

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

Kok Seong Teo
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

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).

Malays' reliance upon indirectness is also consistent with their attitude toward verbal conflict. In Malay society, a conversation is seen more as a way of creating and reinforcing emotional ties that bind members together, with the aim of social harmony. Overt expression of conflicting opinions is usually avoided. It is agreement⁸ that is seen to bring people closer together in Malay culture.

Individuals in Malay society may hold their own views but, in the interests of group harmony, they do not express their views if they conflict with the opinions of others, especially elders. There is profound respect for wisdom and experience in Malay society. As these qualities are always associated with age (or generation), respect for elders is deeply ingrained.

Since they are reluctant to disagree with another's opinion or refuse a request, Malays often feel pressured in giving their consent, even when they actually disagree or are unable or unwilling to comply. Saying "no"⁹ often takes the following forms: silence, ambiguity, regret, doubt, and even lying and equivocation, to name but a few.

(c) Lying

In fact, lying¹⁰ is the most frequent means of declining requests in Malay society. Malay ways of speaking discourage sincerity and spontaneity, preferring courtesy and consideration of others. The reasons underlying the avoidance of "no" include empathy with the interlocutor, whose feelings would be hurt, and concern about the potential negative results. In Malay tradition, in interpreting the response to a question or request, therefore, one must be ready to guess what the speaker probably means to convey even in spite of what may actually be uttered. It is essentially one's knowledge of Malay culture that enables him/her to "guess" the message conveyed.

(d) Chronemics

Malay culture emphasizes time as an important element in their interaction. As Muslims, Malays present themselves as strictly abiding by the rule of praying five times a day. Therefore, one should have high regard for these times of prayer. For example, one has to show great sensitivity by not visiting his/her Malay friends before or during the times of prayer. Knowing when to visit and/or leave or when to stop a conversation is a time consideration. Often, if one decides to stay during a time for prayer, one has to urge his/her Malay friends to perform his/her prayers while s/he waits (cf., Teo 1993: 334–35).

In a similar fashion, one has to be careful not to offend his/her Malay friend/interlocutor by gossiping or discussing taboo topics (e.g., sex), especially during daylight hours of the Muslim holy-fasting month of Ramadan. It is one's cultural knowledge that enables him/her to "behave" appropriately at such times.

(e) Compliments/Praises

Compliment/praise behavior requires cultural competence. The compliment behavior of Malay society requires the knowledge of a special sociogrammar. In Malay culture, by the act of speaking in the context of complimenting/praising, one offers solidarity to the interlocutor, and s/he accepts such an offer by acknowledging the compliment in such a manner as to avoid or negate self-praise. In Malay society, a normal reaction to a compliment/praise is embarrassment, disagreement in a verbal form or downgrading of the compliment. It is Malay sociocultural convention to avoid self-praise. Self-praise is viewed negatively in Malay culture.

Cultural competence to Malay compliment behavior consists of avoiding embarrassment to the interlocutor by means of indirectness. Therefore, it is not customary in Malay society for guests to praise their hostess for the delicious meal served. The acceptable gesture here is to quietly tell the hostess that it must

have been a difficult meal to prepare, and also taken up a lot of her time, and that the ingredients were certainly special, and so forth. The hostess gets the message that her cooking is delicious which she negates by offering to share the recipe (Omar 1992: 178).

(f) Requests

Aspects of requests in Malay also show indirectness. A normal request¹¹ even a fairly urgent one, usually occurs in stages. The ethnography of request in Malay tradition is as follows: one approaches a Malay and engages him/her in a conversation, often a lengthy one. Then s/he brings up the topic concerning his/her request but does not overtly make the request. The Malay is then free to ignore the topic and move to something else if s/he would prefer not to entertain the request. S/he never has to confront the person who makes the request with a denial: s/he need not recognize the speech act as a request at all. Of course, the person making the request may persist and continually reintroduce a topic which concerns his/her needs, but if s/he is repeatedly ignored, s/he can still leave without feeling rejected or shamed openly (cf., Teo 1993: 357–62).

