

# Some Varieties of Spoken English in Malaysia

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An interesting peculiarity about spoken English in Malaysia is the number of varieties that are used in the country. We can, for example, observe two distinct varieties, one being formal spoken English, and the other being an informal variety which is popularly identified as 'Malaysian English' (see in particular the article by J. J. Augustin, "Malaysian English and the English Teacher", in *the English Teacher*, Vol. 1, No. 6, pp. 9-11).

Within each of these two broad varieties we can, moreover, discern several other sub-varieties. My survey of the spoken English usage of a small urban group of Malaysians in the state of Pahang has revealed the existence of these varieties. The results of this survey suggest furthermore, that the varieties correlate with such social factors as education, age, ethnic background and occupational status, to name a few. The Malaysian speaker of English, I found, is on the whole, (depending on his educational background and social status), able to operate with the two distinct varieties, and can, with remarkable agility, switch from one variety to another when the situation demands it.

This speaker also has definite attitudes about his own spoken English as well as about that of other speakers' English and as a result he varies his speech behaviour in English during his lifetime too. He may for instance, come from a home background in which very little formal English is used, but he can, in the process of socialisation, adopt the norms and standards of the formal usage, and very often he preserves the ability to revert to the informal variety whenever he wants to.

During the survey, recordings were made of formal and informal conversations in English, and an examination of this material provided some interesting facts about differences between formal and informal spoken English. For instance, the formal variety seemed to closely resemble Standard British English (or R.P. English) in its syntax and lexicon, but it appeared to differ basically from R.P. English in its phonology i.e. in the sound system.

Here, certain features of pronunciation were common to most speakers, while other features were peculiar only to some speakers and not to others.

Common or shared features which were noticed were weakly articulated final consonants and (in words like *mad, fat*), and the use of simple consonants like 'θ' or 'ð' (in words like *thing, though*) where R.P. speakers would use consonants like 'th' or 'dh'. What was of interest here was the evidence that those who had been to England for educational courses and those who had some kind of contact with British English speakers were the ones who frequently used strongly articulated final consonants and also 'th' and 'dh'.

Unshared features of pronunciation, on the other hand, had strong ethnic correlations. For example, the recorded formal English speech of Indian immigrants was characterised by the high frequency of occurrence of 'retroflex' consonants, i.e. sounds made with a curling of the tongue tips, in words like *like, do, take*, while the speech of Malay speakers was marked by the frequent occurrence of length in the vowel 'i' (as in the word *sit*), where R.P. speakers would use a short 'i'. The speech of Chinese speakers too, had a feature which was not common to speakers from the other ethnic groups, and this was the abrupt shortening of words, as in the word *taking* which sounded like 'te-in' or 'te-i'. Once again it must be added that factors like age, contact with British English speakers, and the medium of education that the speakers had (whether Chinese-, Indian-, Malay- or English-medium) were factors that conditioned the formal spoken English of speakers from the different ethnic groups.

Another fact of significance about the formal spoken English usage arose from the speech of those who came from the Malay-medium stream of education. In the group studied, speakers of this sort were Malay sixth form students who were born in rural areas and had come to the urban centre for their education. The recorded formal English speech of these speakers revealed the follow-

ing significant points: these speakers were operating with a lexicon which was 97 percent English, and with a syntax which was Malay-like. Thus, some sentences like these were found in their usage: *Last year my father transfer to here* and *Every endweek I go catch fish*. However, the speech of older speakers with Malay-medium school background (but with high occupational status) closely resembled R.P. English, indicating that social advancement was a conditioning factor in spoken usage.

So far, we have been concerned with sketching out some of the major characteristics of the formal variety of spoken English in Malaysia. A glance at the informal variety shows that it differs from the other variety in phonology, syntax and lexicon. For example, in the recorded material which was studied, 'tigs' (like *hey, ayah* occurring at the beginning of an utterance) and 'tags' (like *man, lah* at the end of an utterance) were found in a large number of sentences.

Moreover, this variety was marked by the absence or low frequency of occurrence of verb and noun in inflection for person, number and tense, and it also abounded in loans from Chinese, Malay or Tamil. Constructions were also found with no 'be' verb. These characteristics are exemplified in the following sentences: *He only take two 'kueh' yesterday, man. Siva, I tell you ah, very clever cheat, lah*. Sub-varieties within this variety were 'in-groups' usage, such as the usage of University students (*damn sore about it, man*).

Since spoken usage does to a large extent influence

written usage, this description of spoken English will no doubt be of some use to teachers who are involved with the teaching of English as a second language to Malaysian youth. In the first place the very realisation of the existence of the many varieties is in itself an important discovery. Thus students can be made aware of these varieties (through the playing of taped speech in the classroom). The formal variety can then be emphasised as the one which is 'acceptable' for use on formal occasions, and some indication given of each speaker's ability to switch styles, if he so wishes.

