



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**TOLERANCE TOWARDS MALAYSIAN ENGLISH  
AS A NEW VARIETY OF ENGLISH**

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**FPP 1998 26**

**TOLERANCE TOWARDS MALAYSIAN ENGLISH  
AS A NEW VARIETY OF ENGLISH**

**By**

**RUKUMANI DEVI MANIAM**

**Project Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Science in the Faculty of Educational Studies,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia**

**March 1998**



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**March 1998**

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New Englishes have emerged all over the world and are seen as developing from what can be called the established native speaker variety. Malaysian English is a non-native variety distinct from the Standard British English. The consolidation of this variety in its present form or its continuity evolving into a form even further from its roots, depends on the attitudes of its speech community.

Malaysian English has emerged in a systematic and consistent manner both in spoken and written forms. The results of the survey indicate that there is tolerance for Malaysian English both in the spoken and written mode.

**Abstrak projek yang dikemukakan kepada Fakulti Pengajian Pendidikan, Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi sebahagian keperluan untuk Ijazah Master Sains.**

**TOLERANSI TERHADAP BAHASA INGGERIS DI MALAYSIA  
SEBAGAI SATU VARIASI BAHASA INGGERIS YANG BARU**

**Oleh**

**RUKUMANI DEVI MANIAM**

**March 1998**

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Pelbagai Bahasa Inggeris telah muncul di merata dunia and telah berkembang daripada Bahasa Inggeris asli yang kukuh. Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia adalah sejenis Bahasa Inggeris yang bukan asli dan berbeza daripada Bahasa Inggeris British yang standard. Bagi mengukuhkan jenis ini dalam bentuk semasanya atau kesinambungannya dalam perkembangannya kepada suatu bentuk yang jauh berbeza bergantung kepada sikap komuniti yang menggunakannya.

Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia telah berkembang dengan sistematik dan kukuh dalam pertuturan dan penulisan. Dapatan di dalam kajian menunjukan toleransi dalam pertuturan dan penulisan Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

*"Language is a living and growing thing.  
The more people use it, the more frequently it  
is used, the more likely it will be fossilised."*

Halimah Mohd Said,  
Sunday Star, 1997:17

### **Background of Study**

English is a world wide language today (Wong, 1991). It is vastly used nowadays than it was in the past and that the expansion of its uses continues apace. Millions of people use it as either their mother tongue, their second language or a foreign language. This has given rise to diverse varieties of English. The spread of English can be viewed in terms of the Old Englishes, the New Englishes and English as a foreign language variety (Wong, 1991).

The Old Varieties of English might be traditionally described as British, American, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and so forth. The New Englishes have two major features: English is used in the linguistic repertoire and it has acquired an important status in the language of such multilingual nations. The third variety of English, that of English as a foreign language, is used as a necessary international language.

All users of English are not part of a single English-using speech community (Kachru, 1986). Yet paradoxically, as this language expands its diversity of forms also increases. The increase in the use of English among any speech community of even moderate complexity is followed by more varied kinds of English.

A speech community is defined as “a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety” (Hymes, 1972:54). Similarly, Kachru’s division of speech community includes one which shares a common context of cultures of situation and ethnic attitudes (1986).

In more recent years, New Englishes are viewed from a more pragmatic and functional approach. They depend on the communicative needs of those who speak it and write it (Platt, Weber and Ho, 1984). They may lack words and phrases to express the cultural background of the people of the new nation. Some are new creations and others are formed as a result of employing different language strategies. Innovations found in these Englishes are to be interpreted not as violations of the prestige norms of

the Old Englishes but as a process by which English is acquiring various international identities and thus being classified as a variety by itself. Strevens (1982) states that English language is truly a world possession and it is the language of everyone. Renner (1994: 7) adds on that “the language does not belong to any of us or even, finally, to all of us but that we belong to the language, and that each of us has rights to the language commensurate with our commitment to it”

The New Englishes are seen as developing from what can be called the established native speaker varieties such as British, American and Australian English (Lowenberg, 1990). Some researchers have identified phonological, syntactical and lexical features of a new variety and recognising degrees of innovation as marking varieties according to style and education of speakers (Lowenberg, 1990; Platt et al., 1984, Wong 1981).

