

English Lexical Items in Spoken Malay

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Introduction

Jangan kacau aku. Aku tengah tak ada mood sekarang.

*Don't bother me. I'm in no "mood" now. **

Aku suka stail dia bercakap.

*I like the "style" he talks. **

The above utterances are often heard in Malay conversations. It can be heard on the streets or during conversations in the office, between teenagers and among adults. The practice of inserting an English word in a Malay conversation is common and not confined to bilinguals only.

There has been a number of works on the influence of English on the Malay language. Carmel Heah in her book noted that the observations can be divided into two: first observations prior to 1957. These are observations by writers of dictionaries and grammar of Malay. One of the examples given by Heah is the publication of the Malay-English Dictionary in 1901 by R.J. Wilkinson. The second is observations after 1957. According to Heah, these observations are mainly related to terminological development of Bahasa Melayu. All of these works gathered their data from written text; Heah too gathered her materials from newspapers, popular magazines, dictionaries, etc. At present not many works are available on the usage of English lexicals in spoken Malay. This paper will highlight the English lexical items which are frequently used in spoken Malay.

Borrowing

In discussing the usage of English lexical items in spoken Malay, it is necessary to determine whether this phenomenon is

code-mixing or borrowing. Kachru (1978:108) defines code-mixing as:

transferring linguistic units from one code to another. Such a transfer (mixing) results in developing a new restricted or not so restricted code of linguistic interaction.

He further states that code-mixing may be considered as borrowing if, "the term is used in an extended sense and not in its restricted sense". Based on the phrase, "used in an extended sense", it would seem to me that the English words used in spoken Malay, which is the focus of this paper, can be classified as borrowing. Definition of borrowing given by Gumperz (1982:66) also seems to support my contention. He says borrowing is:

the introduction of single words or short, frozen, idiomatic phrases from one variety into the other. The items in question are incorporated into the grammatical system of the borrowing language. They are treated as part of its lexicon, take on its morphological characteristics and enter into its syntactic structures.

More succinctly, Kamwangamala (1989:331) defines borrowing as the integration of the borrowed item into the system of the borrowing language. According to this definition, the phenomenon described in this paper is definitely borrowing.

Subjects and Methodology

The subjects of this study are a group of 2nd year B.Ed. TESL students consisting of 4 males and 13 females. All of them are in their early twenties. They have been together for three years, including one year doing their matriculation studies. They are all competent bilinguals and would often code-switch or code-mix during conversation among themselves. However, there are also instances where they would converse entirely in Malay and insert English words sporadically in the conversation. Usually,

these can be heard in conversation along the corridors, in the cafe or in the class. I gathered the data for this research by listening in on their conversations and recording in notebooks the Malay sentences they used that had English words inserted into them. At times, I would also be involved in these conversations to purposely encourage usage of such words. Sometimes I would seek clarification from the speakers on certain words whose usage was unclear to me. This went on for two semesters. At the end of the second semester, I had gathered about 20 pages of sentences. These were analysed and 38 English words frequently used were extracted from the data.

Table 1
Original Words Collected from the Data

1. best	14. last-last	26. gang
2. real	15. condemn	27. loaded
3. jogging	16. frust	28. season
4. hot	17. round	29. smart
5. mood	18. round-round	30. style
6. act	19. glamour	31. terror
7. action	20. blow	32. cancel
8. tackle	21. relax	33. boss
9. tension	22. relax-relax	34. sound
10. sure	23. challenge	35. brother
11. join	24. balance	36. member
12. free	25. respect	37. over
13. last		

The second part of the research is to confirm with the subjects the usage of these words. I drew up a questionnaire giving them the list of the words that I had compiled. They had to indicate whether they had used those words, and if so, to supply a sentence for each word and indicate the context. (See Appendix A)

After looking at the questionnaires returned by the students and from earlier observations, a pattern was showing that the words were used differently in Malay conversation. To confirm this, I looked up the meaning of these words in two dictionaries (i.e., *The Collins Cobuild Essential English Dictionary* and *The American Heritage Dictionary*). The rationale for choosing these two dictionaries was to note down the meanings of the words, including the various accepted meanings by native speakers of English in both the U.K. and the U.S. These meanings I shall refer to as standard usage.

