Where you going ah?

ANDREW PRESHOUS

An account of the origin and development of Malaysian English

> Many different things are happening to English. Like any widely-spread language before it (widely-spread in terms of geography, cultural and political association, users and uses), it is indigenizing, and those indigenized versions can be quite distinct from each other in vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation and so on.
> — Michael Toolan, *ET*52, Oct 97, p. 7

The spread of English has resulted in the emergence of many new varieties of English. These 'New Englishes' (Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984), 'Local Forms of English' (Strevens 1992) or, in some cases, 'Anglo-hybrids' (McArthur, 1998) differ from older, more established standard varieties such as British or American English.

This paper aims to examine the features which make Malaysian English a distinctive variety of English. Firstly, its origins and development will be discussed before briefly considering different types of Malaysian English. This will be followed by an analysis of the linguistic characteristics, with a particular emphasis on lexical features. Finally, the current status of Malaysian English will be assessed whilst reflecting on its possible position and role in the future.

Origins and development

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, British colonial rule had a significant sociolinguistic influence. This was most notable in the major trading and administrative centres of peninsular Malaysia such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Malacca, where English became the medium of instruction in many schools. This trend continued after independence in 1957. Consequently, English became the lingua franca for the Malay, Chinese and Indian pupils attending these schools. As access to this education was only available to those from privileged backgrounds, English was (and to a certain extent still is) considered to be the dominant language of the educated elites (Benson, 1990; Lowenberg, 1992). Even though English was making a great impact in these urban areas, Malay was still the most widely spoken language and the main lingua franca between ethnic groups (Asmah Haji Omar, 1979).

Language policy

Malay and English shared official status until the 1960s when significant shifts in language policy occurred. Malay became known as *Bahasa Malaysia* ('the Malaysian Language') and was subsequently given sole official language status. Furthermore, it was stated that English was to be replaced by Bahasa Malaysia as a medium of instruction from primary to tertiary level in all state institutions. This was perhaps the most significant influence on the development of a more localised variety:

> The conversion of English to Bahasa Malaysia throughout the education system is now complete. Already the range of functions for

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English has diminished and the types of English used has changed considerably, particularly among speakers of the younger generation.

— Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984: 199

The effects which this change in language policy brought about have been notable. The development of distinctive features and sub-varieties has meant that Malaysian English has become increasingly different from Singapore English (Strevens 1982).

The influence of a pluralist society

The multicultural and multilingual nature of Malaysian society has also contributed to the development of this particular variety of English. A closer look at the demography of Malaysia (both Peninsular and East Malaysia) provides a useful framework (figures from Baskaran, 1994). Malay speakers number approximately 55% of the population, speakers of Chinese dialects (predominantly Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka and Mandarin) number about 35%, while those speaking languages from the Indian subcontinent account for 9% (mainly Tamil). These languages have had a considerable effect on some of the specific features of Malaysian English as will be exemplified in the next section. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the use of English as a lingua franca among these different ethnic groups has influenced the development of a variety of English often nicknamed 'Manglish' or 'Malenglish' (Baskaran, 1994:32; McArthur, 1998:11).

Different types of Malaysian English

Before analysing the linguistic characteristics in detail, it is important to point out that Malaysian English cannot easily be defined as one uniform 'variety'. Augustin (1982) was one of the first commentators to identify 'the continuum of Malaysian English' and the existence of different 'strains'. This notion was developed and refined by subsequent researchers. Benson (1990) distinguished three main types:

- *Anglo-Malay* the formal variety, used by English-educated older speakers.
- *Colloquial Malaysian English* an informal variety, incorporating localized features of pronunciation, syntax and lexis.
- *Malay-influenced Malaysian English* characterised by a high degree of code-switching.