Malaysian English exists as a non-native variety distinct from the Standard British English from which it has evolved. The consolidation of this variety in its present form or its continuity evolving into a form even further from its roots, depends on the attitudes of its speech community. Platt et al. (1984) and Wong (1981) state that Malaysian English is not a sub-branch of British English and neither should it ever be thought of as being inferior to other prevailing varieties of English. It is used nationally rather than regionally. Furthermore, Wong states that majority of Malaysians will need English only for intranational use compared to a small elite group

who will need to use it for international purposes. Thus, the local variety of English would suffice. It has emerged in a systematic and consistent manner both in spoken and written forms (Soo, 1990; Lowenberg, 1990).

In general, Malaysian English ranges in a continuum from the highest variety, the acrolect to mesolect and the basilect (Wong, 1981). This acrolectal form is equated with the variety spoken by the English-medium educated. The acrolectal group has no problem in switching to the other two non-acrolectal sub-varieties in informal communication situations or when communicating with those who have not mastered the acrolect (Augustin, 1982). The general population, on the other hand lacks the agility and whenever they have to use English, the non-acrolectal forms will be used for all occasions and purposes (Baskaran, 1987). Thus, the Standard Malaysian English refers to the acrolect spoken by Malaysians who had English-medium education in Malaysia. The non-standard Malaysian English, on the other hand, refers to the non-acrolectal sub-varieties used by many, particularly in informal situations.

English language in Malaysia developed through formal instructions in English schools (Wong, 1991). Owing to the political and economic realities in pre-independent Malaya, British English, the language of the colonial rulers, acquired a prestige unrivalled by the vernaculars. Thus, English-medium schools became the gateway to white-collar jobs in the administrative and commercial sectors. It was the most important medium of instruction. It gave access to higher education, initially

abroad and later locally as well.

English language in Malaysia is spoken and written by people for whom it is not the mother-tongue, a non-native variety. English was taught in one way or another in all schools, regardless their medium of education. This resulted English as used by the Malay-medium educated, by the English-medium educated and so on. A few students managed to acquire a near-native proficiency in English. The vast majority, however, remade the English language in the image of their mother tongues. Changes in languages such as this, are natural, particularly in non-native varieties.

The processes of nativisation and indigenisation ensure permanent additions and modifications to the language, reflecting the force of cultural embedding (Moag, 1982). Thus, where the written product is concerned, the acrolect user may be almost indistinguishable from a native speaker of Standard British English. However, in terms of spoken language, though near-native in syntax, even the acrolect speaker can easily be distinguished as a non native speaker. His speech is coloured by speech patterns of the local languages.

In 1970, the status and role of English changed. With the elevation of Bahasa Malaysia, English lost its prestige as it had during the colonial period (Augustine, 1982). The difference between Standard Malaysian English and Standard British English could be detected in terms of phonology, grammar and the amount and variety of lexical borrowing from the local languages. The reality of the present day Malaysian

situation indicates that English has declined very much. The Malaysian Ministry of Education has decided that the objective of teaching English in this country, besides internal communication is international intelligibility (Ministry of Education, 1975). Students are not required to speak like native speakers. Thus, it would be unrealistic to aim at a level of proficiency equivalent to that attained when the entire school education was in English.

### **Statement of Problem**

New Englishes have emerged all over the world, and this fact has been given credence and recognised in a formal manner. Lexical infiltration, phonological variation and syntactic variation have contributed to the indigenization of the language. This indigenization is quite widespread and is an inevitable phenomenon.

Whenever two or more languages are in contact, there will be mutual borrowing, assimilation and adaptation from one to the other. Thus, the English used by Malaysians is different from other varieties of English including British English. Moreover, Malaysian English is not a substandard of British English. There are some manifestations in Malaysian English, such as in the areas of phonology, syntax and lexis.

In the light of this, there is a standard variety of Malaysian English which is grammatically correct but which has some differences in lexical, syntactical and phonological features from the British English. These features are perfectly acceptable in Malaysia. The aim of this paper is to survey the degree of tolerance for some local structures of the New English called Malaysian English, both in the spoken and written mode.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study aims at finding out whether Malaysians,

- are aware of Malaysian English as a distinct variety of the English language; and
- are tolerant of certain variations in Malaysian English.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions of this study are:

- Do the respondents show more tolerance of spoken Malaysian English variety than written Malaysian English variety?
- Do the pre-service teachers show far greater tolerance towards variations in Malaysian English than the in-service teachers?