Results

Based on the sentences supplied by the students, the original 37 words were trimmed down to 34 words. The words deleted were “brother”, “member” and “over”. These words were deleted because they did not get a 100 percent recognition rate from the subjects.

At this stage there are two sets of meaning: (1) meanings based on the sentences supplied by the subjects, and (2) meanings found in the dictionaries. When the two sets of meanings are analyzed, the lexical items can be grouped into three different categories, namely:

1) *meaning change:*

the items in this category are used to connote an entirely different meaning than in standard usage

2) *meaning change in some situations:*

the items here are used to connote more than one meaning, one meaning different than standard usage

3) *meaning maintained but used in specific situations:*

the items in this category maintain their meanings as in standard usage but are only used in a specific speech situation (see Table 2)

Table 2
Classification of Words

Meaning Changed	Meaning Changed In Some Situations	Meaning Maintained and Specific
best hot act action boss tackle round round-round sound glamour blow terror	real boring (bored) last last-last condemn relax relax-relax gang	mood jogging tension sure join free challenge balance smart style cancel loaded frust (frustrated) season (seasoned)

Examples supplied by the subjects clearly illustrate the categories:

1) **Meaning change**

- a) Tak ada kerja lain ke? Asyik nak tackle perempuan aje!

*Don't you have other things to do? You always "tackle" girls.**

- b) Dia bukan main action lagi. Ingat dia terror sangat.
*She/He is so “action”. She/He thinks she/he so
 “terror”. **

In the above examples, the English words used in the conversation have totally changed their meaning. The semantic shift is such that they do not reflect the original (English) meaning at all. According to *Collins* and *American Heritage*, the word tackle has several meanings—among them are to tackle a ball in a football game or to tackle a problem. However, used in the above sentence, “tackle” takes on the meaning of trying to attract someone’s attention, usually between a man and a woman or vice-versa. Thus, another example of the usage of that word in spoken Malay can be:

- Susah betul nak tackle dia tu, jual mahal.
*It’s so difficult to “tackle” her; she plays hard to get. **

Here again, the word means to get her attention, not to tackle her down as in a rugby tackle.

Similarly, the words “action” and “terror” in the above sentences have undergone a complete semantic shift. Some of the meanings of “action” are something that you do on a particular occasion or the important and exciting things that are happening in a situation. However, the meaning when it is used in the above sentence is the person is a snob and arrogant. Similarly, the word “terror” is associated with fear or something frightening. In Malay, if someone says that you are “terror”, it means you are really good at what you are doing. Thus, “Engkau terrorlah”/*You are terror** does not mean that the person speaking is afraid of or frightened by you. Conversely, he/she is paying you a compliment!

2) Meaning change in some situations

- a) (i) Mekap dalam filem itu real.
*The make-up in the film looks “real”. **
 (ii) Dia main bola sepak real betul.
*He plays “real” football. **

- b) (i) Budak tu la yang last sekali sampai.
*That boy was the "last" person to arrive. **
- (ii) Last-last kan, pak cik tu pergi juga.
*"Last-last" the pak-cik (uncle) went away. **

In the above examples, sentences a(i) and b(i) exemplify standard usage while sentences a(ii) and b(ii) showed the changed meanings. The word "real" in a(i) means genuine or authentic. The speaker uttered this sentence after watching a movie where the leading man assumed a role of a man who has aged through the years. The make-up artist had successfully shown the aging process. Meanwhile, the word "real" football in a(ii) does not mean that he is really playing football as opposed to other games nor does it mean that he is playing with a real leather ball. On the contrary, it means that he is really good on the field playing football (an excellent footballer).

Similarly, sentence b(i) exemplifies standard usage. There can be no other meaning in this sentence; the boy was the last person to arrive. However, in b(ii) the word "last-last" has not only changed its meaning but it also takes on the morphological rule of the borrowing language, i.e., Bahasa Melayu. The word "last" has undergone the process of reduplication. In Malay, the various word classes can be reduplicated for various reasons. For example, reduplication of nouns signals plurality (i.e., meja-meja/table-table - tables). In the sentence at hand, the word "last-last" has not only taken on the morphological rule of Bahasa Melayu, but it has also undergone a class-changing process—from adjective to adverb. The meaning conveyed by this reduplication is "intensity" (Asmah, 1975). It means that after waiting for quite some time, the "pak-cik" (uncle) finally went away.