Requests in Malay society are indirect in at least two ways: (i) they are not made explicitly, and (ii) they are often made by a third party on behalf of someone.

In the case of a request made by a third party on someone's behalf, usually three parties are involved in the communication: (i) the originator of the request, (ii) the transmitter of the request, and (iii) the receiver of the request (cf., Omar 1992: 185).

The originator of the request does not participate actively in the speech event (or, if s/he does, s/he speaks very little, and not about the request) as s/he has already communicated his/her request to the transmitter before the speech event actually occurs. Hence, verbalization comes only from the transmitter and the receiver of the request. However, the originator is present all the

time, nodding his/her head to affirm certain portions of the communication and speaking only when spoken to.

Usually, this type of speech event arises when there is a gap (in the form of status or camaraderie) between the originator of the request and its receiver. This type of request made by a third party reflects a relationship in which the originator of the request holds the receiver in reverence or in awe, such that a face-to-face communication between the two would embarrass the originator of the request. Instead, s/he chooses to speak “sideways” through a substitute (cf., Omar 1992: 185).

(g) Respectful Style

To speak respectfully in Malay is to avoid “tones”¹² and rapid speech that characterize ordinary conversation: e.g., one speaks to elders, religious and “respectful” figures in a deliberately subdued tone of voice with drawing out “respectful” words. Utterances in respectful Malay are soft, slow and restrained, contrasting sharply with ordinary speech.

At the same time, it is impolite in Malay culture to attempt physical proximity with elders, religious and “respectful” figures. When speaking to these “respectful” people, eye contact should be avoided. Eyes should be downcast or one should look slightly sidewise or obliquely.¹³ One’s verbalization should not have any indication of directness.

In Malay speech, physical and spatial avoidance have an exact linguistic parallel. Indirectness in speech corresponds to avoiding eye contact and sitting sideways when talking to “respectful” people.

Silence is noticeable in situations where Malays are concerned with showing respect. In traditional Malay life, children are taught to speak to elders only when spoken to. Silence on the part of children expresses their respect for elders. People of low

status are also to speak to people of higher status only when spoken to.

Sociolinguistically, there are two social levels of speech in Malay: “bahasa (Melayu) orang kebanyakan” (‘commoners’ Malay’) and “bahasa (Melayu) diraja” (‘royal Malay’).¹⁴ “Bahasa (Melayu) diraja” is used by royalties, especially reigning ones,¹⁵ when addressing the public or when commoners communicate with them. It is required by Malay politeness convention, Malay “budi bahasa” (‘code of courtesy’), and Malay “adat” (‘Malay customary laws’) to use “bahasa (Melayu) diraja” when interacting with royalties.

In royal-commoner interaction, some royalties may choose to use lexical items from “bahasa (Melayu) orang kebanyakan” (‘commoners’ Malay’) to convey their message, while responses from commoners have to be lexical items and expressions/phraseologies from “bahasa (Melayu) diraja” (‘royal Malay’). For example, to express gratitude, royalties say “terima kasih” (‘thank you’) while commoners say “junjung kasih” (‘thank you’).

(h) Pronouns and Pronominals

In Malay, pronouns are a problem: not in the comprehension of forms, but in the selection of the right one for the right context.

The Malay pronoun system is as follows:

<u>Type</u>	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
First Person	saya (‘I’)	kami (‘we’)(exclusive)
	*aku (‘I’)	kita (‘we’)(inclusive)

<u>Type</u>	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
Second Person	*awak ('you')	*awak semua (‘you all’)
	*engkau ('you')	*engkau semua (‘you all’)
	*kamu ('you')	*kamu semua (‘you all’)
Third Person	dia/ia ('s/he')	mereka (‘they’)

The asterisked forms have been described as generally impolite by Malays. As can be seen, the second person pronouns are all in the impolite category. As for the first person pronouns, they are of the polite and impolite types. The rest are of the polite type.