### **Limitations of Study**

The scope of this study has been confined to the linguistic features in the areas on syntax and lexis. The phonological features are not examined. Only items of Malaysian English which show some variation from British English are selected in the questionnaire.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to give some information pertaining to the role of English language as a world language, the status of English in Malaysia, the continuum of Malaysian English and some common features of Malaysian English.

#### **English as a Primary World Language**

English is now recognised as the primary world language (Goh, 1992). It is a universal language (Kachru, 1986) as well as an international language (Strevens, 1992). It has a large community of speakers which encompasses native speakers as well as non-native speakers. The varieties of English spoken by non-native speakers are different from native speakers of English. English has standards varying from

country to country. There are many English language users and thus, it has the flexibility to express any culture it comes into contact with.

English has spread to many parts of the world and has an increased number of people learning and using it. At first, English was the language of a very small nation, England. Later, the English language spread to the rest of the British Isles, North America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (Platt et al., 1984). It was also used in those colonies which were under the British administration but where only a few British people settled permanently: places like India, Ceylon, West Africa and Malaya.

The end of the colonial era, however, has not seen a reversal of the spread of English. Many of the New Nations which were once British colonies have realized the importance of English not only as a language of commerce, science and technology but also as an international language of communication. In some of these nations, most of the education in schools and tertiary institutions is through the medium of English. In the nations where an indigenous language is used as the medium of instruction in schools, English is nevertheless the main second language. English has become the most important international language and is the most commonly taught second or foreign language in the world (Strevens, 1982).

## **New Englishes**

New Englishes refer to the varieties of English. The term “New Varieties” of English implies that there are more or less recognizable varieties spoken and/or written by groups of people (Platt et al., 1984). Thus, there are many new speakers of English all over the world. Platt et al. (1984) have classified New English as one which fulfils the following criteria:

- it has developed through the education system.
- it has developed in an area where a native variety of English was not the language spoken by most of the population.
- it is used for a range of functions among those who speak or write it in the region where it is used.
- it has become “localized” or “nativized” by adopting some language features of its own, such as sounds, intonation patterns, sentence structures, words, expressions.

Some well-known examples of New Englishes include Indian English, Philippine English, Singapore English and African Englishes of nations such as Nigeria and Ghana. According to Platt et al. (1984), there are basically three different situations against which New Englishes developed. In the first situation, New Englishes developed in areas where education in English meant education in a language totally unlike the home languages of the pupils or the languages they would hear around them in the streets and markets. In the second situation, many children

come to school already knowing an English-based pidgin. However, English-based pidgins are not native varieties of English. English-based pidgins cannot be considered as New Englishes as they do not fulfil the first criterion. They have not developed through the education system. They were not taught but developed to perform the basic needs of communication among people who would otherwise have had no language in common. In the third situation, English has been taught in schools to speakers of an English-based creole. A creole is a speech variety which has developed from a pidgin. As a very basic pidgin is inadequate for normal everyday use, the pidgin is expanded: new words are added and more complex grammatical system develops.

As education through the medium of English became available, a situation known as a post-creole speech continuum developed with people speaking a whole range of speech varieties from the creole to a type close to Standard English (Platt et al., 1984). This post-creole continuum is represented with the basilect on one end and the acrolect on the other. Basilect refers to those with little or no formal education who speak the creole or a slightly modified creole. The acrolect refers to the type of speech closest to Standard English. This would be spoken, at least in more formal situations, by those with higher levels of education. The types of speech between the basilect and the acrolect are referred to as mesolects. The acrolect and some of the mesolects of a post-creole continuum can certainly be considered as New Englishes. There are differences in pronunciation and in vocabulary and to some extent in grammatical structure between these Englishes and the kinds of English spoken in Britain. However,

at the upper end of the continuum (near the acrolect) they can certainly be considered as varieties of English. There is no clear point along the continuum where it can be said as no longer English.

### **The Status of English in Malaysia**

Historically, there are three stages of English in Malaysia: the colonial period, the post independence period and the period of opening up, growth and development of the 80's. During the colonial period, colonies under the British administration used English language (Benson, 1990). English enjoyed a very important position where promotion into high-ranking jobs and integration into the upper class depended on it. This refers to the first process in the life cycle of non-native Englishes (Moag, 1982). English was brought into a new environment for purposes of colonial administration. Contacts between native speakers of English and the local population required the locals to learn English to assist the colonial administration. In this way, English was introduced in Malaysia. It entered this country as a colonial power language (Awang Had Salleh, 1994). English was spoken and written by people for whom it was not the mother-tongue.