Baskaran (1994:27) also notes that 'within this linguistic tapestry, a distinctive Malaysian English lish is used at every social level'. The three levels she has identified are:

- *The acrolect* a 'high' social dialect used for official and educational purposes.
- *The mesolect* a 'middle' social dialect used in semi-formal situations.
- *The basilect* a 'low' social dialect, used colloquially as a kind of patois.

In an earlier study, Platt, Weber and Ho (1984) had simply divided Malaysian English into the 'old kind' (spoken by English-educated Malaysians) and the 'new kind' (spoken by Malay-medium educated Malaysians).

These distinctions indicate that the nature of Malaysian English depends on an interplay of factors related to educational background, class, region, level of formality and medium (spoken or written). More attention will be given to these areas in the following sections.

Features of Malaysian English

An analysis of texts taken from different sources helps reveal some of the specific features of Malaysian English.

Lexical

There are four daily, national newspapers published in English (*The New Straits Times*, *The Star*, *The Sun* and *The Malay Mail*) so an analysis of samples can provide useful evidence of written English. Indeed, it has been noted that the English-educated elites 'still set the standards for English usage as leading journalists for the most-prestigious English language newspapers' (Lowenberg, 1992:111).

Much of the 'journalese' appears to be similar to standard British English, but there are distinctive traits, many of which are lexical.

Loanwords

Loanwords from Malay (see Tan, 1998, for a recent study of this area) are frequently incorporated into the text, as the following headline examples show:

Text 1

Protecting padi planters

(*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

Text 2

30,000 heads of cattle in Kelantan vaccinated to prepare for Hari Raya

(*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

Padi ('rice', the term from which *paddy field* derives) and *Hari Raya* (the main annual Muslim Festival) would be instantly recognisable to readers. Both words reflect significant aspects of Malaysian culture: the first, as part of the economy; the second, a facet of the country's multi-ethnic nature.

The following article describes Brickfields, an area of Kuala Lumpur. The informal tone of the extract reveals a number of lexical features.

Text 3

The thoroughfare hosts most of the restaurants in Brickfields. Alongside Seetharam, which is near the 7-Eleven, is a famous Chinese vegetarian shop, Kwang Fa Piu. On the opposite side lies a row of three well-patronised banana leaf outlets — Sri Paandi, New Kashi Brahmin and Sampoorna Curry House.

A Chinese coffeeshop housing numerous stalls holds up the rear end. It's beside this shop that a row of well-shaded lunch stalls flourish next to a field, catering to Malay and Indian taste buds.

There are countless street-side stalls in every nook and cranny of Brickfields, if you're hankering for that frothing *teh tarik* under shady old trees. Thankfully, they haven't yet been huddled into Singapore-styled, soulless food courts.

When it comes to accommodation, visitors would be spoilt for choice! You could spit and hit a motel. All are much cheaper than the ones downtown, A couple of brighter relatively new hotels include Matri Inn on the main road and Hotel Florida along Thamby-pillai. The rates are from RM65.

As far as watering holes are concerned, Dinty's seems to be the focal point of "refined" guzzlers. Variety being the spice of life, there are options like a *dangdut* night spot, old wide-west "saloons," [sic] a toddy shop, karaokes, massage parlours, etc, etc.

Ros Merah (now known as RM) is the *dang-dut* joint that's been on Jalan Thambypillai for a while. It lies next to my favourite *ikan bakar* restaurant, Lai Fatt Ikan Bakar Brickfields.

(*The Star*, 6 Mar 99)

It is interesting to note that the central focus of the article from which this extract is taken is food and drink, an area that provides countless loanwords. In fact, most Malaysians state that *makan* (food or eating), whether used as a noun or verb, is a subject close to their hearts. This may account for the significant influx of Malay vocabulary from this area into Malaysian English. *Teh tarik* (literally 'pulled tea') is a local staple, *ikan bakar* (grilled fish) a local speciality, and *dangdut* a type of local music. The advertisement below shows more examples of the type of English common on menus, such as 'steamboat' (Chinese method of cooking food). *KL* in the ad is short for *Kuala Lumpur*.

