is **the lack of interest among Indonesians for Malay literature**. Ajip Rosidi, a well-known Indonesian writer, had observed this phenomenon, and had expressed his disappointment over this. [Rosidi 1964: 9]. The situation today has not changed much from the time Ajip Rosidi made his comment.

Regional Co-operation and the Language Council

Despite the one-way language flow between Malaysia and Indonesia, there had always been the intention between the two parties to unite (*menyatukan*) their two varieties of language. The first realization of this intention came in the form of a **Cultural Agreement** agreed upon between the two countries. It was signed in Jakarta in **1959. An important item in this Agreement was the unification of the spelling systems used in Indonesia and Malaysia**. Arising from this, experts in both countries worked together on a common spelling system, and the result was the ***Malindo*** spelling which had never been implemented; *Malindo* being an acronym of Malaya and Indonesia. The non-implementation of the system was partly due to the Indonesia-Malaysia war, better known as *Konfrontasi* (1963 – 1966) which was waged on Malaysia by Indonesia in the wake of the latter's opposition to the formation of Malaysia, consisting of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak, in September 1963.

When the war was over, one of the first peace commissions from Indonesia to visit Malaysia was a spelling team, known as ***Team Ejaan Koti*** (Koti Spelling Team); Koti being the abbreviation of *Korps Tentera Indonesia* (Indonesian Military Corps). This team was established by the military corps which took over the government of Indonesia after the bloody *coup d'etat* of September 1965. The visit which took place in the ***Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka***, Malaysia's Language Planning and Development Agency, in 1967, was the beginning of a cordial linguistic and cultural relationship that was to last to this day. **It was through the effort of this team and its counterpart in Malaysia that a common spelling system to be used in both countries was born**. The system was announced to the public simultaneously on 16th August 1972, the eve of the anniversary of the Indonesian independence, by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdul Razak, and President Soeharto of Indonesia.

Following the success of the spelling program, the linguistic co-operation between the two countries was formalised in December 1972, in the form of an organization known as ***Majlis Bahasa Indonesia- Malaysia*** (Language Council of Indonesia and Malaysia) or ***MBIM*** for short. The first task of the Council was to refine the spelling system giving a guideline to the spelling of words, inclusive of loan words. The second was to work on **another major program, and that was to prepare a set of rules for the coining of technical terms.** In 1975, this second program was completed , and it was announced to the public simultaneously by the respective Ministers of Education, on 30th August 1975, the eve of the anniversary of the Malaysian independence. [Omar 1979: 70 – 100].

With the two major achievements mentioned above, the Council proceeded to work on technical terms in specialised subjects, based on the subdivisions of the academic disciplines. Among its products are dictionaries and glossaries of the scientific terminology in various academic disciplines and subdisciplines. It has also produced its own journal, *Rampak Serantau* (Voice of the Region), where the member countries take turns to bring out an issue.

In 1985, *MBIM* added another member into its fold, and this was Brunei Darussalam. With this addition, the name of the Council had to be changed to *Majlis Bahasa Brunei Darussalam – Indonesia – Malaysia*, but it is better known by its acronym, ***MABBIM*.**

The purpose of having a common spelling system was **to make reading each other's publications in Indonesia and Malaysia easier** than it used to be. Previously, reading Indonesian

books for Malaysians was a slower process than it is now, and the same applied to Indonesians reading Malaysian publications. The Indonesian spelling system that was in use prior to 1972 was based on the Dutch spelling system, adopting Dutch graphemes like *oe* for *u, tj* and *dj* for *c* and *j* respectively, and so on. On the other hand, the Malay spelling systems in Malaysia were based on English orthography.

The common spelling system has adopted the English graphemes , which appeared to the Indonesian public of that time as an act of "surrender" to Malaysia. However, there were other rules in the system which Malaysia happily agreed to adopt from Indonesia. In the process, the Indonesia-Malaysia language team created a new grapheme, and that is *c* to stand for *ch.* This was a compromise after a long drawn-out debate on the opposition between *tj* and *ch.*

Prior to 1972, Indonesia was using one standard system, but there were several in Malaysia. This was because the one used in the schools was considered cumbersome in its rules and less learner friendly. It was also considered to be less adaptable to the spelling of scientific words, which was a most crucial point since Malaysia was taking a serious step in implementing the national language policy in the schools and the universities, starting with the schools in 1970. As changing the situation in the school appeared to be a slow process, the media, the universities, and certain publishers took their own separate initiatives to modify certain cumbersome rules. **This writer was given the task of formulating a more forward-looking and simpler spelling system for the University of Malaya**. The University of Malaya Spelling System was in use for two years before the acceptance of the Indonesia-Malaysia common spelling system.