3) Meaning maintained and specific

- a) Jom, kita join dia orang.
*Let us "join" them. **
- b) Aku respect betul budak itu.
*I really "respect" that boy. **

As evident in the above sentences, the words used in this category maintained their meaning as in standard usage even when translated. The words “join” and “respect” have only one specific meaning when used in spoken Malay (i.e., when two or more people come together and are united and when one has a good opinion of someone, respectively). The words in this category do not imply any other meaning when used in spoken Malay.

Table 3
Words With Their Specific Meanings

Meaning Changed	Meaning Changed In Some Situations	Meaning Maintained and Specific
best / <i>good</i> (not the superlative meaning)	real / <i>good, excellent</i>	mood / <i>state one is in</i>
hot / <i>angry</i>	boring / <i>causing negative feelings of anger and frustration</i>	jogging / <i>a form of exercise</i>
act or action / <i>snob, arrogant</i>		tension / <i>mental strain</i>
boss / <i>term used to address someone you want to please</i> (usually not your superior)	last or last-last / <i>finally</i>	sure / <i>certain</i>
	condemn / <i>criticize</i>	join / <i>unite with</i>
tackle / <i>get someone's attention</i>	relax / <i>take it easy</i>	free / <i>given without charge</i>
	relax-relax / <i>do not hurry</i>	

Table 3 continued . . .

Meaning Changed	Meaning Changed In Some Situations	Meaning Maintained and Specific
<p>round or round-round / <i>go for a walk or a drive</i></p> <p>sound / <i>warning</i></p> <p>glamour / <i>looking pretty and usually wearing nice clothes too</i></p> <p>blow / <i>extremely angry</i></p> <p>terror / <i>good, fantastic</i></p>	<p>gang / <i>friend, member of the same group</i></p>	<p>challenge / <i>invite someone to fight or compete with oneself</i></p> <p>balance / <i>equal</i></p> <p>smart / <i>neatly dressed, fashionable</i></p> <p>style / <i>design</i></p> <p>cancel / <i>annul</i></p> <p>loaded / <i>having a lot of money</i></p> <p>furst or frustrated / <i>being in a situation that makes one angry or upset</i></p> <p>season or seasoned / <i>matured</i></p>

Conclusion

I have tried to show the different categories of meaning to which these borrowed words belong. Further to this are cases

where students are writing in English and using the borrowed English words with the attached Malay meanings. What is interesting here is that it looks like the borrowing process has come full circle. It started as an English word, was then borrowed into Malay, and lastly was used again in English but with Malay meanings attached. Thus, it is possible sometimes to get sentences like:

The teacher was “blow” at the students.

(meaning that the teacher was angry with the students)

or

He always “condemn” my work.

(meaning that he is always criticizing my work)

Lastly, the 34 words presented in this paper may look like a small number but they are enough to highlight the semantic shift that they have gone through. There are a lot of other words that would fit into any of the three categories mentioned earlier. Borrowing is done by people of all ages. It is not limited to adolescents as was the scope of this study. Perhaps a logical extension to this study would be the research of borrowing by adults and/or children.

Notes

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* — literal translation used

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Appendix A

Biodata Pemaklum (*Respondent's Biodata*)

Jantina (*Sex*):

Bangsa (*Race*):

Umur (*Age*):

Jika anda pernah mendengar atau menggunakan perkataan-perkataan berikut di dalam pertuturan anda, sila berikan contoh ayat dan konteks penggunaannya. (*If you have heard or used the following words in your conversation, please supply a sample sentence and its context*).

Contoh (*Example*): member

Dia tu member aku! (bercakap dengan rakan sebaya)
He/She is my "member"! (talking with friends)

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|------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|
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| 4. hot | 13. last | 22. relax-relax | 31. terror |
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| 8. tackle | 17. round | 26. gang | 35. brother |
| 9. tension | 18. round-round | 27. loaded | 36. member |
| | | | 37. over |