

Malaysian English and the English Teacher

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There is no doubt that we do speak a variety of English which is commonly called 'Malaysian English'. The extent to which it is spoken however varies with the educational levels attained by the speakers. In general, like all other dialects of languages, it is the initial variety of English most of us are familiar with; and in the process of deve-

loping competency in 'Standard English', we start to shed the salient features of this variety of language. Nevertheless, in a sense, most Malaysians can regard the Malaysian variety of English as a native language, and because of this we are able to use it in casual and intimate situations with a facility which defies non-Malaysian English

speakers. Even when the phase of its use is past and restraint has set in because of social or other reasons, the fact remains that because we share a common sociological and educational background, Malaysian English is a fact of life. It is very much the lingua franca of children in English-medium primary and secondary schools, and even in College campuses (although college students will tend to deny they habitually use it in everyday life). Even the older generation, I suspect, lapse into this variety in unguarded moments. In certain cases the use of this variety may in fact prove advantageous, not from the view of the language learning process but from the point of view where 'bridging the generation gap' is concerned. "Reaching" the younger generation today means being able to speak their language and this implies the use of Malaysian English in many cases. The ability to speak in standard (and, therefore faultless) English does help to impress upon the younger generation one's command of the language and the situation, but it does not help in establishing the rapport which is essential in solving the problems (and these are many) of the young. Only recently, in conversation with a pre-University student, I was told quite innocently "Our new Physics teacher is just like one of us. He speaks our lingo."

Let me make it very clear from the outset that this 'thing' which we call Malaysian English exists only in a spoken form. It is a kind of 'rojak' of linguistic features from the major languages (and dialects of these languages) spoken in Malaysia. Because it is used mainly in casual and intimate situations the style is essentially colloquial. Influences from the other languages spoken in the country consequently take place at the same level. There is no question of the standard forms of the other languages affecting it for the simple reason that as one's competence in one's native language develops through formal learning, for example, one is able to 'compartmentalise' the system of the language and in like manner do the same for other languages one learns. It is therefore not surprising to find that the children in the primary schools communicate with their playmates in a 'lingo' (as my young friend puts it) of their own. At this level when most pupils learn Malay and English at school, and already have a home language in many instances, a 'common language' fulfills an impelling human need. At the tertiary level of education most students have already mastered the language, be it Malay or English, but revert to Malaysian English, I'm sure, out of sheer habit. But it is a source of consolation to us, as English Language teachers, that these very students are quite capable of expressing their thoughts, in speech or writing, in RP or standard English when the occasion arises, exemplifying, from my experience at least, the Malaysian quality of 'rising to the occasion'.

If I may return to the features of the 'rojak' I spoke of. Briefly, the 'Englishness' of the variety comes mainly from the lexis (or words) although constant 'borrowing' takes place, e.g. "Let's have some makan." At the 'higher level' speakers use their own jargon and slang, often coining new words, e.g. 'frus', 'worse type', etc.,. Since the major interfering languages are structurally alike, in the sense that word-order follows the pattern S V P, the structure of basic English does not pose a problem for the speakers. The real 'flavour' of the variety is in its phonology, i.e. in the sound system. Malaysian English has its own distinctive pattern of sounds caused by the difficulties of the speakers in producing the correct value of phonemes of RP English because of the absence of such sounds in their own mother tongues, and the superimposition of the Malay rhythm pattern on the structure and the incorporation of Chinese tonal systems or an Indian language (mainly Tamil) accentuation. The grammatical considerations are of no concern to the speaker. At a later stage, through formal learning, when the adolescent speakers have attained a conscious knowledge of the grammar of English, these features are taken into account in the generation of sentences.

Perhaps it would be appropriate here to consider examples of what I mean by Malaysian English. I have to acknowledge my thanks to my former colleague, Mr William Wong (now at UCLA) for allowing me to publish the following data. I dare say that only a Malaysian will be able to give these utterances the rhythm, intonation and accentuation their Malaysian quality.

A: Hey, come go and walk lah.
 B: Walk where?
 A: Just walk walk lah.
 B: I slept very well you know.
 A: Aah, don't talk rubbish lah.
 B: What rubbish? I speak true lah.

Mary: Annie, got any letter for me or not?
 Annie: None.
 Mary: Frus only man. I am very feduppy with my sister for not writing. Not only feduppy but also angrified. Worst type.
 Annie: Heh, envy me or not? I got five letters today.
 Mary: Yah lah, you needn't have to boast. I'm very jealous type, know. Must be your boy friend's letter needless to say.
 Annie: Oh! Look at her blushing away.

A: Ai yoh, my leg's painful lah.
 B: People ask you not to walk so much, you want to walk.

C: I tell you to go and see doctor, you don't want.

A: How can man – you people no mercy ah?

The lights go off;

A: This fellow just turn off the lights any time. Joker man. Sometimes so late, sometimes so early.

B: Yah lah, every time like this.

C: Be a good guy. You people got no sense of time; it is now eleven.

B: Oh, we got no sense of time! Every time you never turn off the fan the government pays. You think your father's money ah?

C: Don't talk like that man. You two buggers in the same boat man.

At the bath:

Who's that bathing?

Me

Why so long man?

What should the attitude of the English teacher be in regard to this linguistic phenomenon? The answer is simple. We cannot, like Canute, stem the tide, because like water, a language finds its own level; but we can, by our own performance of English, provide the models for those wanting to learn English. We can, too, insist only on the standard forms of spoken and written English in the classroom and on formal occasion; and bring the students to a realisation that each *educated* speaker of English is in a sense multilingual” we use one variety of English at home, another with our friends, a third at work, and so on” (Crystal and Davy in *Investigating English Style*).