In this way, some sort of linguistic 'sophistication' can be impressed upon the students, so that their shyness at using the formal usage in familiar surroundings can be compensated for by their knowledge that they can, and in fact, should, use the informal usage on these occasions. Secondly, each student's language learning problem may well be his own problem (since ethnic background, age etc. were seen to be conditioning factors in the use of spoken English). Therefore, each problem can be tackled at its root cause. For instance, since the formal English of young, rural, Malay-medium speakers reveals complex structural differences from the formal English of peer groups, a teaching scheme which includes motivational programmes (such as, ones which point out the usefulness of English in certain fields of research and study) as well as the use of contrastive studies between English and Malay, will, I am sure, be of some value in approaching the problems of these students.

## Songs for Primary Schools

Primary teachers often ask where they can find songs with simple English words they can teach their pupils. We should like to suggest that they could make up their own words to simple tunes, and to show how it can be done we are reproducing two songs from a dissertation written by Mr E. F. Edema when he was at RELC in 1969. "The rhythm of the song" says Mr Edema, "will help the children with the rhythm of the sentence pattern, if the rhythm of the song and the sentence pattern do not clash but are similar." Mr Edema himself has provided 40 songs which are based on units taken from the Primary Syllabus. The melodies are the traditional tunes that children learn, for example, from Radio Malaysia and Radio Sarawak.

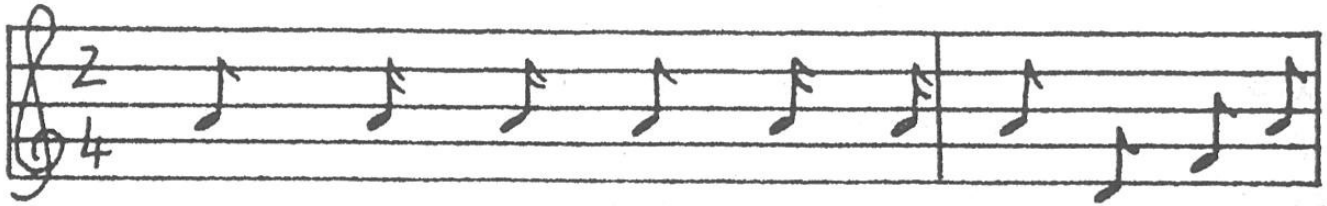
Addition verses can be made up by the teacher e.g. What can we do with a ball and racket? What can we do with a pound of flour?

Mr Edema's note says "Other verbs and suitable prepositions can be used to bring in the use of the objective forms of the pronouns, as long as they fit the music. In this song one group (or one pupil) can sing lines A and another group can sing lines B in reply ..... Make up other similar verses bringing in other intransitive verbs previously taught."

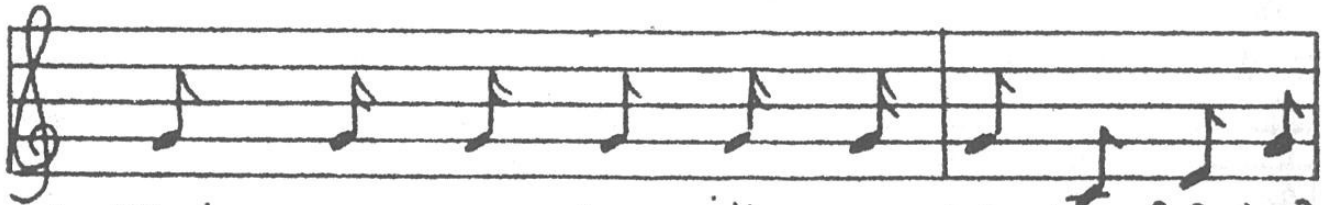
### Useful books of songs for teachers

- 1) *Songs for Malaysian Schools*, Book 1 to 6. (Borneo Literature Bureau)

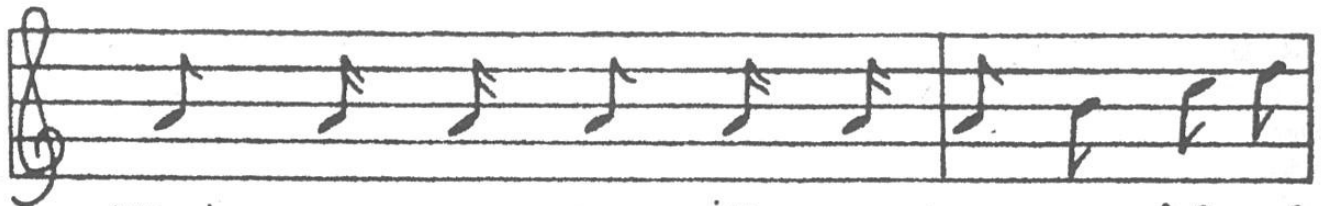
# 32. WHAT CAN YOU DO?