The pronouns for “you” in Malay are to be used with discrimination. To use any of the three forms of “you”, one has to take into consideration the age or generation, social status, and social distance of the interlocutor(s). These forms, i.e., “awak”, “engkau” and “kamu” (all meaning ‘you’), as well as other impolite forms, can only be used when the speakers are intimate with the interlocutor(s).¹⁶

The Malay address system is a complicated one comprising pronouns, kinterms, titles and personal names. As substitutions for “you” when the interlocutors are not intimate, Malays usually make use of fictive kinterms or titles which may or may not be followed by names, depending on their age, generation and/or status. When addressing an interlocutor of one’s own age or generation, the term “saudara” (literally ‘relative’ but in this case ‘male friend/buddy’) or “saudari” (‘female friend/buddy’) is usually used (cf., Teo 1992: 26–30, Teo 1993: 369–77).

In Malay, it is more respectful to designate the person spoken to by his/her name, title or other descriptions than by the use of second person pronouns.¹⁷ Often, no second person pronoun or address term is used at all.¹⁸ Actually, the dropping of the second person pronoun, with no substitution of any kinterm or title, is often compensated for by a facial gesture or by a slight forward movement of the head (toward the interlocutor) when addressing him or her.¹⁹ Sometimes, a polite hand or pointing gesture is used as a compensation for the deletion of a pronoun or address term. In other words, the pronoun or address term is never totally lost.

The facial and/or hand gestures, also known as kinesic pronominal markers (cf., Poyatos 1983: 105), however subtle, are practically always present as part of the verbal-paralinguistic-kinesic structure of Malay interaction.

When the interlocutor is of the age or generation of one's parents, either "pak" ('father') or "mak" ('mother') is used, often accompanied by his or her name. This rule applies to the usage of other kinterms when the interlocutor is of the age or generation of one's elder sibling or one's grandparent or great-grandparent (Omar 1987: 48).

The observance of this sociolinguistic norm of the Malay address system reflects that one has "budi bahasa" ('code of courtesy'), a good knowledge of "adat" ('Malay customary laws'), and awareness as well as understanding of one's own recognized position in society or in a particular social situation, i.e., "tahu diri."

Since acknowledgment and maintenance of one's self relative to the position of others (i.e., "tahu diri" governs all social interactions in the society), this sociocultural knowledge is deemed appropriate by Malay politeness conventions.

Malays consider it polite to use personal names, especially the abbreviated form, usually the last syllable, in place of pronouns, especially when interacting with familiar older interlocutors (cf.,

Karim 1981: 105). The practice of using one's name in place of pronouns, personal or possessive, is considered a good Malay virtue.

For the older speaker, s/he will add an appropriate kinterm before his/her personal name. This polite feature is easily noticeable among Malays of both sexes and all ages, irrespective of whether they are familiar or unfamiliar with the interlocutor, in both formal as well as informal situations. This virtue is linked with humility, which is as important a Malay cultural theme as indirectness.

In Malay, "saya" ('I') is also used as a backchannel signal, i.e., the response of the participant in conversation who is being spoken to or addressed. It is considered impolite to respond with inarticulate vocalizations such as "mm", "hm", and the like. The word "ya" ('yes') in Malay is also considered not as polite as "saya" ('I'). To respond to someone calling one's name, it is also polite to say "saya" ('I') instead of saying "ya" ('yes').

Head nods and/or postural shifts, to convey the hearer's passive acknowledgment of the speaker's opinions, suggestions, or propositions, or to actively encourage the speaker to continue talking, or approve of his or her change of topic are all considered not as polite as "saya" ('I'). Malays also use "saya" ('I') to fill gaps in conversations. In this context, "saya" ('I') can be viewed as functioning as fillers which may mean "Saya faham apa yang dikatakan itu" ('I understand what has just been said') or "Saya bersetuju dengan pendapat itu" ('I agree with the opinion expressed'). Using "saya" as fillers is considered a good habit in Malay, and is equated with having etiquette.

