



STANDARDIZATION OR UNIFORMITY: IN PURSUIT OF A GUIDE FOR SPOKEN SINGAPORE MALAY

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Abstract

The standardization of spoken Malay has been mentioned in the corpus planning of Malay Language since 1956. The main issue surrounding the spoken form has always been the determining of the standard spoken form or *sebutan baku*. Before 1956, the Johor-Riau spoken variation was regarded as the standard based on the fact that the Johor-Riau area was the centre of Malay language and development then. In 1956, the 3rd Malay Language & Literary Congress passed a resolution determining that the Johor-Riau spoken variation should cease to be regarded as the standard. More than 30 years passed before the Malaysian government formally announced their shift from regarding the Johor-Riau spoken variation as a standard replacing it with *sebutan baku*, and to be used by educators and the mass media. In 1993, Singapore's Ministry of Education launched its standard spoken Malay Language program of *Program Sebutan Baku Bahasa Melayu* which is based on the Malaysian model. In the year 2000, the Malaysian government retracted its support for *sebutan baku* and returned to using the Johor-Riau spoken variation. In spite of this development, Singapore still maintains its support for *sebutan baku* till today.

This paper will track the historical development of Malay Language corpus planning with emphasis on the spoken variation in Malaysia and impacting on Singapore. This paper will also suggest some steps that can be considered by the Singapore authorities in this respect taking into account 21st century skills in the ever changing educational landscape.

Introduction

The issue of standard spoken variation in the context of Malay language planning in Singapore has been ongoing since 1956 when the 3rd Malay Language and Literary Congress deliberated and agreed to replace the Johor-Riau spoken variation with that of *sebutan baku* which emphasized on the standardization on the use of the /a/ sound. This change has until today resulted in two variations of the Malay spoken form, one referred to as the Johor-Riau spoken variation, which is spoken mostly in the Johor-Riau region, and the new standard which is referred to in this paper as *sebutan baku*.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part will outline the historical development of the Malay Language with emphasis on the corpus planning in terms of the spoken form. Secondly, the implementation of the *sebutan baku* in Singapore. Lastly, this paper will offer some recommendations in pursuit of a guide for spoken Singapore Malay.

1 Historical Development of Malay Language: Planning for a standard spoken form

The standardization of any language encompasses not only its spoken form, but also spelling and creation of new words. Historically, the standard form of the Malay Language is the Riau-Johor variety. According to Asraf (1984), this was due to the fact that the earlier Malay text originated from the region and it became the standard form. Among the text that originated from the Riau-Johor region was the *Sejarah Melayu* or Malay Annals which originated from Johor and was written by Tun Seri Lanang. The sentence pattern in the widely read text was subsequently adopted as the standard variety. Even the standard spoken Malay was the Riau-Johor variety as all the development of the Malay Language then originated from the region.

But, in 1956, when the Third Malay language and Literary Congress passed a resolution for the change in the standard variety, the landscape changed overnight. In the spirit of standardizing the spoken variety with a system of one letter one sound, the Riau-Johor spoken variety will cease to be the standard. The new standard will be based on phonemic sound and not phonetic sign. Nevertheless, not much was done in ensuring that the resolution was adhered to. The Riau-Johor spoken variety still maintained its „status“ as the standard variety as that was how it was taught in schools.

Sebutan baku was fully implemented in Malaysia in 1988. Ismail Dahaman (1992:17) insisted that through *sebutan baku* language competence and the system and internal structure of the Malay language will be stabilized. This was reiterated in his outline of the objective for standardizing spoken Malay;

1. Produce a standard spoken variation in Malay language that can be used in a formal situation.
2. Enhance standard Malay language competence among all users.
3. Ensure the stability of the system and internal structure of the Malay language, so that the spoken system is stabilized and standardized in line with the stabilization and standardization of the grammar, lexical and terminology, as well as the spelling system

2 Implementation of Sebutan Baku in Singapore

The word “*baku*” is a Javanese word meaning true and correct. *Sebutan Baku* or standard spoken Malay was introduced in Singapore in 1993 by the Ministry of Education to be used in the teaching and learning of the Malay Language progressively beginning with the primary schools and followed by the secondary schools and junior colleges/centralised institutes.

The Malay Language Council of Singapore (MBMS) indicated categorically that the Standard Malay Language or *Bahasa Melayu Baku* as a matter of the policy of the Singapore government is to be used within the domain of;

1. formal teaching and learning at educational institutions by education officers, lecturers, teachers and students,
 2. public speeches in the form of lectures, debates, forum and announcements,
 3. official communication and discussions in the public sector, e.g. official meetings, interviews and speeches during official function, and
 4. broadcasting of programmes through electronic media (radio, television and film), by the news reader, presenter and analyst.
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According to the MBMS, the standard spoken Malay language has to be based on spelling, i.e. pronunciation based on character symbol and number of syllable, and its function in the sentence. Emphasis should be placed on the below mentioned characteristics;

1. Pronunciation of letters: should be based on the sound of the Malay language,
2. Pronunciation of words: should be based on the spelling and word form,
3. Intonation: based on type and sentence form in the Malay language.

