

TOPIC SELECTION AND ORGANIZATION AND DISCOURSE STRATEGIES IN MALAY NEWS IN FOUR COUNTRIES

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Introduction

Malay is an official language in four Southeast Asian countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore. MABBIM (Majalis Bahasa Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia), a regional body, in conjunction with local government bodies, has attempted to formulate a 'standard' form of the language. Work to date has consisted mainly in standardizing the spelling (two and a half decades ago), and proposing vocabulary adoption, especially in connection with recent scientific and technological advances.

Despite these efforts, Malay speakers from different countries still complain of difficulty in understanding each other. How much of this difficulty is due to differences in lexicon, to differences in grammatical structures or to differences in discourse organization? This paper compares some of these features in similar texts originating from the countries in question in order to determine the nature of differences in discourse structure and organization as well as discourse-related grammatical features which might partially account for problems in cross-national intelligibility. Specifically the paper examines TV news broadcasts and news articles found on the internet, as the topics discussed in the various countries within these genre are similar and the genre features in each case (news broadcasts and Internet articles) are also fairly constant.

Features examined include (1) selection and ordering of topics, and length of each item, (2) similarities between English and Malay broadcasts in Singapore (to determine to what extent translation might be responsible for any features of the Malay broadcasts in Singapore which differed from those of the other Malay-speaking countries), and (3) grammatical choices (i.e. active vs. passive) in Malaysian vs. Indonesian Internet news articles.

Some Notes on Problems in Data Collection and Methodology

The original plan for this project had been to collect TV news broadcasts in the four countries during the same time period, on the assumption that the topics would thus be similar. TV news broadcasts were selected as the genre because broadcasting constraints result in discourses of similar length and structure. It was felt that any differences between them would thus truly reflect differences in discourse strategies used by speakers of the language in the four countries (as well as differences in national preoccupations in terms of topic selection and topic prominence).

The recordings were made on 3, 4 and 6 February 1998. During this week topics on the international news included (1) the US balanced budget, (2) Clinton's sex scandal, (3) an airline crash in the Philippines, (4) UN weapons inspection in Iraq, (5) the Asian

economic crisis. Regional topics included (1) the double Chinese New Year and Moslem Hari Raya holiday and (2) the hot dry weather.

As I was not able to record the news myself in all four countries simultaneously, I relied on friends and relatives to assist me.¹ Unfortunately the video tape on which recordings were made in Indonesia turned out to be damaged and unusable. The recordings made in Brunei were on audio tape only and the sound quality was somewhat inferior. It was not possible to transcribe the contents of this tape word for word. However, topics could be identified and timed.

As damage to the Indonesian tape was only discovered months after the recordings were made, the initial comparison of TV news broadcasts was limited to three countries: Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. An opportunity arose several months later to record some TV news broadcasts in Indonesia but it was not possible to obtain simultaneous recordings of news broadcasts in the other countries. General features of topic selection, arrangement and timing found in the Indonesian news broadcasts were, however, noted.

Due to the problems encountered in collecting news broadcasts simultaneously from the four countries, Internet news resources were explored as an alternative source of texts. The advantage of using these is that, since they are archived, it is possible to examine selection and length of topics from previous dates. This source, however, like newspaper articles, has the disadvantage over TV news broadcasts, that there are less stringent restrictions concerning overall length of an issue.

In this paper TV news broadcasts will be examined first. Then Internet sources will be discussed. Finally, there will be a discussion of conclusions that can be extracted from this analysis regarding overall tendencies in use of the formal style of language in the four countries and implications of these tendencies for cross-national intelligibility.

The TV News Broadcasts in four Malay-speaking Countries

In this section, three sets of data will be analysed. These include (1) TV news broadcasts from Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei on 3 February 1998, (2) English and Malay news broadcasts from Singapore on 4 February 1998, and (3) an Indonesian TV news broadcast of 11 July 1998.

Malaysian, Singaporean and Bruneian News of 3 February 1998

I will list here the topics covered by each country in the order of coverage and indicate the time devoted to each topic. A comparison of similarities and differences will then be made.

Malaysian news (TV 3) 3 February 98

- Traffic accidents over the double holiday (nearly 15 min)
- Clinton's sex scandal (1 minute)
- Cebu Pacific plane crash in the Philippines (1 min 5 sec)
- UN weapons inspection in Iraq (2 min 20 sec)
- Civil strife in Somalia (1 min)
- Medical breakthrough in Europe – using neutrons to attack damaged brain cells (53 sec)

¹ I wish to thank Peter Martin for recording the news programmes in Brunei and my son Krisnadi Poedjosoedarmo for recording the news programmes in Indonesia.