(i) Self-Restraint²⁰

Self-restraint is another Malay cultural value and is manifested in the concept of "sabar" ('restraint' or 'reserve'). One way of expressing "sabar" ('restraint' or 'reserve') is to restrain oneself from expressing disagreement with whatever appears to be

the opinion of the majority. The moral excellence or virtue of “sabar” (‘restraint’ or ‘reserve’) is also to avoid displeasure for others besides conforming to group pressure (for the harmony of the group).

The Malay culture can be seen as a culture bent on preventing displeasure, i.e., being considerate. It can be noted in the speech of Malays that they frequently need to refer to “buat susah-susah”, “menggangu”, and “mengacau” (all meaning ‘to trouble’), to another person, when not wanting to be in his or her way, or hurt his or her feelings. In actual behavior, too, Malays tend to be circumspect and reserved, so as not to offend other people.

In Malay tradition one is expected to be circumspect in expressing one’s thoughts, wants, and feelings. It is not only a question of when to express them, but whether one should express them at all. Much of the definition of a “budi bahasa” person (‘well-bred’ person) involves restraint in the expression of personal desires and opinions.

The Malay culture places a taboo on direct expression of one’s desires. It is also culturally inappropriate to ask other people directly what they desire, prefer, wish, think, and the like.

It is also a traditional cultural constraint that Malays are discouraged from clearly stating their preferences, even when in response to direct questions. For example, Malays, when asked about their time of convenience, will decline to state it. Instead they may say one of the following:

“ikut” or “ikutlah”	meaning ‘anytime will do’
“saya semuanya boleh”	meaning ‘anytime will be all right for me’
“pandai-pandai saudara”	meaning ‘it’s up to your discretion’

(j) Lexical Choices/Word Meanings

Lexical choices are important in executing polite speech. For instance, Malays are careful not to use the word “jahat” (‘mischievous’) when making remarks about, say, the behavior of their neighbors’ children. The word “jahat” (‘mischievous’) has the connotation that parents are partly to blame for their children’s misconduct. Instead, the word “nakal” (‘mischievous’), which does not carry the same connotation, is used. The word “nakal” (‘mischievous’) is linked more with the semantics of the innocent mischief of children as part of the process of growing up. Thus an expression of “anak saudara jahat” (‘your child is mischievous {+ parental negligence}’) vs. “anak saudara nakal” (‘your child is mischievous {- parental negligence}’) is taken as impolite vs. polite.

Word meanings are interrelated with cultural knowledge which is an integral part of language. An understanding of Malay cultural models is undeniably an important component to understanding Malay lexical semantics. Meanings of Malay words do not exist in a vacuum any more than Malays themselves do!

3.1.1 Concluding Remarks

The ethnography of speaking as displayed in the daily life of Malays is encoded in various sayings, among them:

- “terlajak perahu boleh diundur, terlajak kata buruk padahnya” (‘it is possible to back up a boat if it has passed its destination, but it is impossible to retract one’s words once uttered’)
- “kerana pulut santan binasa, kerana mulut badan binasa” (‘because of the glutinous rice, the coconut milk is consumed, because of one’s [bad] mouth, one suffers’)

- “hidup di dunia biar beradat, bahasa tidak berjual beli” (‘to live on this earth, one has to be polite, “bahasa” [in the sense of ‘politeness’] is priceless’)

The sayings show the relationship between language use and Malay systems of knowledge and social conduct.

3.2 NONVERBAL

Any discussion of Malay interaction is inadequate without touching on the nonverbal aspects of Malay communication. Since interaction is a social behavior (i.e., since interaction is socially motivated), it is only reasonable to say that one, especially a second language learner/speaker of Malay, must know Malay sociocultural systems well enough to successfully and/or appropriately produce “accepted” Malay behavior.

Discourse strategies cannot be adequately constructed from linguistic considerations alone; nonlinguistic factors are equally, if not more, important than their linguistic counterparts.

In Malay, conversations are not based so much upon lexical choices and syntactic structures that one must decide upon. The main emphasis in appropriate language use in Malay is the way in which the words and phrases are spoken—accompanied by facial gestures, by movements of the hand and body, and by various postures of the speaker.