In Singapore, the New Spelling System or *Sistem Ejaan Baharu* which was approved by Indonesia and Malaysia was implemented in the teaching and learning of Malay in 1979. After its successful implementation, the Ministry of Education Singapore (MOE), in a Malay language teaching seminar in 1985, mooted the idea of introducing a “speak as you spell” (*sebutan berdasarkan ejaan*) basic reading programme for primary schools. A year after that, the MBMS discussed a paper written by Suratman Markasan entitled „*Perlunya Singapura Melaksanakan Sebutan Baku*” (Should Singapore Implement the *Sebutan Baku*). After a few more dialogue sessions with Malay/Muslim organizations, the MBMS recommended the use of *sebutan baku* in the teaching and learning of Malay language to the MOE. In Jun 1990, MOE approved MBMS’s recommendation paper and later in August that year, the Cabinet of Singapore agreed in principle to the recommendation. Based on the recommendation received by MOE in 1990, the reasons stated for the implementation of *sebutan baku* was as follows:

- a) *Sebutan baku* does not change the spelling of a word. Therefore, its implementation does not create problems to the writing system.
 - b) As every single vowel or consonant are related to a specific sound, this system enhances uniformity between the letter and its sound. This uniformity aids in pronunciation and reading.
 - c) As an effort in uniformity, this system should be implemented as has already been done in other member countries of Mabbim.
 - d) The implementation of the *sebutan baku* system is an effort by Singapore to follow in the development of Malay language in the region.
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The Ministry of Education, Singapore, in implementing the policy of standard Malay language or *Bahasa Melayu Baku*, launched the Standard Spoken Malay Program in 1993. The rationale behind the program is as follows:

1. As a continuation of the policy in using the standard form of Malay language in terms of spelling, terminologies, grammar and vocabulary;
2. To help students learn the Malay language especially in the context of spelling and reading. The close correlation between writing and speaking that is produced is hoped will assist in the learning process;
3. As an effort in keeping up with the progress of Malay language in the region.

The Standard Spoken Malay Program was introduced in the primary school level in 1993 and in secondary schools, junior colleges and centralised institutes the following year. It became fully functional at all levels of schools in Singapore from 1998 onwards. In aiding its implementation, the MOE formed a working committee to administer and discuss issues pertaining to *sebutan baku*. This committee effectively became the implementer, arbiter and expert when it comes to issues relating to implementation in schools such as being a resource for teachers and playing an advisory role for its successful implementation. To prepare the teachers, MOE organized seminars on *sebutan baku* inviting experts from the region notably Nik Safiah Karim from Malaysia and Harimurti Kridalaksana from Indonesia. Workshops were also conducted by MOE personnel for teachers and new textbooks based on the new Malay Language syllabus with the added emphasis on *sebutan baku* was rolled out as well. Instructional materials in the form of audio-CDs, educational TV programmes, and E-Videos were produced and made available for teachers' usage. The implementation at school level was further aided by support from the MBMS, the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, the Malay Teachers' Association and cultural groups within the community. The media too played their part by using *sebutan baku* in their programmes, especially news and those targeting children.

There has been little academic research analyzing the effectiveness of *sebutan baku* in Singapore.

Kasmadi (1993: 153), a Specialist Inspector tasked to oversee its implementation, reported that the program was implemented quite successfully. According to Kasmadi, students in the lower primary level (Primary 1-3) were better able to adapt to the new spoken standard, compared to the upper primary level (Primary 4-6). This may have occurred due to the fact that the upper primary students had been exposed to the Riau-Johor variation at the lower primary level and needed more time

to get used to the new standard variation.

Paitoon (1996) were the first to present an academic perspective in terms of the use of *sebutan baku* and how it has impacted the teaching and learning. Although his working paper was more based on his observation rather than clinical research, Paitoon observed that the form of *sebutan baku* inherent in usage was not that of the standard form as required by the MOE. What he observed as a “*bakuantara*” variation where the standardization is geared towards the graphem /a/ in the final syllable only.

Ali (2002) did a clinical research on the *sebutan baku* used by newscasters in Singapore. Similar to Paitoon’s observations, he found that the spoken form is still influenced by the Johor-Riau variation although effort in using *sebutan baku* was obvious enough. Nevertheless, this could be an interim period in the users getting used to the new spoken standard.