- Sports (7 min)
- Weather (less than 1 min)

Singapore Malay news – Prime 12 – 3 February 98

- PM Goh's visit to Indonesia (1 min 30 sec)
- Min. of Ed. Teo in Switzerland says Eastern Asia will not be defeated by the current economic crisis (1 min 10 sec)
- Asian economic crisis in Japan and Malaysia (1 min 25 sec)
- Asian stock market and Dow Jones (2 min 11 sec)
- America's balanced budget (1 min 25 sec)
- Seagate (Thailand) lays off workers (37 sec)
- German factory begins production of silicon wafers in Singapore (1 min 1 sec)
- Local crime story – man attacked in coffee shop later dies (1 min)
- A bag containing money and a passport was stolen from a man waiting at the bus terminal to go to Malaysia (50 sec)
- Two brothers (in Singapore) are accused of receiving bribes worth millions (53 sec)
- "Gong Xi Raya" celebrations in Singapore schools (53 sec)
- Cebu Pacific airline crash (1 min 12 sec)
- Iraqi crisis – UN weapons inspection (4 min 22 sec)
- Death penalty to convicted woman in Texas (56 sec)

Sports:

- tennis (37 sec)
- soccer (1 min 10 sec)
- riots in Italy (1 min)
- Local stocks and foreign exchange (1 min 20 sec)
- Weather (41 sec)

Brunei – RTB – 3 February 98

- Hot dry weather
- causes forest fires
- handling of oil in refineries to prevent fires
- asthmatics should avoid dust (6 min 50 sec)
- Number of new converts to Islam (1 min 10 sec)
- Some companies continue to celebrate the dual holiday (20 sec)
- Local weather (27 sec)
- Cebu Pacific airline crash (2 min 19 sec)
- Iraqi crisis – UN weapons inspection (3 min 16 sec)
- Videos of Princess Diana's car (1 min 15 sec)
- Cigarette smoking causes fires (1 min 5 sec)
- Regional weather (18 sec)
- South Korean economy (1 min 32 sec)
- US balanced budget and more spending on education (1 min 28 sec)
- Sports (1 min 36 sec)

Common topics between the news broadcasts of the three countries included (1) the Cebu Pacific airline crash, (2) US – Iraqi relations and the UN weapons inspection, (3) sports and (4) the weather. A comparison of time spent on each of these topics in each country is given in the following chart:

(Topic)	Malaysia	Singapore	Brunei
Cebu Pacific airline crash	1 min 5 sec	1 min 12 sec	2 min 19 sec
US – Iraqi relations & UN weapons inspection	2 min 20 sec	4 min 22 sec	3 min 16 sec
Sports	7 min	2 min 47 sec	1 min 36 sec
Weather	(less than one min)	41 sec	7 min 35 sec

In addition to identical topics found in the three news broadcasts there were some topics which were similar in certain respects but which were given different focus in different countries. These included the double holiday – Hari Raya and Chinese New Year – and the US presidency.

In connection with the double holiday, the Malaysian news spent 15 minutes discussing traffic accidents, the first item on the news that evening. Singapore had a 1 minute 16 second item on what they called ‘Gong Xi Raya’ celebrations in schools, celebrations combining the two holidays with cultural shows from each ethnic group. Brunei had two related items, one 20 second one on the fact that some companies continued to celebrate after the holiday had officially ended and a 1 minute 10 second item on new converts to Islam.

In regard to the US presidency, Malaysia had a 1 minute item on Clinton’s sex scandal which was followed on 4 February with a 54 second sequel. Singapore and Brunei both had items on the balanced budget, Singapore’s being 1 minute 25 seconds in length with a follow-up on 4 February of 54 seconds, and Brunei’s being 1 minute 28 seconds in length. Though the tape of the Indonesian news for that evening was not available, the Internet source of Kompas online had one article on 3 February and two on 4 February relating to the sex scandal. There was nothing in the archives on the balanced budget.

Summary

If we compare the news broadcasts from Malaysian, Singaporean and Bruneian TV, we can make the following observations:

- Singapore’s news items tend to be quite short, generally under 2 minutes
- Brunei and especially Malaysia tend to have fewer items but some much longer (4 Feb TV3 had a story about rabies which lasted 5 min 36 sec)
- Brunei and Malaysia tend to have local news first while Singapore has “headline news” first which may be either local or international