As can be seen from the discussion above, the orthographic situation in Malaysia was a bit chaotic, and **it was Malaysia rather than Indonesia that needed a standardisation of its spelling**. Indonesia's willingness to modify her existing spelling system and to work on a common spelling system with Malaysia, when she least required the modification, was an act of amicability, specifically when we take into consideration the sociopolitical situation that the region was in at the time. With the benefit of hindsight, one can say that the common spelling system has been as advantageous not just to the growth and development of *bahasa Indonesia*, as it is to *bahasa Melayu*, but also to the learning process that Indonesian students have to go through. This point is made in the context of Indonesia's present-day policy of making English the most important foreign language in the country.

The common spelling system has greatly facilitated the coining of scientific terms in the language that the two countries are co-operating in. **Scientific terms are taken from books and journals written in English, and the common spelling has made possible the adapting of those terms while retaining at the same time the phonological features of the Malay language.** For example, *oxygen* is now *oksigen*, and not *oksijan* (formerly in Malaysia), and *zat asam* (formerly in Indonesia).

Brunei was admitted into the Council on a cultural and regional consideration. **The Indonesia-Malaysia spelling system had already been adopted by Brunei even before she joined the Council**. Brunei's bilingual policy which requires that all subjects, excepting the Malay language, Islam, Civics, and Art and Craft, be taught in English makes the linguistic détente in MABBIM less urgent for her .

Language Wall

In general there are two types of belief in the relationship between the language used in Indonesia and that used in Malaysia, namely *bahasa Melayu (Malaysia)* and *bahasa Indonesia*. **According to the first type, these two are varieties of a single language. The second type maintains that *bahasa Indonesia* is a language in its own right although it had its foundation in the Malay language**. Malaysians in general seem to support the first type, while in Indonesia there is a mixed reaction, as has already been mentioned earlier.

The fact that there is the MBIM/MABBIM seems to support the Malaysian belief, and the Malaysian stand could have arisen from the ability of Malaysians to read Indonesian texts and to enjoy Indonesian films shown on the local television networks as well as in the local cinema halls. **They may not be able to understand certain words and phraseologies, but this is also the situation that they are faced with when they communicate with people from a different dialect area in their own country.** And this is also the situation when members of MBIM/MABBIM and their various subcommittees meet and confer on language and terminology issues. One can also surmise that a similar situation occurs when leaders of the two countries meet in bilateral talks.

The second type of belief which is held by a great many Indonesians, especially the

non-Sumaterans and the non-Riau-Lingga people, could have arisen due to an underlying need for an identity that is specifically Indonesian. Malay or *bahasa Melayu* to the supporters of this type of belief belongs to another world, either to another political entity or to a world before *bahasa Indonesia* was born.

In the absence of hard data on the intelligibility of *bahasa Indonesia* to the Malaysians, **I carried out an intelligibility test on my students of Malay linguistics of**

1998. There were 81 of them, comprising Malays, Chinese and Indians. Of the total, 73 were in the final year for the Bachelor of Arts degree, and 8 were in the first year of their Master of Arts course. I used two texts, each of the length of about 300 words, taken from two different Indonesian newspapers. For each text, the respondents were asked to mark the items that appeared to them as odd, unintelligible or unusual in terms of spelling, meaning, word-form, and style. **The result showed that the odd, unintelligible and unusual items made up 30% of the totality of the two texts**. The items can be broken down into the following categories:-

1. Use of a different type of spelling.

2. Free use of acronyms and abbreviations.

3. Presence of words and phrases totally unfamiliar to Malaysians.

4. Presence of words and phrases which are familiar to Malaysians

but which bear different meanings.

5. Presence of a number of loan words, mostly from English, which

at times are given new meanings.

Categories (1) and (2) are not internal to the language, and if they are taken off, the percentage

is much less. Categories (4) and (5) are subject to interpretation. So that leaves us with Category (3) which is less than 10%. **Nevertheless, this test shows that the process of reading is not smooth when Malaysians are faced with Indonesian texts**.