(a) Use of Right Hand

A Malay is taught to always use his/her right hand for touching food, and for giving and receiving things. The use of the left hand should be avoided if only one hand is needed. It is bad manners to pass to or accept from someone with the left hand. This behavior is also in accordance with Islamic teachings. Incidentally, most Asian cultures stress the habit of using the right hand. The use of the right hand with the left hand holding the right wrist when accepting things, especially gifts, is considered more

polite than just using the right hand alone. If one's right hand is soiled, it is polite to inform others that one will be using his/her left hand.

(b) Limb Discipline

Limb discipline (cf., Goffman 1963: 27), which is essentially the proper placing of limbs during interaction, is crucial in Malay culture. Malay children, especially girls, are taught from an early age to see that their legs are not exposed too much and that they do not spread them apart when sitting. Exposure of the legs is not only linked with a lack of self-control and rudeness but, more importantly, with low breeding. Any female who sits with her legs stretched out is not only perceived as "gatal" (literally 'itchy', figuratively 'wanting attention from the opposite sex') but also as "melanggar adat" ('not in accordance with Malay customary laws').

(c) Postures

It has been a rural Malay tradition to conduct interaction at home on the veranda by having all parties seated on the floor. Malay men are required to "bersile" (to sit in a cross-legged or Buddha-position; cf., Provencher 1971: 165). On the other hand, Malay womenfolk are required to "bertimpuh" (to sit with their legs neatly folded on the left or right against their bodies). It is considered more polite if their feet can be tucked under the hem of their dresses.

With modernization, most rural Malay homes have furniture in the living room, but the practice of sitting on the floor is widespread, especially when entertaining guests. When sitting on chairs, especially in the presence of someone of higher status (in terms of age, generation, occupation, and the like), one should never cross his/her legs. Crossing legs while seated in the presence of "superiors", "respectful" people, and elders is considered rude.

The polite way for a man to sit in such a situation is to place both feet on the floor and to hold elbows and arms close to the body. For a woman, a slightly raised knee is expected, even more so if she is wearing pants. This act of modesty to conceal the physical signs of her sexuality is most important. Such modest behavior is a sign of Malay femininity.

(d) Pointing

If pointing has to be done at all during interaction, especially with an elder or “respectful” person, to indicate direction or to refer to a person, the forefinger is not to be used. It is more polite to point with the right thumb over the fist. In Malay culture, pointing with the forefinger is perceived as domineering on the part of the speaker. Pointing by protruding the lower lip in the direction of the object to be designated in the presence of an elder is also considered impolite.

(e) Walking Past

When walking past or passing through elders, “superiors”, and “respectful” people, it is considered polite to ask for their permission by saying “*minta lalu*” or “*tumpang lalu*” (‘May I walk/go past you?’) while doing the act of passing. Since it is expected of them to say “yes”, one should not wait for their reply. The act of seeking permission can be replaced by the nonverbal act of slightly bowing the head, hunching over²¹, and keeping the right arm and hand down as one passes. The simultaneous using of the expression “*minta lalu*” or “*tumpang lalu*” (‘May I walk/go past you?’) with the body movement when passing through is taken as a very polite act on the part of the speaker (cf., Teo 1993: 384–87).

To walk or pass behind someone’s back without informing him/her, especially when s/he is an older person, is considered impolite in Malay culture. The act of informing or seeking permission takes the form of a formulaic expression: “*minta lalu*

di belakang” or “tumpang lalu di belakang” (‘May I walk/go past your back?’).

Standing with one’s back faced or turned to an elder or person of higher status is definitely disrespectful in Malay culture. As a politeness strategy, if one has to walk/go past an elder, or a “superior” or a “respectful” person, one has to “walk backward” until one reaches a point where one’s back would be out of sight of the elder, “superior” or “respectful” person.

(f) Head

The head is considered the most “respected” part of the body by Malays. Touching another person’s head gratuitously²² is taboo in Malay society. If one has to gesticulate near the head of a Malay, or when one has to hand an object over to another and the Malay’s head is close to either the object or the act of handling, a formulaic speech act in the form “atas kepala” (‘over the head’) has to be uttered in advance.