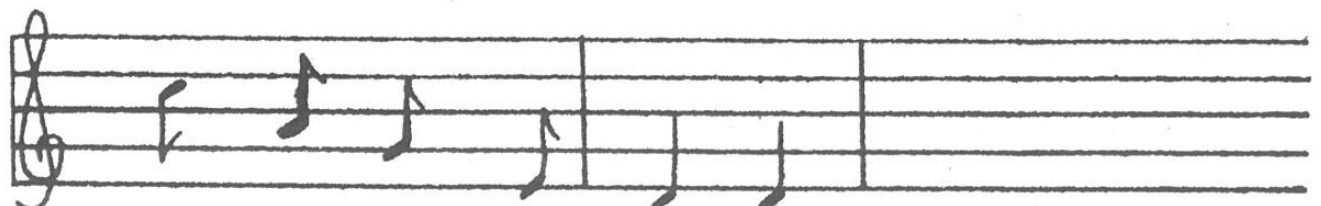
- 1.A. What can we do with a dol-lar fif-ty?  
2.A. What can she do with a broom and dus-ter?



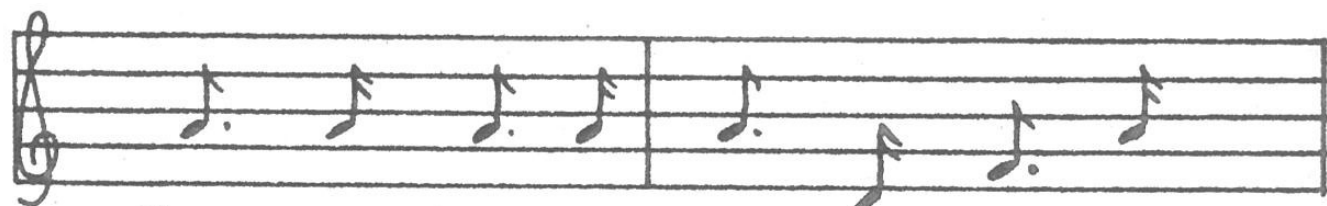
- 1.A. What can we do with a dol-lar fif-ty?  
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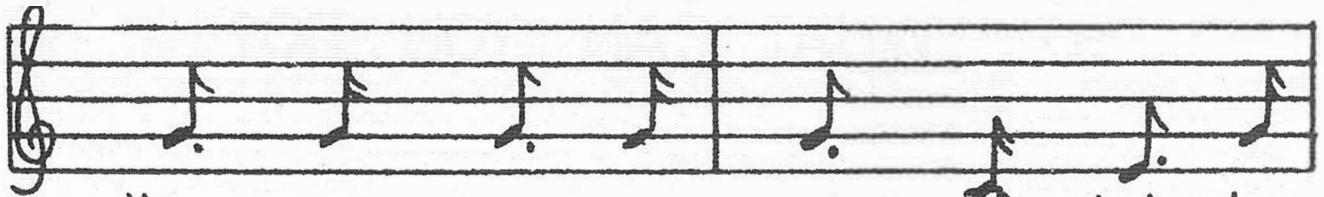
- 1.A. What can we do with a dol-lar fif-ty?  
2.A. What can she do with a broom and dus-ter?



- 1.A. With a dol-lar fif-ty.  
2.A. With a broom and dus-ter.

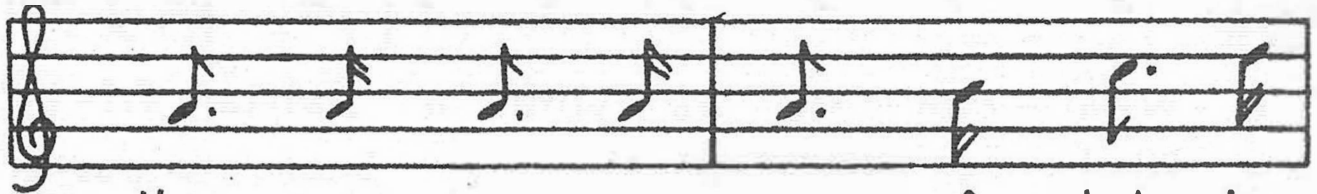


- 1.B. You can buy a pound of but-ter.  
2.B. She can sweep and dust the class-room.



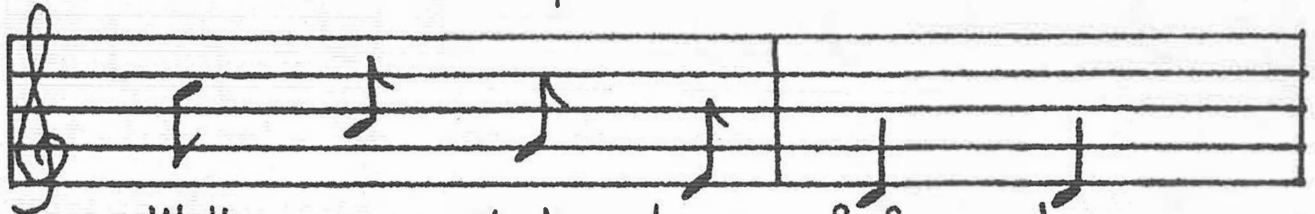
1. B. You can buy a pound of but - ter.

2. B. She can sweep and dust the class - room.



1. B. You can buy a pound of but - ter.

2. B. She can sweep and dust the class - room.



1. B. With a dol - lar fif - ty.

2. B. With a broom and dus - ter.

2) *Songs and Rhymes for the Teaching of English:*

Students' book)

Teacher's book)

by J. Dakin (Longman)