Malaysian English: What Makes It So?

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Abstract

Since the 1980s, research and discussion on the existence of a Malaysian variety of English has been recorded. The idea that a Malaysian variety of English now exists is increasingly being accepted by all concerned with the issue of language and linguistics, especially in South-east Asia. It was with the aim of understanding this phenomenon better that the Malaysian Corpus of Learner English (MACLE) project was launched at the University of Malaya. To data, about 800,000 words have been accumulated on the data-base, comprising essays of more than 500 words written by undergraduates from several faculties at the University. In this paper, I analyse a selection of this corpus to discover the extent to which the language used by the learners is different from Standard English in terms of structure and meaning. The selection comprises about 50,000 words written by undergraduates reading for law at the University of Malaya. A discourse analysis approach is used to analyze the texts, and variables such as ethnicity and gender are taken into consideration. We attempt to discover if there are any patterns of use that identify features of Malaysian English.

Keywords

Malaysian English; Varieties of English

Introduction

The scene with regard to the English language in Malaysia is one that is highly ambiguous and vacillating, a situation that proves to be extremely challenging for anyone attempting to describe its position or identify its form and function.

Nonetheless, it is advisable to pause at times to view the issue of whether the language as it is used in this country now can be hailed as a Malaysian variety (I do not think we can claim that it is 'standard English'!); we should at least stop to take stock of the language as it used here in terms of seeing whether there are any identifiable patterns of use that are distinctly Malaysian. This is not merely for purposes of nomenclature, but because of the need to establish whether there is sufficient 'permanence' or 'homogeneity' (Ferguson, 1971: 30) in the language / dialect / variety in order to permit its being accepted with no inhibitions by the teaching and academic community in the country (these being the unofficial gatekeepers of whether the code used by a person is recommended or at least permissible!). It is thus the aim of this study to investigate the use of English in this country to see if there are patterns of use that can be identified, and if there exists enough support to declare that there is a Malaysian variety of English.

The paper is divided into the following sections: a discussion of the concept of variety, and the existing notions on there being a variety of Malaysian English; the research methodology (including the corpus) employed in this study; and a description and analysis of the use of English.

1   Varieties of English

There have been numerous definitions of varieties: Ferguson (1971:30) in Wardough (1992:23) defines variety as 'any body of *human speech patterns* which is *sufficiently homogeneous* to be analysed by available techniques of synchronic description and which has *a sufficiently large repertory of elements* and *their arrangements or processes* with *broad enough semantic scope* to function in *all formal contexts of communication*' (italics mine). In this context, 'human speech patterns' can comprise phonetic, phonological, grammatical, syntactic and semantic features.

Hymes (1974:123) adds to this definition by bringing to attention that language boundaries between communities are based on much more than linguistic elements: attitudes and social relationships also have a strong bearing on these (boundaries).

…Any enduring social relationship or group may come to define itself by selection and/or creation of linguistic features, and a difference of accent may be as important at one boundary as a difference of grammar at another. Part of the creativity of users of a language lies in the freedom to determine what and how much linguistic difference matters…

In summary, and simply, when a code of communication exhibits sufficient homogeneity in its patterns of use and is socially accepted in formal contexts of communication, it can be classified as a language variety.

2 Malaysian Variety of English

According to The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Languages & Literature (2004:61), English in Malaysia has been categorized into three levels: the acrolect, mesolect and basilect. The acrolect is near-native, and not many Malaysians fall into this category - only those educated in core English-speaking countries from early schooling up to university may be found to speak the acrolect variety, so only tiny percentage of Malaysians are proficient in it. As with other similar situations, a continuum exists between these three varieties and speakers may code-switch between them depending on context. Most academicians, professionals and other English-educated Malaysians, speak mesolect English. Malaysian English belongs to mesolect, and it is Malaysian English that is used in daily interaction.

Malaysian English should not be confused with Malaysian Colloquial English which is famously known as Manglish or Street English, a portmanteau of the word Malay and English although mostly spoken by the non-Malays.

As has been stated earlier in the definition, there are linguistic features that are peculiar to Malaysian English in terms of spelling, vocabulary, phonology and syntax, some of which have been identified in related research. Basically, some of the features of Mlaysian English that have been identified are:

- It has components of American English, Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other languages: vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.
- The /t/ phoneme in words like butter is usually not flapped (as in most forms of American English) or realised as a glottal stop (as in some other forms of British English, including Cockney).

Malaysian English has also created its own vocabulary just like any other former British colonies such as Australia and New Zealand and these words come from a variety of influences. Typically, for words or phrases that are based on other English words, the Malaysian English speaker may be unaware that the word or phrase is not present in British or American English.

Most Malaysians are adept at switching from Manglish and Malaysian English, but are sometimes unclear as to the differences between Malaysian English and SABE (Standard American-British English).

As can be seen, most of the work has been done in the area of pronunciation, spelling and vocabulary, there is a paucity of work done in the area of syntax and analysis at the level of discourse. This is one of the shortcomings that the present study hopes to alleviate.

3 Research Method

This study examines a corpus of about 50,000 words that form part of a larger corpus on learner English in Malaysia. The words have been produced by undergraduates at the Faculty of Law, and comprise about 100 essays of more than 500 words each written on ten topics (see Appendix A).

N-Vivo software will be used to code and analyse the data according to the linguistic features that appear in these essays. Language errors will not be taken into consideration: these are considered to be irrelevant to the patterns of use that are exhibited.

The data will be categorised according to the type of linguistic features. A Malaysian variety will be determined by whether or not a particular instance of language use conforms to the 'standard'. The 'standard' in this case will be the language (English) as found in the major current dictionaries and language teaching materials produced by established international publishers.

4 Data Analysis

Some examples of Malaysian English:

- In my opinion, I think...
- Let us think together
- Most university degrees are theoretical...
- Whether you agree or not with the issue above...
- There are further explanations about it...
- Study skills are the most important things when you are n the learning process...
- In the courses they take...

These will eventually be categorised according to the aspect of language they fall into.

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