Text 4

Restoran Sri Putra
KL's Dazzling Multi-Function Restaurant

(Occupying an area of approx 32,000 sf at the Basement of Merdeka Square)

Special Promotion at RM8.00 per pax/item

Favourites:
- Nasi Lemak Kedah
- Sri Putra Special Fried Noodles
- Red Garoupa Curry Fish + Rice
- Kam Heong Prawn + Mixed Veg + Rice
- Lemon Chicken + Mixed Vege + Rice

Wide Selection of Ala carte and Chinese/Malay/Nyonga set meal and steamboat

(*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

Other words in Text 3 have not been italicised which suggests older, more established influences, largely from the period of British rule: *Coffeeshop* (a Chinese-run establishment offering noodles and drinks), *toddy* (a local spirit), and *banana leaf outlets* (Indian-run establishments serving curries on banana leaves). These features illustrate how the different ethnic communities have an influence on Malaysian English. The use of the words *motel* and *downtown* in the text also hint at the increasing impact of American English. In a similar way, the economic recession in Malaysia in the late 1990s resulted in the frequent use of international buzzwords such as

economic downturn, *retrenchment* and *downsizing*.

Although loanwords are often incorporated into the text on the assumption that the reader will understand the meaning, this is not always the case. The example below provides translation in brackets for some lexical items but not others, which seems to suggest that the vocabulary is regionally specific (from Johor Baru in the South).

Text 5

> The Johor Malays are also steeped in culture, tradition and religion. They can lay claim to the "ghazal", "zapin", and some say the "marhaban" and "berzanji".
>
> Johor Malay cuisine, like "Johor laksa", is also renowned nation-wide, as are their unique traditional costumes: and accessories like "sanggul pukul dua-belas" (literally 12 o'clock hair pin), cucuk sanggul" (gold hair pin), "gelang kaki" (leg bangles) and "kerongsang" (brooch).
>
> Another thing that strikes you about the Johor Malays is they place a lot of emphasis on religion. This probably has something to do with the fact that almost all of them have had some form of formal religious education.
>
> (*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

Advertisements also reveal the distinctive qualities of Malaysian English, as in the following examples:

Text 6

TRUMPF

TECHNICAL SALES ENGINEERS

As the largest German based machinetool manufacturer of CNC sheetmetal machinery, TPUMPF GmbH & Co. Is expanding its operations in South-East Asia.

TRUMPF REGIONAL CENTRE

Invites suitable candidates to succeed in the above opening

The Requirements
- A male Malaysian, should possess a Diploma in Mechanical Engineering with strong interest in Sales of the latest state-of-art CNC machines for Laser; Punching, Bending, and Waterjet cutting.
- Preferably one year sales experience with technical products.
- Training will be provided.
- Outstation travelling will be required.
- Good communication skills and be bilingual In both Bahasa Malaysia and English. Ability to speak Chinese dialects would be an added advantage.
- Stationed In Kuala Lumpur.

Interested applicants, please submit in before **30th November 1999**, with a detailed Resume together with a photograph and contact telephone number to:-

The Manager, TRUMPF, No 74 (1st Floor), Jalan SS 15/4D, Subang Jaya, 47500 Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan. Tel (03) 7343889 Fax (03) 7341239 E-mail Address: trumpf@tm.net.my NOTE: Only shorlisted candidates will be notified.

(*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

To go *outstation* originates in the colonial period, when government officers had to administer large regions and were required to travel to certain outlying areas*. Interestingly, the Malay term *ulu* (the source of a river) is also often used to suggest areas that would be described in British English as 'the back of beyond'.

