

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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)

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<sup>1</sup> 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
<b>Cebu Pacific airline crash</b>	1 min 5 sec	1 min 12 sec	2 min 19 sec
<b>US – Iraqi relations &amp; UN weapons inspection</b>	2 min 20 sec	4 min 22 sec	3 min 16 sec
<b>Sports</b>	7 min	2 min 47 sec	1 min 36 sec
<b>Weather</b>	(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

### English and Malay News in Singapore

To what extent are the patterns found in Singapore's Malay news influenced by Singapore's English news? Baker (1992) has noted that frequent translation can affect the structure of the language and recent work on transfer suggests that transfer of discourse level features are more likely to persist than are surface level syntactic features (Gass & Selinker 1983). With this in mind, a comparison was done of the Malay and English news broadcasts in Singapore on 4 February 1998. Topics covered and time devoted to each are listed here first:

#### Singapore Malay news 4 February 98

- Prime Minister Goh back from Indonesian visit (1 min 43 sec)
- Regional exchange rates (54 sec)
- Economic crisis in Indonesia (45 sec)
- Who will be Indonesia's next VP? (35 sec)
- South Korea's financial crisis (54 sec)
- Clinton's balanced budget (45 sec)
- Textbooks to be selected from commercial companies (1 min 26 sec)
- Delegates from Crescent Girls' School to attend model UN meeting in Russia (53 sec)
- ASEAN nations to adopt common system for registration of new drugs (48 sec)
- Dealing with the aging population (50 sec)
- Heroin found – crackdown on drugs (59 sec)
- Local traffic accidents (1 min 3 sec)
- Events sponsored by Mendaki (37 sec)
- Stocks to be sold by Second Chance Enterprise (1 min 55 sec)
- Crisis in Iraq (1 min 21 sec)
- Sri Lanka's independence celebrations, riots and Prince Charles' visit (37 sec)
- Chinese defense minister and Japanese counterpart meet (50 sec)
- Cable accident in Italy – Clinton apologizes (57 sec)
- Cebu Pacific air crash – all presumed dead (44 sec)
- Hong Kong fire (27 sec)
- Texas woman receives death penalty (1 min 15 sec)
- Sports (26 sec)
- Stocks & exchange rate (1 min 14 sec)
- Weather (42 sec)

#### Singapore English news 4 February 98

- Textbooks to be published by commercial companies (1 min 22 sec)
- Local traffic accidents (1 min 27 sec)
- District court sentences 16 year olds who clashed in rival gangs (43 sec)
- Crackdown on drugs (42 sec)
- ASEAN health officials agree on common system for drug registration (1 min 26 sec)

- President Goh back from Indonesian trip (1 min 42 sec)
- Who will be Indonesia's next VP? (44 sec)
- South Korea's financial crisis (1 min 6 sec)
- Clinton's balanced budget (1 min 19 sec)
- Local traffic (less than 1 min)
- Chinese defense minister and Japanese counterpart meet (33 sec)
- Gulf crisis (1 min 32 sec)
- Sri Lanka's Independence celebration, riots and Prince Charles' visit (54 sec)
- Cable accident in Italy (57 sec)
- Cebu Pacific air crash (about 1 min)
- Local housing agents ask home owners to chip in to cover cost of advertising (1 min 40 sec)
- Crescent Girls' School delegation to model UN in Russia (1 min 16 sec)
- Sports (2 min 23 sec)
- Weather (1 min 19 sec)
- Stocks and exchange rates (36 sec)
- Repeat headlines (16 sec)

If we compare the time devoted to similar topics in the Malay and English news broadcasts in Singapore, we find that there is not a great deal of difference, as seen in the following chart:

(Topic)	Malay	English
Textbooks	1 min 26 sec	1 min 22 sec
Traffic accidents	1 min 3 sec	1 min 27 sec
Crackdown on drugs	59 sec	42 sec
Drug registration procedure for ASEAN	48 sec	1 min 26 sec
PM Goh back from Indonesia	1 min 43 sec	1 min 42 sec
Next VP in Indonesia	35 sec	44 sec
South Korea	54 sec	1 min 6 sec
Clinton's balanced budget	45 sec	1 min 19 sec
Chinese defense minister meets Japanese counterpart	50 sec	33 sec
Gulf crisis	1 min 21 sec	1 min 32 sec
Sri Lanka's Independence celebrations	37 sec	54 sec
Cable accident in Italy	57 sec	57 sec
Cebu Pacific air crash	44 sec	About 1 min
Crescent Girls' School model UN delegation to Russia	53 sec	1 min 16 sec

**Comparison of Order of Ideas**

Although the topics covered and the amount of time devoted to each in the English and Malay broadcasts in Singapore are quite similar, as seen above, they are not necessarily presented in the same order. A comparison of transcribed texts for parts of two news items, the decision of the Singapore Ministry of Education to commercialize textbook publication and the cable car tragedy in the Italian mountain resort, shows that the sequencing of ideas within the discourse is also rather different for the two languages. Samples of these transcribed texts are given here, the Malay one being translated (more or less literally) into English:

(1) Commercialization of Textbook Publication (English)

The Ministry of Education has announced a move to commercialise textbook publication. It wants the private sector to design and produce textbooks for all exam subjects so that schools will have a wide range of teaching materials to choose from.

(2) Commercialization of Textbook Publication (Malay, translated)

Schools will soon have a wider range of choices of teaching materials if the Ministry's plans for privatizing the publication of textbooks succeeds. The Ministry wants the private sector to publish textbooks for all examinable subjects.

