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## Bahasa Rojak: Malaysian Way of Speaking English?

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**Abstract:** This conceptual paper discusses the use of informal Malaysian English or famously known as *Bahasa Rojak* in Malaysia. *Bahasa Rojak* from academic perspective is defined as a language that results from the combination of different languages. This paper aims to emphasize the differences and similarities between *Bahasa Rojak* and Manglish, and highlights the factors that influence Malaysian to practice *Bahasa Rojak* in daily speeches, whether in formal or informal situations, answering the question how does *Bahasa Rojak* come into existence. This paper also intends to raise the issue relating to Bahasa Rojak which are the effects of having Bahasa Rojak as one of the languages spoken in Malaysia, focussing on whether it leads to the evolution of both languages— Bahasa Malaysia and the English Language or it causes destruction to both languages. This paper also puts forward the view of some academicians regarding the issue of *Bahasa Rojak*. There are different views and both sides have its own advantages and disadvantages leading to endless debate between both parties. The conclusion summarizes the advantages and the disadvantages of the use of *Bahasa Rojak* in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Bahasa Rojak, Malaysian English

### 1. Introduction

The diversity of languages in Malaysia started in the fifteenth century with the arrival of Portuguese, Dutch, British and Japanese colonizers in Tanah Melayu (now Malaysia). This has contributed to the linguistic development of the Malay language. It is a shared knowledge that many words used in Bahasa Malaysia are borrowed from other languages. For examples, the words ‘televisyen’ and ‘tender’ are borrowed from the English language, and the words ‘bola’ and ‘minggu’ are borrowed from the Portuguese language (Siti Hamidah et al., 2013). However, British were the most prominent among the other colonizers as the British were able to establish a formal education system in Tanah Melayu in the early twentieth century. Lee et al. (2010) described the English Language as an “inherited” language, a “legacy” of the British colonialists, an inevitable consequence of its role in our national history. Then, the influence of the English Language was further impinged by the implementation of the National Language Policy in 1967 which has made the English Language as the second language in Malaysia. Since then, it has been used widely in a broad range of domains such as government administration, education, law, business and the mass media (Augustin, 1982). As English is used by Malaysians who are non-native, now we have Malaysian English.

### 2. Malaysian English: A Combination of Manglish and Bahasa Rojak

The English Language has been localised in terms of phonology, syntax, morphology because the influence of local languages such as Malay, Chinese and Indian and these localizations show a distinctive Malaysian English with various combinations and permutations of three sociolects or social dialects, which include acrolect, mesolect and basilect (Baskaran, 1994). The comparisons between the three sociolects of the Malaysian English continuum are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Three Socioclects of the Malaysian English Continuum (Baskaran, 1994)

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Acrolect: Official Malaysian English</b>	<b>Mesolect: Unofficial Malaysian English</b>	<b>Basilect: ‘Broken’ Malaysian English</b>
Sociolinguistic	Spoken and written for standard and formal usage, for national and international purposes	Spoken and written formally but nonstandard usage, for intranational purposes	A highly informal colloquial patois (substandard), with limited general intelligibility, for intranational purposes only.
Phonology	Permits a slight variation so long as it is internationally intelligible	Allows for greater variation especially in stress and intonation	Stigmatized because of its great segmental and prosodic divergence, internationally unintelligible
Morpho-syntax	Permits a slight variation from the international standard	Diverges considerably from international usage but remains largely intelligible to the non-Malaysian	Stigmatized because of its substantial divergence, internationally unintelligible
Lexical	Permits considerable variation for words relating to local contexts	Allow substantial substitution of words from Malaysian languages, including for international expressions	Heavily infused with items from local languages

In summary, the table above illustrates that acrolect is close to British English and is used by Malaysian professionals, while mesolect is different from British English and most Malaysians use mesolect Malaysian English. Basilect is a type of broken English, which is used colloquially in Malaysia.