Text 7

SETAPAK INDAH SINGLE storey link, 3 rooms, facing playground. Bumiputra only. $170,000. 019-3388088 (E1480)

(*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

One of the most common loanwords from Malay is *bumiputra* ('son of the soil') and its more informal, shortened form *bumi*: an indigenous Malay. The fact that *bumiputra*s are often afforded favourable opportunities by the state gives the word political, economic, and social resonance: Pennycook (1994) provides a more detailed analysis of this area. Other Malay words that carry comparable strong connotations are *merdeka* ('freedom' or 'independence'), which symbolises national identity for many Malaysians, and *Barisan Nasional* ('National Party') incorporated into adverts in the English-language press for the 1999 election campaign.

Text 8

ENSURING OUR FUTURE

> When million of us echoed the Tunku's cries of "Merdeka!" 42 years ago, we also made a solemn oath – to always preserve our freedom and protect the future of our children. In the past 42 years, through the good times and the bad, Barisan Nasional has been honouring that oath by providing stability and security, progress and development, unity and peace.

(*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

Changes in meaning

Apart from loanwords, many lexical items have acquired particular meanings that are distinctive to Malaysian English. In Text 9, *bungalow* does not refer simply to a single story building but denotes a rather lavish type of accommodation.

* Compare the Indian English phrase *out of station*, meaning 'not in one's usual place of work', as in *Mr Patel is not available; he is out of station this week*. Ed.

Text 9

MINES RESORT FEW units 2-storey bungalows 6-7 rooms, well furnished RM3.5M-RM6.8M neg. Stephanie 019-3377762/ 7542833 E(3)0345

(*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

Verbs which have similar yet distinct meanings in British English, such as *live/stay*, *listen/hear* and *borrow/lend*, have assumed slightly different uses in Malaysian English. For example:

I stay in Taman Desa
(Even if this is on a permanent basis)*

I like to hear English music

Can you borrow me some money?

Initialization of place names

The following headline displays a further feature of Malaysian English:

Text 10

Flash floods in KB

KOTA BARU: Flash floods hit several low-lying areas in the district following heavy rain since Thursday.

(*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

Initialisms for place names are common currency for Malaysians. Thus, Kota Baru becomes *KB*, Kuala Lumpur *KL*, Johor Baru *JB* and Kota Kinabalu *KK*. This feature may also be a legacy of British colonial rule.

The emphatic particle 'lah'

An analysis of data from a different source provides an example of the most distinctive lexical feature of Malaysian English. The dialogue in Panel 1 derives from an internet website dedicated to 'Manglish'.

Although the strict authenticity of this exchange cannot be verified, it typifies a certain kind of colloquial Malaysian English. The particle *lah* can be used as a separate item or grafted on to other words, as above, to add emphasis. It is a common characteristic of informal conversations. Likewise, *Aiyah* (an expression indicating surprise or displeasure) is widely used.

* This is also an everyday Scottish usage. Ed.

Where you going ah? `1`

A: Eh! ['Hello!'] Where you going ah?

B: Aiyah ['oh hello'], it's you ah? I'm going to the supermarket to buy a few things lah!

A: How you going ah? ['How are you planning to go?']? I thought your car rosak wan ['not running smoothly']

B: Ya lah ['that's true'], but ne' mind. I can take the bus. Not hard what, just have to walk a bit to the bus stand lah!

A: I say man, you crazy ah? So hot today, you know. After you become black lah! ['After all that, you'll come back black!']

Adapted from < www. Mmserve.com/selamat/608/speak.htm> (accessed 23 Nov 99)

Grammatical features

The exchange above also highlights some grammatical attributes of Malaysian English. The utterances below omit the auxiliary from the verb 'to be':

Where you going ah?
How you going? I thought your car rosak wan.

This usage occurs frequently, and the absence of the copula form in passive constructions and before adjectives indicates interference from first languages including both Malay and the South Chinese dialects (Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984).

The words below reveal some features of question forms.

You crazy ah?

Firstly, the rising intonation on the particle *ah* indicates that it is an interrogative. Secondly, the absence of the auxiliary is fairly common:

Where you come from?