(3) Cable car tragedy (English)

Now the tragedy in an Italian mountain resort: a US warplane clipped the overhead wires of a cablecar, killing twenty people. President Clinton has expressed deep regret over the mishap.

(4) Cable car tragedy (Malay, translated)

President Clinton apologized for the tragedy of an American military plane which ran into the cables of an Italian cable car while on a low level training mission.

In both of these stories (as well as in others that occurred in both the Malay and English news) most of the same information occurred in both stories but not necessarily in the same order. If film clips were shown, the same film clips were used in both languages. However, if those filmed spoke, the speakers were heard in the English version but in the Malay version the reporter simply continued to talk about the story (and did not translate what the speaker in the film clip said).

Conclusions concerning English influence on Malay news stories in Singapore are that the influence on the language is minimal. Writers of the Malay news stories select some of the same news items and use any film clips prepared for or acquired by the English program but they reorder items, delete some, add their own and reorder points within a story.

### Indonesian news broadcasts – Dunia Dalam Berita – 11 July 1998

Here I will list the topics covered and the amount of time devoted to each. This data cannot, of course, be compared directly with that from the other countries as the recording was made at a different time. However, some generalizations about the general structure of the program can be made. The items and time devoted to them were as follows:

- Golkar convention (3 – 5 min)
- World Bank loan to South Korea (1 min 30 sec)
- US loan to the Philippines (1 min 25 sec)
- Asian economic crisis – World Bank urges developed countries to help those most in need (1 min 20 sec)
- ITB is looking in to the development of cooking oil, margarine and possibly even motor fuel from a new vegetable source (45 sec)
- Elections in Japan (25 sec)
- Delegation to Iraq (45 sec)
- A new zoo is being built where animals including domesticated cattle can roam freely (55 sec)
- Sports (World Cup) (5 min)
- Weather (1 min)

### Main observations on Indonesian broadcast

The Indonesian news broadcasts differs from those of the other countries investigated in that the total length of the program is only about 20 (rather than 30) minutes. In terms of the organization of ideas, the Indonesian program was more like Singapore than like Malaysia and Brunei in that ‘top stories’ could be either local or international.

### Indonesian and Malay Internet News Stories – a comparison of the use of active vs. passive verb forms

One important feature of Indonesian texts is the frequent use of passive verb forms. (See Poedjosoedarmo 1986 for an explanation of why this pattern is so common.) If Malaysian Malay, partially under the influence of English and/or Chinese, uses passives less frequently than Indonesian does, this difference in discourse strategy might be one factor in occasional communication breakdown between speakers of the two varieties.

In the present study, two news items were reported in both *Kompas* (Indonesian) and *Berita Harian* (Malaysian) on the 5 and 7 July. These items were Croatia winning in soccer (World Cup) over Germany and President Habibie asking Indonesians to fast on Mondays and Thursdays in order to save rice. For the first of these stories, the Malaysia item was a translation from Reuters while the Indonesian one was the story of an Indonesian reporter who had been present during the game. The statistics are as follows:

*Kompas*:

17 active transitive verbs

9 passive verbs



*Berita Harian*

31 active transitive verbs

5 passive verbs

These figures may suggest that English is indeed influencing verb form choices in Malaysian journalistic writing more than it is in Indonesian. However, in the second news story, where no translation from English was involved in either country, the figures were as follows:

*Kompas:*

9 active transitive verbs

4 passive verb

*Berita Harian:*

18 active transitive verbs

7 passive verb

Though the Malaysian article was longer, the proportions of active to passive verb forms in the two articles was similar. The conclusion then is that the disproportionate number of active forms in the Malaysian soccer story is probably due to the fact that it was a direct translation. In stories composed by local reporters there seems not to be much difference between the two varieties in this respect. The major linguistic difference between news stories from the two countries does, in fact, appear to be lexical. This then is probably the source of problems in cross-national comprehension of formal texts.

**Overall Conclusions**

The structure of news broadcasts, a borrowed genre, seems to have been adapted similarly in all the Malay-speaking countries. The influence of English in either live news broadcasts or news stories found on the internet is only apparent where direct translation has taken place. No obvious or consistent structural differences were found in comparing news articles from Indonesia and Malaysia, suggesting that reported difficulties in comprehension are probably due to lexical differences between the two varieties.

Language variation occurs where change has taken place and change may be motivated by either external influence or by an imbalance in internal features. In the case of the structure of Malay news broadcasts, English is the obvious external influence, in fact, the source of the genre. However, regional influences can also be a factor in change resulting in variation. An earlier study of pronunciation features in TV news conducted in Brunei (Poedjosoedarmo 1996), found that while Bruneian newscasters were attempting (not with total success) to follow the pronunciation conventions they had observed on Malaysian TV (such as using schwa for a final spelt a), Malaysian newscasters at the same time, influenced by the internal decision to follow 'bahasa baku' (standard language) 'rules', attempted (also not with total success) to pronounce final a as /a/.

According to accommodation theory (Trudgill 1986), individuals tend to modify speech features to be like those they feel positively towards and different from those they feel negatively towards. In the same way, a particular style, a particular genre in a given location may either verge towards or away from a similar style and genre in a neighbouring

location, depending on the current cultural and political climate. Bruneians look to Malaysia in matters of language but to Singapore in matters of economic management. Relations between Singapore and Malaysia during the current year have been tense and yet many Singaporean Malays feel their closest affinity to be with Malaysia. Indonesia is culturally and politically very different from the other Malay-speaking countries and very diverse internally. All of these factors no doubt contribute to tendencies to be like or different from neighbouring countries in terms of language use patterns. A more detailed exploration of the relationship between these features and variation in the structure of discourse, however, will have to await further study.

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