English was widely used in the country in the 19th century and the first half of the twentieth century where it was the language of the colonisers, the aristocracy, the ruling class, the commercial sector and the language of education. Most of the education in schools and tertiary institutions was conducted through the medium of English. In fact, English has been retained as the compulsory second language throughout all levels of primary and secondary school (Lowenberg, 1991).

After independence, English continued to be frequently used by people and in the schools, but the growing intensive spirit of nationalism led Malaysia to question its national identity and language loyalty (Lowenberg, 1990). Malay was favoured as it was the language of the indigenous population and the politically dominant group. During this period the National Education Policy (NEP) was enacted and its implementation gradually enforced. English was slowly phasing out from schools and universities as a medium of instruction (Benson 1990). It served as the medium of instruction in extremely few settings (Platt et al., 1980; Augustin, 1982). Most of the medium of instructions in schools and tertiary institutions was through the Malay medium. However, as stated by Lowenberg (1991), English maintained its status as a compulsory second language.

Besides these, Malaysia's population is diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion and culture although it manifests a sense of unity and social integration (Lowenberg 1990). English in a society like Malaysia functions in a multicultural and multilingual context. Many other languages and cultures come in contact with it, thus, creating a totally different socio-cultural and sociolinguistic environment. English is the unifying factor to bind these different communities together. To ease the communication between different speech communities, English is the neutral and powerful medium of communication. It functions as a tool for international communication as well as an intranational second language for education, government, business and inter-ethnic communication (Lowenberg, 1990).

The target to achieve a fully developed status in Malaysia through Vision 2020, involves strong competition with other developed nations commercially and economically, industrially and technologically and educationally and scientifically. This can only be attained through English as the medium of communication. Thus, the use of English is obvious in Malaysia.

Consequently, the type of English which Malaysians employ in their interactions and communication and conversations amongst themselves and with the outside world is referred to as Malaysian English (Lowenberg, 1991). Malaysian English is viewed and judged against the multilingual and multicultural background peculiar to this country (Wong, 1983). As a result of the background against which it

developed, the English language has undergone a process of indigenisation where local words have been incorporated into the English language. This contributes to the emergence of a new variety of English called Malaysian English (Vetharmani, 1996). According to Moag (1982), this is the second process in the life cycle of non-native Englishes. English language has become localized through the use of language features of its own, such as sounds, intonation patterns, sentence structures, words and expressions.

Malaysian elites, who still use and set the standards for English usage in Malaysia tend to code mix and code switch between English and Malay and also use patterns of lexical borrowing from Malay into English. The forms and functions of these borrowings, mix and switch can enhance understanding of the localized language features of Malaysian English. These variations are in fact what Kachru (1982) calls “deviations”. He makes a distinction between “mistakes” and “deviations”. “Deviations” are fully acceptable as linguistic innovations and they are the result of a productive process which marks the typical variety specific feature; and they are systematic within a variety. However, “mistakes” are imperfectly learnt forms of English and cannot be justified with reference to the socio cultural context of a non-native variety.

Malaysian English being a new variety, can only evolve in a multilingual environment and is, therefore, something to be studied rather than dismissed. Lowenberg (1990) states that it has a great deal to tell about how languages interact in the multilingual brain. The speakers of Malaysian English have developed and are still developing a whole new range of expressions to fulfil their communicative needs. Most of them are new creations. English language is regaining its status and gaining wider circulation in usage. Benson (1990) states that English has a firm rooting and acts "like a solid rock" in this country.

### **The Continuum of Malaysian English**

When the new language policies in Malaysia promoted Malay as the national language, the language of government and of education, there emerged two kinds of Malaysian English (Platt and Weber, 1980). The first type, Malaysian English Type I is spoken by English medium educated older Malaysians and some younger Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent. It has a striking resemblance to the English language of native speakers. This is a formal variety used by older English speakers but mainly found in newspapers, and other publications of English (Benson, 1990). This variety incorporates various localized features of pronunciation, syntax and lexis, discourse and style (Prator, 1968). Thus, the localized forms of English refers to the great proliferation of English in the world today. The attitudes of Malaysians vary towards it as some regard it as legitimate local variety of English while for others it is