Other related grammatical features that distinguish Malaysian English are question tags, particularly the invariable tag *is it/isn't it*, as in:

The bus left, isn't it?

Other common colloquial expressions are the short forms (without subjects) such as *can/cannot* (it's possible/it's not possible), shown in Text 11, and *got/don't have*.

Text 11

TOK GURU

(*New Straits Times*, 20 Nov 99)

Another significant element of colloquial Malaysian English in Panel 1 is the words:

After you become black lah!

Instead of using the auxiliary *will*, a time marker *after* is used. Platt, Weber & Ho (1984:70) have noted that 'the use of adverbs of time instead of marking verbs for tense is common', The following examples illustrate this:

Before I always go to that market.
Last time she come on Tuesday.

These grammatical characteristics are similar to Singapore English and the same writers point out that this is because Chinese dialects do not directly mark tenses. They also comment on the influence of Malay on informal English. For example, *sudah* refers to completed actions:

saya   sudah   makan
(I   finish   eat)
= I've eaten

Already is often grafted on to comparable expressions, as follows:

You finish makan already?
= Have you already eaten?

(Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984: 70–71)

Colloquial Malaysian English has many other distinctive features, such as not marking nouns for plurality and the absence of articles, but

detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

Phonological features

A brief analysis of three areas reveals some important characteristics of Malaysian English pronunciation:

Vowel sounds
There is a tendency to shorten longer vowels resulting in *leave* /liːv/ sounding like *live* /lɪv/. In addition, diphthongs may be reduced to single vowel sounds. For example, *take* /teɪk/ might sound like *tek* /tɛk/.

Consonants
One notable feature is the omission of consonants from the end of words particularly the /t/ and /d/ sounds of the *-ed* endings of regular past simple verbs. For example:

Yesterday I walk(-ed) to my office.

In addition, the /k/ is likely to be glottalized or also absent. In a similar way, consonant clusters are also reduced. Another tendency is to replace /θ/ and /ð/ with /t/ and /d/, which approximate to the nearest sounds in the L1. So *three* /θriː/ becomes *tree* /triː/ and *then* /ðen/ becomes *den* /den/.

Word stress
Certain lexical items display stress patterns that differ from standard British English as follows:

● ● ●   ● ●   ● ● ●
Insurance   *Purchase*   *Industry*

Code-switching and code-mixing

Whether the extract in Panel 2 is a true example of Malaysian English is open to question, but it certainly displays elements that cannot be ignored. Code-switching and code-mixing between English and Malay are common. Baskaran (1994) provides evidence of this ability to draw on shared bilingual knowledge and Lowenberg (1991:372) gives a possible reason for the use of these linguistic devices at colloquial level: 'Code-mixing occurs to enhance rapport and familiarity and code-switching to mark changes in pragmatic intentions.' Benson (1990) has remarked on the increase of this type of linguistic switching, particularly amongst the younger generation.

Code-switching and Code-mixing

The extracts are taken from a popular Malaysian TV programme, the soap opera *Idaman* (25 Jul 99).

Extract 1 Two women are talking:

A: Thanks, Ita, for house-sitting for me.
B: No problem. *Apartment kau lebih cantik daripada apartment apu.* ['Your apartment is much more beautiful than mine.'] Anyway, it's all yours again.
A: Thank you. *Selama aku tak ada, ada sesiapa telefon tak?* ['When I was away, did anyone call?']
B: *Takde.* ['Nobody']
A: *Takde?*
B: *Yang kau sorok-sorok pergi Langkawi ni, takde beli apa-apa untuk apu.* ['Why didn't you tell me that you were in Langkawi? Did you buy me anything?']
A: Sorry, Ita. Sorry *banyak-banyak.* ['Very very (sorry)']

Extract 2 A female employee Yasmin has been talking about a male colleague Khalid, and he has overheard part of the conversation:

Khalid: Yasmin. *Kalau you nak tahu apa-apa tentang, tak payuhlah u tanya orang lain.* [If you want to know something about me, no need to ask other people.] You can come right out and just ask me yourself.
Yasmin: *Tapi,* ['But'] Khalid… I… I… .
Khalid: *Lagipun, nak buat apa tanya* [Anyway, why did you ask the] dispatch boy. *Dia bukannya tahu apa-apa.* [He doesn't know anything'] Anyway, *ni dia semua fail-fail akaun yang lepas.* ['here are all the old account files'], as you asked for. It's all here.