Pairah (2007) ran a survey on 300 students and 76 teachers from various secondary schools to ascertain their *sebutan baku* standard and their feelings and thoughts on using it. Among the findings were that a higher percentage of younger teachers do not use *sebutan baku* while teaching and most of the students who fail to use it do so because they are more comfortable with the Johor-Riau variation. Nevertheless, a high percentage of students and teachers were of the view that *sebutan baku* aids in their teaching and learning of the Malay Language.

Besides these, there have been no other studies on the use of *sebutan baku* in Singapore. Although there have been some discussion on it in the media especially from the Editor of Berita Harian clamouring for a return to the Johor-Riau variation as *sebutan baku* is only used in the classroom and media but not in Singaporeans’ daily life. His views has received some support from a section of the community who felt that the Johor-Riau variation is already “*baku*” and is a part of the Singaporean Malay identity.

3 Recommendations in pursuit of a guide for spoken Singapore Malay

In pursuit of a guide for spoken Singapore Malay, certain considerations should be taken into account.

Firstly, is the parity theory where based on the All-Party Report Of 1956, equal treatment is to be given to all the MTLs and English. This equality is also mentioned in the constitution where the Malay Language is the National Language and one of the Official Languages, and no one should be stopped from using their own language, and that the Malay Language is in the Roman Script. This understanding is imperative as the Chinese Language is learnt based on the spoken form (Putonghua) and the written script (Hanyu Pinyin), whereas for the Tamil Language it is the Standard Spoken Tamil (spoken) and Literary Tamil (written). The same applies for the English Language too where standard spoken variation is that of Queens’ English and not Singlish (a local variety).

Secondly, the teaching of Mother Tongue Languages as a Cultural Ballast. This has always been the stand taken by the state that MTL is to act as a „cultural ballast“ to the ever widening use of the English Language. According to Lee Kuan Yew,

“One abiding reason why we have to persist in bilingualism is that English will not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. To have no emotionally acceptable language as our mother tongue is to be emotionally crippled.” (Speak Mandarin Campaign: 1984)

If this is so, then the Johor-Riau variation is the culture of the Malays in Singapore. The *sebutan baku* variation is alien to the Singapore Malays and to a certain extent uproots the culture of these people. The emphasis has turned to form rather than function. What is lost is the spontaneity in the use of the language.

Lastly, is the issue of rationalization. The rationale given for the use of *sebutan baku* are as follows:

- Continued effort in the standardization process of the Malay Language.
- Enhance teaching and learning of the Malay Language. Easier to teach reading using the syllable method.
- As a form of regional unity.

These rationales were repeated again in 2004 by the Chairman of MBMS in response to a parliamentary query. Thus, the rationale has not changed since implementation even though educational landscape has.

With reference to the first rationale, this continued effort should have a clear goal. Cooper (1989), outlined three categories in corpus planning i.e., graphization, standardization and modernization. He indicated that modernization of a language in terms of corpus planning occurs when it is used as an “appropriate medium of communication for modern topics and forms of discourse” (Cooper, 1989: 149). In the case of Singapore, this change in standard spoken form does not relate to new usage. Therefore, in terms of Cooper’s categorization, he has added a fourth, i.e. renovation – an effort to change an already developed code, whether in the name of efficiency, aesthetics, or national or political ideology. According to Cooper,

“Replacement or reform of an existing writing system is not graphization but regraphization. Purification of an already standard language is not standardization but restandardization.” (Cooper, 1989: 154)

Thus, based on Cooper’s statement above, Singapore’s standardization of the spoken form is not modernization but renovation. It is not standardization, but

restandardization. Not for the language's sake but for national or political ideology.

There has also been no clinical research done indicating that rationale number two is valid. Although Pairah (2007) indicated in her study that the students and teachers felt that *sebutan baku* aided in the teaching and learning of the language, she highlighted that it is more useful for non-Malay speakers rather than Malay language speakers. Nevertheless, the Malay language in Singapore is learnt more as "cultural ballast" and less of a communicative language. Therefore, the question that arises is whether *sebutan baku* aids in this aspect of the language learning.

With reference to the third rationale, Asmah (2004) has indicated that in reality the spoken form in Malaysia and Indonesia has diverged and not converged. There is this growing identity difference between *Bahasa Malaysia* and *Bahasa Indonesia*. This is obvious enough when we read the Malay language newspapers of both countries or tune in to their respective news programme on TV1 for Malaysia and TVRI for Indonesia.

Conclusion

Thus we have seen that in pursuit of a guide for spoken Singapore Malay, there need to be a relook not just at the policy level, but at the rationale in the choice of variation. This relook will have to take into account the philosophy behind Mother Tongue Language education and policies connected to language acquisition in Singapore and the language landscape and its use within the community.

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