According to Augustin (1982) Malaysian English is categorised into four different varieties. The first variety of Malaysian English is near native British Standard English. It has minimal deviations to British English and used in formal situations such as lecturing, teaching and meetings. The second variety of Malaysian English is educated Malaysian English. This variety has deviations that distinguish the speakers from speakers of the near native British Standard English. This too is used in formal situations. The third variety of Malaysian English is colloquial Malaysian English. This variety is spoken informally by educated Malaysians in urban areas and intimate situations, and incorporates many features from the major dialects spoken in Malaysia. The fourth variety is pidgin language. In another study by Mufwene (2007) pidgin is described as broken language as it is used informally as their structures are very much reduced compared to their lexifiers, and lexifiers mean the original languages from where a pidgin language comes from.

### 3. Similarities and Differences of Bahasa Rojak and Manglish

Bahasa Rojak (henceforth BR), as the name itself suggest, originally comes from a type of Malaysian food – rojak. Rojak is a food in which different ingredients are mixed together, perfect description for a mixture of languages. BR or mixed language is a different name given to Malaysian English. Based on the descriptions above, it can be concluded that similar terms to BR are basilect, colloquial and pidgin.

Looking at BR from academic perspectives, BR is called pidgin language linguistically, while in sociolinguistic, a similar term given to BR is the switching and mixing of codes (Teo, 2004). BR can be considered pidgin language because the structures of BR are reduced from its lexifiers which are Bahasa Malaysia and the English Language.

Meanwhile, Teo (2004) generally defined code switching and code mixing as the use of other foreign languages at word or phrase level and there are four different types of switching and mixing of codes. Below are the definitions of code-switching and code-mixing with examples.

1. Code Mixing means the use of particular words from another language.

Examples:

- So, kita harus selesaikan perkara ini secepat mungkin.
- First, wo yao qu tushuguan.

The use of conjunction ‘so’ in the first sentence is mixed with a complete Malay sentence, while in the second sentence, the discourse marker ‘first’ is mixed with a complete Mandarin sentence.

2. Intra-sentential code-mixing referred to a mixture of different languages in a sentence.

Examples:

- It depends on sama ada dia mahu atau tidak.
- Para hadirin sekalian diminta switch off telefon bimbit.

The phrases ‘It depends on’ and ‘switch off’ are mixed with other Malays words to form one complete sentence.

3. Inter-sentential code-switching referred to the switch from one language to another language in different sentences.

Examples:

- Maaf atas kesilapan ini. I promise I will not do it again.
- Wo yao qu tushuguan. Do you want to come with me?

In the first sentence, a complete English sentence is used with another complete Malay sentence. While in the second sentence, a complete English sentence is used together with a complete Mandarin sentence.

4. Code-mixing in a word referred to the use of other languages in a word.

Examples:

- forwardkan, terdelete.

The first word 'forwardkan' is a combination of the English word 'forward' and a Malay suffix 'kan', and the second word 'terdelete' is a combination of the English word 'delete' and a Malay prefix 'ter'.

As can be seen from the examples, Teo (2004) described BR as the mixture of languages at sentence or word level.

However, the question here is "what is the relation between BR and Manglish"? Firstly, Manglish is assumed to be the short form version of Malaysian English by many Malaysians. The true fact is Manglish stands for Mangled English, and referring to Oxford Dictionary 9<sup>th</sup> Ed. (2015, p.g 918), the meaning of the word 'mangle' is something that is badly damaged. Thus, an understanding can be formed that Manglish is a language that is badly damaged, and so is BR, at some point. The word Manglish itself sounds negative, and the definition shows that it is a language that is badly damaged. Unlike BR, which is acceptable when used appropriately.

Secondly, BR is also assumed to be only a combination of Bahasa Malaysia and the English language. Looking at the definition of BR by Awang Sariyan (2004) BR is the symbol given to a language with a combination of languages, and often it brings negative connotation. This tells us that BR could be a combination of any languages. In addition, Awang Sariyan (2004) also states that (BR) is comparable to drugs. Interestingly, drugs have always been seen as something negative and bad, where actually drugs are not dangerous at all. The medicine that we take whenever we are not feeling well is a type of drugs too. It is the misuse of drugs that is dangerous. Similarly, using BR in everyday life is not wrong, but the misuse of it that is wrong.