The current status of Malaysian English

English still maintains a strong presence in certain domains of Malaysian society. The educated elites have retained a firm foothold in the media and to some extent dictate the 'standard' version of Malaysian English. However, this position is likely to be questioned in the future.

English is widely used in commerce and business. It is also a lingua franca between ethnic groups and is often preferred to Bahasa by many Chinese and Indians (for educational, social, business and/or political reasons). In fact, English is used as a first language in many homes. English has even been awarded official second language status by the Malaysian government. Yet a number of concerns have been voiced.

A decline in proficiency and use?

For the older, English-educated generation 'the traditional prestige attached to English still exists' (Crystal, 1995). For these speakers, the primary concern is the decline in proficiency and the need to maintain a certain standard. Lowenberg (1982) refers to the major debates that have occurred in the Malaysian press. Headlines such as the following have appeared: 'Decline and fall of the English language' (*New Straits Times*, 5 Nov 85).

Some observers (Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984; Crystal, 1997) have declared that English in Malaysia is becoming for the local people more like a foreign language than a second language. Others have commented on the decrease in use of English, compared to the increase of Bahasa Malaysia. This is definitely true in rural Malaysia, but there has also been a significant shift in the urban centres. Asmah (1979: 65) stated that Malaysians may one day use the national language as the main form of communication, as the people of Indonesia or Thailand do.

Linguistic conflict

The role and status of English in Malaysia is a complex issue and there are political, social and economic implications. As a result, elements of linguistic conflict arise. On the one hand, the state is actively promoting Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, the official language and the medium of instruction. Yet, on the other hand, there is general agreement that a certain level of competence in English is necessary within Malaysia itself and certainly on an international stage. Recently, this latter point has resulted in a rise in the status of English. However, Pennycook (1994) has wondered whether the 'Islamization' of Malaysia may cause further linguistic tension.

The future of Malaysian English

Malaysian English, like other varieties, is constantly developing and changing in terms of 'the adaptation of the norms of English to the

political, economic, and sociocultural contexts of contemporary Malaysia' (Lowenberg, 1991: 367).

In fact, a language shift is occurring within this particular variety of English. The more colloquial variety of Malaysian English is rapidly becoming more dominant than the older, more formal type. In the future, the older type is likely to attain a more elitist position. A Malay-medium educated younger generation, more used to drawing on bilingual and multilingual resources (characterised by code-switching and code-mixing), is influencing this change. For many of these young people, Malaysian English is highly valued as an expression of cultural identity. In fact, it is not hard to detect a certain pride in this informal variety.

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Cyber-Asia

(From Thomas Crampton, 'Asian Domain Names in Cyberspace: Web Addresses in Chinese, and Other Scripts, to Go Up for Sale', *International Herald Tribune*, 10 Nov 00)

Hong Kong – Asian-language Internet addresses are going up for sale Friday, potentially opening a cultural revolution for non-English speaking travelers in cyberspace.

VeriSign Global Registry Services, a company that assigns individual Internet addresses, will start accepting Web-site names in Chinese, Japanese and Korean characters to be used with the Internet suffixes .com, .net and .org.

Names to be used with special characters for Norse, Greek, Russian, Spanish, French and German are expected to become available for sale in the not-too-distant future.

Internet addresses are currently limited to using just 37 characters – the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet, 10 numerals and the hyphen. The addition of Asian scripts will explode the available character set for Web addresses to more than 40,000.