Daring to Speak: Indonesian Discourse on Learning English

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Introduction

We can only speculate at what point English appeared historically in Indonesian cultures, particularly on Java. Prior to the nineteenth century, contact with English speakers would have occurred through trade and mercantile relations in coastal port towns. The effects of occasional contact with English merchants on Javanese language are unknown. In 1811, when Governor-General Daendels claimed Dutch sovereignty over the coastal territories, he imposed new treaties upon the Javanese courts and significantly altered the political relations of tribute and trade. However, there is little or no mention of the linguistic terms of these political maneuvers by the Dutch (Ricklefs 1981:108).

The British military conquest of the Netherlands Indies from 1795 and their seizure of Batavia in August 1811 introduced English directly to the Indies polity; and in 1819, when Thomas Raffles founded the city-state of Singapore, English became the language of administration across the Straits of Malacca (cf. Cohn 1988). Raffles also initiated reforms in the Netherlands Indies between 1811 and 1816. Javanese elites and British colonial officials apparently experienced numerous misunderstandings of protocol and etiquette. Ricklefs writes, "[W]hen Raffles visited the court in December 1811 he personally encountered the Sultan's hostility and replied with such belligerence which on one occasion nearly led to armed combat in a crowded room" (Ricklefs 1981:109).

Other than those five years of British rule of the Indies, English did not seriously contend with the Dutch language in the Indies colonial administration and education until the beginning of the twentieth century. Even then, English was only marginally embraced by Indies intellectuals, who spoke and wrote primarily

in Dutch. R.A. Kartini (1875–1904) and others advocated education in Dutch and praised it as a vehicle for education, enlightenment and awareness of the world beyond the Indies. Colonial administrators restricted education in European languages so that only Indies elites could study Dutch (Sutherland 1979). Kartini was offended especially that European officials required civil servants on Java to address them in high Javanese and to be answered in Malay, the lingua franca.

Indonesian nationalists disdained speaking Malay among themselves (Toer 1993). Only after efforts at political recognition failed did nationalists turn to Malay as a cultural strategy to distance themselves from colonial rule (Shiraishi 1990). Those who spoke and wrote in Malay faced resistance on the part of others literate in Dutch. For example, when Sukarno promoted 'Bahasa Indonesia' as a unifying new language for the new nation in 1927, contemporary journals such as *Indonesian Youth* struggled with the choice, since few readers were familiar with written Malay. The journal editor "was forced to compromise with its perspective contributors." One editorial read, "[I]f you are afraid to express your thoughts in Indonesian, because you are not proficient enough in it, write to us in Dutch, step by step certainly we will all learn." This transition from Dutch to Malay is echoed seventy years later in Indonesian discourse on learning English, even though English was already present in the nationalist circles. Sutan Sjahrir, the subject of recent biography, advertised English lessons in the 1920s. "Sjahir himself hung a board above the entrance of his 'university' with 'Free English lessons by Mr. Soebagio from New York'," (Mrazek 1993: 46–48).

Indonesians of Chinese descent also pursued English instruction at the turn of the century. Their children were excluded from Dutch instruction in European schools, so urban merchants founded the Tiong Hoa Thee Koan schools in Batavia in 1901 to educate their children in Mandarin. Suryadinata (1972:49–72) points out:

> It is interesting to note that English, not Dutch, was taught as the first foreign language. One of the main reasons for this was that English had a wider use than Dutch. Kwee Tek

> Hoay argued that the teaching of English revealed the Indies Chinese resentment of the colonial government. "English was so emphasized in the THHK school in Batavia that an English section was established. The English section was known as the Yale Institute because it was headed by a Yale graduate." The school proved popular, by 1908 there were fifty-four established.

This branch of the genealogy of English instruction is scarcely remembered in Indonesia today. Yet almost a century later, private and extracurricular lessons are a common avenue for English language instruction. Dutch has long since disappeared from use, except among elderly speakers in the eastern Islands and those with relatives in Holland. Bahasa Indonesia, the national language, is maintained through public school instruction and media. While formal study of English as 'a foreign language' is increasingly part of the curriculum in secondary and even primary schools, public instruction is rarely successful in producing competent speakers. Instead, Indonesians teach each other (English) 'conversation' through increasingly entrepreneurial and informal means.

When Indonesian speakers study English, they identify three geographic origins for native speakers of English: England, the United States and Australia. They show very little interest in 'global English' spoken in postcolonial countries; for example, India does not seem to figure in their perceptions of world English, nor does Singapore (cf. Kachru 1986). Machan and Scott (1992) have described English-speaking linguistic communities, especially their internal heterogeneity. Braj Kachru has edited several volumes on global or world English, but there are few if any references to Indonesia in the comparative literature (1983, 1986, cf. Quirk 1985) Since sociolinguists ask how casual attitudes and official policies shape language use and the social relations that language mediates, this approach has informed my initial questions for contemporary Indonesian speakers of English.

Let me first sketch how and why Indonesians learn to speak global English. Indonesians readily acknowledge English as 'the international language' and the state requires children to study

grammar in secondary schools. Yet, English has entered everyday discourse primarily through extracurricular means outlined above: marginal groups and informal instruction, entrepreneurial interactions with foreigners. With financial and communication networks linking Indonesia to global markets and media the interest in English among Indonesians of all ages and backgrounds is accelerating. Widespread instruction is fairly recent, although English has always been a minor part of school curriculum (personal communication, Pak Sipatenu, 1995).

Teachers and local authorities promote English in the classroom, though in ways which undermine more traditional forms of instruction in the Javanese context. In an article on education, "Speaking English at Bakti High School," the Indonesian magazine, *EDITOR*, reports that staff and students at a private school four hours west of Surabaya are required to use English the entire day once a week. The requirement was introduced in 1988, "a step," *EDITOR* reports, "which demonstrates that English need not be feared." The headmaster, Haji Imam Sukardi, gives the following advice to students.

> The key is one must be brave, just let go. There is no need to feel embarrassed or afraid of mistakes. After a while you will know yourself whether a sentence needs [the verb] 'to be' or you need to add '-ing' and that sort of thing.

Such advice to native speakers of Javanese reflects sensitivity to the risk of making mistakes and offending listeners. Schools are the social domain where one defers speaking a mother tongue, Javanese, and learns religious or national languages (Siegel 1986, Shiraishi 1991). Ethnographers have noted that learning to speak a different language from one's teacher establishes the teacher's authority and socializes children into the broader social hierarchy in Javanese society (Glicken 1987). Yet at Bakti school the headmaster urges his students to be bold in the classroom, to let go and just say something. He does not suggest who they might address: a peer, their teacher, himself. Therein lies a potential risk and anxiety for Javanese speakers. To speak English is to risk a loss of status in social interaction in Javanese society.