Thus, for the purpose of being respectful, special care should be observed when gesticulating near the head of a Malay.

3.2.1 Concluding Remarks

Knowledge as well as adoption of Malay culture-specific gestures undoubtedly contribute tremendously to one’s integrative orientation of learning/speaking Malay. The choice of a right gesture certainly plays an important role in coding the social values of Malay society/culture during interaction in Malay with Malays.

4. CONCLUSION

It has not been the intention of this paper to promote Malay culture or Malay cultural chauvinism.²³ This paper intends to address the broader issue of the place/role of culture in second language acquisition/learning. The place/role of culture in second

language learning is far more sophisticated and is both deeper and broader in scope than that addressed in this paper. It includes, among other items, theories of language acquisition in the cognitive domain, the selection of salient cultural practices to be included in the teaching and learning of the second language, and second language learning contexts: learning with the culture of the second language or learning within one's own native culture.

A good understanding of cultural values that underlie the language behavior and the cultural significance of each speech act in the language concerned is crucial in understanding the thought/thought patterns expressed in the language. In other words, these thoughts/thought patterns can only be recognized when the language is learned together with the culture.²⁴

Assuming the language together with the culture, second language learners/speakers will be competent in both what the language says, as well as what it means. Language meaning is obscured without some recognition of cultural values. The cultural significance of some explanations and directions cannot be properly grasped²⁵ if second language learners are unaware of certain cultural values. This happens when one understands all the words but is incapable of comprehending all of their connotations.

As Malay is both "speech" and "etiquette", of which the latter is more important, it is a realistic option to also acquire/learn Malay culture in acquiring/learning Malay as a second language. The subtleties of Malay in its cultural domain outweigh the sophisticated linguistic use or subtleties in its linguistic domain. Acquiring/learning Malay as a second language with an instrumental orientation is some kind of "sociological aestheticism", (cf., Geertz 1973), i.e., to learn/speak Malay without the context of Malay culture.

Notes

¹There are two orientations toward language learning: integrative and instrumental. An integrative orientation involves the intention of becoming part of the target society/culture besides being able to speak the language, thus leading to the functional understanding of both the language and culture. An instrumental orientation involves the intention of learning a language to serve a purpose, such as getting a job, with no wish to mix socially or integratively with the speakers of the language, and aims exclusively for the functional understanding of the language.

²It refers to the complex relationship of members in society rather than the art and science of directing and administrating states and other political units.

³It is a metathesis version of “erti” meaning ‘understand’.

⁴A linguistic-grammar is a description/theory specifying the manner in which sentences of a language are constructed.

⁵“Bahasa Melayu pasar” is part of the verbal repertoire of all Malaysians, including Malays. For more information of bahasa Melayu pasar” as a major communicative code in Malaysia, see Collins (1987).

⁶These contexts are arrived at by frameworks worked out on the basis of empirical evidence.

⁷By “directness” or “indirectness” is meant the degree to which the speaker’s illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution.

⁸Unlike in Jewish culture, it is disagreement or argument which is a valued form of sociability, and is seen as something that brings people closer together (cf., Wierzbicka 1991: 69).

⁹“No” is employed in a direct way more at home, but very rarely in public.

¹⁰It occurs when the speaker consciously knows that the statement(s) that s/he is making is/are false. However, there is no intention of deceiving the interlocutor by making such statements. Lying is more complex than the above definition indicates. For a comprehensive definition of “lie”, see Sweetser (1987).

¹¹Directness of a request will vary with the magnitude of the request and the social relations that exist between the person making the request and the person to whom the request is directed.

¹²Malays are generally soft-spoken. A voice quality of high pitch is perceived as being too loud, which implies inappropriateness.

¹³This has also been observed by Omar (1992: 175).