#### **4. Concerns Relating to BR**

##### **4.1 The Factors of BR Existence**

One cannot deny the fact that we are now living in hedonistic era. Thus, many youths are easily reached with entertainment, specifically songs. As stated by Jaafar (2004) a research in neuroscience found that singing is very much related to brain development, and a song composed with a good use of language and creative choice of vocabulary can produce humans with a high level of emotional intelligence. In addition, the use of language, whether it is good or bad, can influence human's minds and thoughts (Jaafar, 2004). It is a sad truth that many songs that are written these days tend to disregard good use of language to make the lines rhyme. One good example would be the song 'Kantoi' by Zee Avi.

"Semalam I called you, you tak answer. You kata you keluar pergi dinner".

Looking at the informal use of BR, this song does not really destroy the beauty of both languages used, as there are still correct uses of grammar either in English or Malay. For example, in English the correct tense to use to describe "semalam" (yesterday) is past tense for the verb called, thus making the line grammatically correct. This is relatable to what Teo (2004) described as intra-sentential code-mixing, which explains a mixture of different languages in a sentence. However, Jaafar (2004) raised a concern relating to the issue of how songs can destroy the beauty of a language such as Tipah Tertipu. There is one line in the song that goes "tipah tertipu tipu tertipah" (Jaafar, 2004). It is worrisome when songs are written with the sole intention to entertain, but not to educate.

Films and drama series produced in Malaysia also bring negative influence as they are produced also to entertain and not to educate. A good illustration is from a movie which is Adnan Sempit. To show example, one line from the movie goes "I don't want banana to fruit two times". The line above is a direct translation of a Malay idiom "pisang berbuah dua kali" which is not the correct expression in English. This, without a doubt, would destroy both languages.

##### **4.2 The Effects of BR**

Most linguists are always against BR as BR always comes with negative connotations. The biggest concern is that BR would destroy the purity of Bahasa Malaysia and could also

cause the extinction of Bahasa Malaysia. Malaysian Insider (2012) reported Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is the former Minister of Education said that the extinction of a language could happen when the people do not use their native languages anymore. Other views include Chief Department of Bahasa Melayu, Modern Language and Communication Faculty in Universiti Putra Malaysia, Profesor Madya Dr AdiYasran Abdul Aziz said that the community nowadays focused too much on appearance, not only the style but also the language which has to be sophisticated and follow the current progress (mainstream). Another view is from Prof Datuk Dr Teo Kok Seong, BR is mainly due to the attitude of the speaker, which is being ignorant towards the purity of the language. This is true as it is very visible these days, especially in social networking sites. Many people post their status in BR, with poor grammar control of both languages – Bahasa Malaysia and the English Language and wrong spelling. At a point, one would argue that there is nothing wrong with that as it is an informal environment. Informal or not, we should not allow words like ‘kipidap’, ‘dongibab’ and anything of sorts for the sake of being in trend.

Other than destroying the beauty of language, another effect of BR is regarding an issue of language and identity. As Asmah Haji Omar’s (1998) as cited in Lee et al. (2010) in her study found that linguistic identity in the individual is not inborn and not fixed, but “changes with their individual’s development, environment and situations of language use”. What or who we are today is what we have been exposed to and decide to portray to others. Citizens of Malaysia these days are losing their true identity as the Malays, the Chinese or the Indians as their environment is constantly changing. An analogy can be best in terms of fashion. The young adults prefer to dress like the Koreans because they are influenced and affected by the K-Pop wave. It is just similar when it comes to language use. It is claimed that the trends require people to speak improperly such as “Come on lah, ini trend what”.

There is also an issue of stereotyping. It is normal to hear different races labeling each other. For example, “Oh they are Malays, what more can we expect”. It does not matter what your race is, you should not be labeled as the destroyer of a language just because it is your habit. As mentioned above, the youths are exposed to damaging entertainment that could destroy their linguistic proficiency. Our language purity should not be gambled for the sake of unbeneficial entertainment.

## 5. Conclusion

The most imperative question that needs to be answered when it comes to BR is “is it really destroying the true form of a language, in particular Bahasa Malaysia? Awang Sariyan (2004) admitted that it is almost impossible for a person to use a language without the inclusion of another foreign language. Thus the best answer for the question is it depends on who and where the language is used. The use of BR is not wrong, but needs to be used appropriately, for example informal conversations among friends. However, it becomes a big issue when BR is not used accordingly, such as in meetings and interviews.

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