For the sake of a comparison, I used a Brunei text on the same group of students. The items that appeared odd, unintelligible and unusual to them only made up 0.7% of the whole text of 830 odd words. This means that Brunei texts are more reader friendly to Malaysians. An explanation for this is found in the very close historical relationship between Brunei and Malaysia, in particular in the education system. The education systems in the two countries were based on the same model during the British rule. It was then normal for Brunei children to be schooled in Malaysia, and for their teachers to be trained in Malaysian institutions. Even when Brunei had established her own training colleges and university, Malaysians have been among those recruited to work in those institutions.

Remarks have been made quite freely that the relationship between *bahasa Indonesia* and *bahasa Melayu* is akin to that of British and American English. In order to get a picture of this, I conducted a test on teachers of English at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. Of the 10 teachers, one is a native speaker of British English, while the others are Malaysians who had been trained in teaching English and who speak the language in their day-to-day life. I also included 2 others who have been speaking English all their life, but who teach French at the Faculty. I chose three texts on world economics, from Britain, USA, and the Philippines, but the respondents were not informed of the origins of the texts. They were asked to mark the unintelligible items, as well as to determine the variety of English in each text.

The result shows that there is no question of unintelligibility. As for the variety, the spelling was a give-away, but then the differences were few and far between. The only examples cited were *labor* and *clamor* in the American variety (inclusive of the Philippines text). However, more importantly, the respondents were able to spot the differences in the style and idiomatic expressions, which in actual fact do not hamper communication, e.g.

American English	**British English**
government agencies	government bodies
government employees	public/civil servants

bosses heads

If this experiment is anything to go by, its finding can be supported by a general observation of Malaysians reading books written in English or watching films in English aired by the local TV stations. Most of them are not even aware of the existence of the two varieties.

A detailed discussion of the whole experiment for Malay and English are found in my forthcoming paper: ***Wujudkah Tembok Bahasa Antara Malaysia dan Indonesia?*** **(Is There a Language Wall Between Malaysia Indonesia ?)**

Conclusion

There is an optimistic as well as a pessimistic view of the routes taken by *bahasa Melayu* and *bahasa Indonesia* in their continual growth and development. **As one who has been involved in the MBIM/MABBIM since the time of its inception, I am optimistic that the varieties will remain as varieties.** And varieties are usually marked by their individual features due to the different social and cultural milieu they are in. **The gap between these varieties is bigger than that between the American and the British varieties of English.** It will take a much longer time for Malaysia and Indonesia to narrow the gap to match that of English. The latter has been able to do that because of its free flow in a two-way traffic across the Atlantic. Apart from that , British and American language products are spread throughout the world, without one having to fear a threat from the other.

The pessimistic view is that the two Malay varieties will go further and further apart, despite the efforts of the MABBIM. However, this view will not last for a much longer time if attitude changes and if language users across the narrow seas between Malaysia and Indonesia are able to tolerate one another.

References - Bibliography

Bachtiar, Harsja W. 1978. Bahasa Indonesia dan Perkembangan Masyarakat (= *Bahasa Indonesia* and Social Development, *Kongres Bahasa Indonesia III,* Jakarta: Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa, Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, pp. 94 – 110.

Omar, Asmah Haji. 1979. *Language Planning for Unity and Efficiency: A Study of the Language Status and Corpus Planning of Malaysia,* Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Omar, Asmah Haji. 1987. *Malay in its Sociocultural Context,* Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Omar, Asmah Haji. 1988. *Bahasa DiRaja* (=Royal Language), Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Omar, Asmah Haji. 1992. *The Linguistic Scenery in Malaysia,* Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Omar, Asmah Haji. forthcoming. Wujudkah Tembok Bahasa Antara Malaysia dan Indonesia, *Sarjana: Journal of the Faculty of Arts and the Social Sciences,* University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, No. 15.

Rosidi, Ajip. 1964. *Kapankah Kesusastraan Indonesia Lahir?* (= When did Indonesian Literature Come into Being?), Jakarta: Bhratara.

Trimurti, S.K. 1978. Peranan Bahasa Indonesia dalam Peningkatan Kesadaran Politik di Kalangan Masyarakat di Indonesia, (=The Role of *Bahasa Indonesia* in Elevating Political Awareness of the Indonesian People), *Kongres Bahasa Indonesia III,* Jakarta: Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa, Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, pp. 111 - 134.

Yaacob, Ibrahim. 1951. *Nusa dan Bangsa Melayu* (=The Malay Race and Their Birth Place), Jakarta: N.V. Alma'arif.