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English in Malaysia

Postcolonial and Beyond

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Postcolonial Malaysian English: Realities and Prospects

At the end of “the colonial momentum” under which English in Asia had progressed, “a new phase has begun through something like an act of deliberate choice on the part of Asians” (Fernando 1972: 71)

Introduction

English in Malaysia is a postcolonial variety. It was inherited from the British who ruled Malaya for over 150 years until the country’s independence in the middle of the 20th century. Although it was initially the colonisers’ native as well as administrative language, the colonisers’ long period of abode, the nature of their stay in Malaya and the institutionalisation of English through missionary and English-medium schools, inevitably caused English to be transplanted, used and acquired by the locals. Over time, the locals’ contact with English, through formal instruction and informal interaction and usage resulted in the emergence of localised variations of the native form used by the colonizers. During British rule, the educated form used by the locals was near native and therefore considered “standard” while non-educated forms were considered deviant and stamped as ‘non-standard’. Post-independence, the command of the colonizers lingered long after they had left, but the forms that emerged during the colonial period evolved further due to various internal and external factors. The English language in Malaysia, as in many other former colonial varieties, essentially experienced naturalisation in the context of usage through readjustments at the phonological, structural and lexical levels. Present-day English in Malaysia is therefore a localised variety. It

is *Malaysian English* (ME), a form of English that demonstrates the characteristics and features of a new variety of English. Malaysian speakers use English in various formal and informal situations and for various communicative purposes. The term ME therefore, represents all the various forms of English used by Malaysian speakers.

English in Malaysia

The beginning

The history of English in Malaysia began when the British landed on the island of Penang off the northwest coast of the Malay Peninsula in 1786. British presence since then, until the country's independence in 1957, saw the English language transplanted and consequently adjusted and readjusted to local conditions and requirements to evolve into a postcolonial variety. As with other postcolonial varieties therefore, English in Malaysia is the product of specific evolutionary processes closely tied to its colonial past, which spanned over 150 years, and also importantly, to its 50 odd years of postcolonial experiences.

Mufwene theorizes that English developed in former colonized nations depending on the type of colony they were, "trade colonies", "exploitation colonies" and "settlement colonies" (2001: 8-9). In trade colonies, the variety used between English traders and locals was not a standard one and the language contact would have caused the emergence of pidgins. However, when the nature of the colonisers' presence morphed from trade to exploitation, there was more language contact between the colonial and local languages. Based on the language contact situation between the colonial and local languages, Malaysia or Malaya as it were, following Mufwene (2001), was an exploitation colony.

Throughout their colonisation of Malaya, naturally, the British used English as their language of administration. And to help them run the colony, the British brought in officers who were native speak-

ers of English, non-British officers from other colonies who spoke English and set-up English-medium schools to train the locals as administrators (Kirkpatrick 2007). Besides British colonial policies, Christian missionaries were also responsible for setting up English-medium schools, particularly in strategic urban locations in Malaya. The establishment of these schools, where English was the medium of instruction, essentially marked the beginning of the institutionalisation of English education in Malaya during British colonisation. The institutionalisation of English in exploitation colonies such as Malaya and India, gave rise to “non-standard and ‘school’ varieties of English” which later evolved into localised varieties, particularly post-independence (Kirkpatrick 2007).

Unlike settlement colonies like Australia and New Zealand, exploitation colonies were “to provide wealth to the colonizer” (Kirkpatrick 2011: 21). To this end, the British established its human resource for the cultivation of wealth in the Malay Peninsula not just by using local peasants but also by recruiting immigrant workers, particularly from India and China. The presence of the British colonials and the influx of immigrants in the 19th century forever altered the ecology of the dominant Malay social and linguistic spaces of the Peninsula and inevitably sowed “the seeds of Malaysia’s current multicultural and multilingual society” (Kirkpatrick 2011: 21). Thus, besides the institutionalisation of English, the change in the linguistic scenery which came about with the emergence of a culturally and linguistically diversified speech community must also play a role in the evolution of English in Malaysia. As Anchimbe points out, from a genetic linguistics perspective, “language is not an independent entity but is embedded in the life and acts of its speakers (hosts) and their community (habitat)”, and alterations in the feature pool and environment of the speech community will without fail result in changes in the language (2009: 344).

ME feature pool

Rooted in the country’s colonial history therefore, the sociolinguistic ecology of ME is rather complex. Malay is the most common lan-

guage among Malaysians but the country, in fact, has a diverse linguistic panorama of speech communities. Malaysia's population comprises various ethnicities and hybrid communities¹ but the three main ethnic groups are Malays, Chinese and Indians. The mother tongues of these speech communities are Malay (various dialects such the Northern Malay Dialect, Johor-Riau, Kelantanese, etc.), dialects of Chinese (e.g. Cantonese, Hokkien) and Indian languages (Tamil, Bengali, etc.) respectively, but generally-speaking, because of the education system of the country, Malaysians also know the English language. Therefore, the common assumption is that most Malay-Malaysians are bilingual (with differing levels of proficiency in English) while others whose mother tongue is not Malay are most probably trilingual (with differing levels of proficiency in Malay and English). In such a rich and diverse collection of speech communities, each one deeply connected to its native language and culture, the use and development of English cannot help but be influenced by local cultural environments, and the speakers' need to convey experiences, ideas, and meanings that are closely tied with their local cultural and social situations.

Pre-Independence to Post-Independence English in Malaysia

Before the arrival of the British and the introduction of English-medium schools, education in the Malay Peninsula was in the form of Islamic schools where children were taught practical skills and the Qur'an (Gaudart 1987; Foo and Richards 2004). Colonial reports suggest that the British did not give much attention to education in the Malay States until the Colonial Office in London took over admin-

1 Malaysia is a multicultural country with a population of diverse ethnicities (Malays (50.4%), Chinese (23.7%), and Indians (7.1%), indigenous communities (11%), and others (7.8%)) are native speakers of a multitude of languages, which include various dialects of Malay, Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan and Foochow dialects), different Indian languages (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Punjabi), indigenous languages (Temiar, Jah Jut, Mah Meri, Iban, Kadazan, Bidayuh, Melanau) and English (Malaysia Demographics Profile 2011).