¹⁴The two varieties share between them a major portion of common core lexical and grammatical inventories. “Bahasa (Melayu) diraja” is different from “bahasa (Melayu) orang kebanyakan” in the domain of personal pronouns, sets of enclosed lexical items as well as affixes and phraseologies (cf., Omar 1982: 104 - 110, Omar 1985, Omar 1987: 83 - 86).

¹⁵It is not uncommon for reigning royalties to use “bahasa (Melayu) orang kebanyakan” when interacting formally with commoners.

¹⁶However, the abbreviated forms of “engkau” (‘you’), “kamu” (‘you’), and “aku” (‘I’), which are “kau”, “mu”, and “ku” respectively, are polite forms. They are normally used to avoid egotism in polite Malay speech.

¹⁷Marsden (1812: 48) observes this behavior too.

¹⁸Winstedt (1957: 26) also observes this behavior by reporting that “Malays shun the use of personal pronouns. If the context and circumstances admit no doubt, they omit the pronouns altogether.”

¹⁹This nonverbal behavior is also observed by Collins (1982: 672).

²⁰By “self-restraint” (the opposite of “self-assertion”), is meant not expecting one to say clearly and unequivocally what one wants, prefers, thinks, wishes, and the like.

²¹Elaborate postures of submission and/or respect in Malay culture involve lowering of the body.

²²Of course, the contexts/relations of touching the head are important. A functional or professional touch by a barber or doctor is not interpreted as disrespectful. The relationship between the parties involved is another important factor in interpreting touch.

²³This paper has no such ethnocentric overtones. It merely suggests that what a second language learner/speaker should accomplish is an adequate knowledge of the culture - not only to understand behavior in that culture, but more importantly, to produce appropriate speech acts as well as “accepted” behavior when speaking the language, especially when interacting with its native speakers. It does not suggest that the learners be part of the society/culture.

²⁴Cultural models, i.e., cultural knowledge underlying linguistic systems are not extensively studied. This cultural view of language studies is important for cultural knowledge plays an enormous role in human understanding and thought which are embedded in language.

²⁵The level of one's functional understanding of the culture plays an important role here. Cases of running up against subtle dimensions of the language and culture are not uncommon among even "competent" second language learners/speakers.

References

- Ali, Abdullah. 1985. *Malaysian protocol and correct forms of address*. Singapore: Times Books International.
- Collins, James T. 1982. *Kata sapa dan kata alih: Analisis rakaman*. Dewan Bahasa 26.8: 665–99.
- . 1987. Malaysian and bazaar Malay: Polarity, continuity and communication. In *National language and communication in multilingual societies*, ed. by Asmah Haji Omar, 151–74. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1983. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Behavior in public places: Notes on the social organization of gatherings*. London: Free Press.
- Karim, Nik Safiah. 1981. *Beberapa persoalan sosiolinguistik bahasa Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Marsden, William. 1812. *A grammar of the Malayan language with an introduction and praxis*. London: Cox and Baylis.
- Omar, Asmah Haji. 1982. *Language and society in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

- . 1985. *Bahasa Melayu diraja*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- . 1987. *Malay in its sociocultural context*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- . 1992. *The linguistic scenery in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Poyatos, Fernando. 1983. *New perspectives in nonverbal communication: Studies in cultural anthropology, social psychology, linguistics, literature and semiotics*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Provencher, Ronald. 1971. *Two Malay worlds: Interaction in urban and rural settings*. Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California.
- Simin, Azhar M. 1988. *Discourse-syntax of “yang” in Malay (bahasa Malaysia)*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Sweetser, Eve. 1987. The definition of lie: An examination of the folk models underlying a semantic prototype. In *Cultural models in language and thought*, ed. Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn, 43–66. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Teo, Kok Seong. 1992. The sociolinguistics of politeness: A Malay account. Unpublished Special Field Examination - Ph.D. program, Department of Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley.
- . 1993. A sociolinguistic description of the Peranakan Chinese of Kelantan, Malaysia. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

Wierzbicka, Anna. 1991. *Cross-cultural pragmatics: The semantics of human interaction*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Winstedt, Richard O. 1957. *Colloquial Malay: A grammar with conversations*. London: Oxford Clarendon Press.