

The Acquisition of Malay as a Second Language: A Case of the Essentiality of Culture Learning

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that Malay is a highly social/cultural context language. As such, acquiring/learning Malay is essentially acquiring/learning (mainstream) Malay culture.

This paper will attempt to demonstrate the highly social/cultural context of Malay by discussing some of its salient affective characteristics from frameworks that have been developed within anthropological and sociological linguistics. By discussing the affective characteristics of Malay, it is inasmuch as dealing with the special characteristics of Malays as an ethnic group.

Language is undeniably part of culture. As such, in some sense, an adequate knowledge of sociocultural organization is a prerequisite to the integrative¹ acquisition/learning of a second language.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION: THE MALAY LANGUAGE

Language to Malays touches on the wide universe of life itself. To Malays, religion, politics,² social organization, culture, gestures, postures, manners, norms, values, taboos, interactions, beliefs, and a whole range of sociocultural organization, and of course speech, to name a few, are equated in the term “bahasa” (‘language’).

Language use is of paramount importance in Malay society. Malays are required to follow “rules of language use” for proper interaction. Ignorance of the appropriate use of language may be construed as being “tak tahu bahasa”/“tak reti³ bahasa” (literally ‘not knowing language’/‘lacking language skill’, figuratively ‘ill-bred’). “Tahu Bahasa”/“Reti bahasa” (literally ‘knowing language’/‘having linguistic skill’, figuratively ‘well-bred’) is interpreted as having had good breeding.

Malay sensitivity to the appropriate use of language in everyday affairs is also reflected in the saying “bahasa jiwa bangsa” (‘language is the soul of the people’) (Simin 1988: 58). At the personal interactional level, this saying means “one’s use of language (vocalization) is the image of oneself (etiquette, behavior)” (Simin 1988: 58).

Hence, language to Malays is more than grammar, specifically linguistic-grammar.⁴ “Bahasa” can be interpreted as a system consisting primarily of a sociocultural grammar/sociolinguistic grammar in which exists a linguistic-grammar that is considered less important. “Bahasa” is some kind of meta-language (a supra governing constraint) which has the semantic of “to be proper or appropriate in the use of language” (Simin 1988: 58).

This perception of Malay as both “language” or “speech” and “appropriateness” or “etiquette”, of which the latter is more important, is evident from the fact that Malays are able to tolerate the imperfect handling of Malay linguistic-grammar.

“Bahasa Melayu pasar”,⁵ a pidginized form of Malay with heavily reduced morphology, lexicon and syntax, is extensively used by Malays themselves when interacting with non-Malay speakers (speakers of Malay as a second language), even when some of these non-Malay speakers have a good command of the language. Most Malays have the skill of imitating the type of “bahasa Melayu pasar” as spoken by Chinese and Indians: “Chinese Malay” or Indian Malay”, and often suit their style of

intonation and grammatical structures to the variety spoken by their interlocutors.

However, mistakes of sociocultural grammar/sociolinguistic grammar, are not readily tolerated by Malays. Malays as a rule never tell the offender directly that s/he has committed a breach of etiquette. They consider it most impolite to “tell off” anyone, even a child, let alone adults. It is most likely that the offender will be shunned if s/he continues to commit breaches, will be considered to be a very rude person, and probably will not receive or be given any more attention (Ali 1986: 13).

It is not uncommon for a non-Malay (local or foreign) whose command of Malay is imperfect to be commended by a Malay for being competent in using appropriate forms of address, pronouns and lexical choices, some of the affective characteristics of Malay. Malays react warmly toward non-Malays/speakers of Malay as a second language who show a little genteelness in their speech.

3. MALAY AS A HIGHLY SOCIAL/CULTURAL CONTEXT LANGUAGE

In describing Malay as a highly social/cultural context language,⁶ it is my intention to be illustrative besides being ethnographic, since language is part of human life. Discussion of some salient affective characteristics of Malay will be made in reference to conventions of Malay politeness.

In accounting for its affective characteristics, Malay should be viewed as consisting of two components: verbal and nonverbal. Nonverbal rituals, as in verbal ones, operate as an effective form of interaction. This aspect of language is usually overlooked when accounting for language use in social interaction.

3.1 VERBAL

(a) Humility

Malay tradition places high value on humility (Omar 1987: 46). As a commendable trait among Malays, humility is likened to the avoidance of calling attention to oneself: boasting, bragging, and indulging in self-praise. It is a sociocultural convention to avoid self-praise in Malay. In other words, humility or “understatement” is the norm. “Overstatement” is seen as “sombong”/“takbur”, i.e., to be proud, conceited, and/or arrogant.

(b) Directness/Indirectness⁷

Directness in Malay discourse is considered impolite and uncouth, even in warning a child (Omar 1987: 46). Directness is correlated with “kurang ajar” (literally ‘not taught enough’, figuratively ‘low breeding’), “tak ada budi bahasa” (‘lacking courtesy’) and/or “tak tahu adat” (‘lacking knowledge of Malay customary laws’). Directness in discourse is perceived as being boastful and arrogant in certain contexts and, in others, as being ignorant of the genteel tradition of Malay.

Generally, Malay discourse will go on for some time before the real intention is made known and, even then, it will be imparted in an indirect way. The forms of utterances and the discourse structure reflect on participating parties who take a long time on preliminaries and make hints at their intentions and responses.

Indirectness is an important theme in Malay culture. Malays rely upon indirectness in many common social situations, especially when they are trying to be polite. Indirectness in Malay may be reflected in routines of offering and refusing, as well as in accepting gifts, food, and the like. A “yes” or “no” intended to be taken literally is more direct than an initial “no” intended to mean “persuade me” and/or “ask me again” (cf., Teo 1992: 20).