RESEARCH ARTICLE

ENGLISH, CLASS, AND GENDER IN MALAYSIA: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the usage of Malaysian English from a sociolinguistic or variationist perspective. More precisely, it investigates how social class, gender and style correlate with English use in Malaysia. The data consists of three phonetic variables: (r) and (th) in Malaysian English and (r) in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. The speech data comprises taped 10-15-minute conversations and reading passages, which were later split up into a number of styles (ways of speaking). The population sample includes 69 speakers of both sexes, who were contacted by student fieldworkers during the academic years 1995-1996. The results indicate that the variables behave differently. While Malaysian English (r) was socially and stylistically insignificant, (th) was a real sociolinguistic marker, displaying social and stylistic stratification. Moreover, although four or five classes were distinguished, they were more clearly separated into two larger ones: the WC and MC. Stylistic differentiation was normal, with higher frequencies of the standard form as style formality increased. Women were found in general to favour the standard features more than men. Similarly, (r) in Bahasa Malaysia showed similar patterns to (th) above. Thus the results support the variationist theory on all counts. In summary, social and stylistic variation in Malaysian English is as real as it is in native English varieties, which shows that English is being indigenized in the country.

Keywords: Malaysian English, World Englishes, Bahasa Malaysia, sociolinguistic variation and change, class, gender, style

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Background

English has a relatively recent history in Malaysia, which is connected with the colonization of the country by Britain (see Jassem 1994a: 6-7; 1993a: ch.2). It has been used in this country for about 200 years although the actual number of its speakers may not have steadily increased over the years. The most

important thing is that English has had a continuous presence in Malaysia, which considerably increased in the first half of the 20th century. During the 1980's and 1990's, the status of English improved to such an extent that it even threatened the national language, as seen by some quarters (see Jassem 1994a: 162-170; Jassem 1995). The surge in importance of English is due to several factors, at the top of which stands the economic boom and the large international investments that came into the country. Education is another significant factor since Malaysia is trying very hard to be a prominent centre of education in South-East Asia. The country sees in education excellent opportunities for investment and, subsequently, development. Malaysia again cannot lead in this direction without the use of English as a means of instruction and interaction.

This means that English has a strong social base as well. It is used by different ethnic (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) groups and classes of people for different purposes (see Jassem 1994a: Ch.2; Jassem 2013). The mastery of English depends on how much a Malaysian is involved in social advancement and socio-economic mobility. This has resulted in the fact that there is a great deal of variation in the language, which is the intention of this study to investigate.

1.2 Variation in Language: Class, Gender and Style

Labov (1972) is the pioneering founder of the sociolinguistic theory of language variation and change (see Jassem 1993b; 1994b for an overview). His analysis centred on the examination of how the use of English in New York City and other American settings later on varied or differed according to one's social class, gender, age and style (Labov 1994, 2001, 2010). On the whole, the lower or working classes used the vernacular dialect more often than the middle and higher ones. Moreover, for each class, men favoured the vernacular more often than women. As to style, formality and informality were linked to the standard and vernacular respectively. More precisely, the more formal the style becomes, the more correctly a speaker speaks (see Labov 1972: 113; Jassem 1993b: 133).

Labov's work has been enthusiastically received by scholars all over the world (see Fasold 1984, 1990; Herk 2012). It has been applied to many languages, which no study can aspire to list (for an overview, see Jassem 1993b, 1994b, 1996a, 1996b). As to Bahasa Malaysia or Malaysian English, there were no sociolinguistic investigations of this type at the time. However, Jassem (1993a, 1994a) tried to offer a tentative such description of both languages, especially the role of gender. This present study extends the analysis to class and it will, therefore, fill a gap in this respect which, it is hoped, should stimulate future researchers to probe this very interesting area.

1.3 Social Class in Malaysia

The concept of social class is very problematic and controversial in both sociology and sociolinguistics, not only when applied to non-Western societies but also to Western ones themselves (see Jassem 1993b: 334-41, 1994b (vol.2): 56-68). So one can ask here: Are there social classes in Malaysia? And if so, how many?

I asked this question to all my sociolinguistics students from 1993 onwards. All seemed to agree in general that social class in Malaysia is an undeniably obvious reality. However, there are two types of social stratification in this society: one traditional and rural and one modern and urban. Traditional rural society splits into three groups in the main: the royalty, the nobility, and the commoners. The royalty includes the Sultans and their families; the nobility those people who are closely linked to this class, with whom they form the ruling class. To this one can add the elite such as wealthy businessmen, the ulama '(religious) scholars' and mashayekh 'religious elders or chiefs'. The commoners are the majority of the people such as farmers, fishermen and petty traders (cf. Jassem 1993b: 8-12)

Modern urban society still retains earlier structures but to a less noticeable extent. Education, industrial occupation and the spirit of entrepreneurship have led to the emergence of a new class in Malaysia that can be called the middle class, whose numbers are certainly increasing day by day. It is very hard to say how many classes there are in Malaysia at present. Researchers, however, can distinguish as many classes as their criteria permit them to. In general, one can safely say that there are three main social classes: working class, middle class and upper class. The size of these classes varies: The smallest is the upper class (between 5-

10% of the population), the middle class (between 20-40%) and the working class (50-60%). These classes are not unified and discrete wholes; rather they are aggregates which continue into and overlap with each other. So they can be further sub-divided into lower working class, middle working class, and upper working class, lower middle class, middle middle class, and upper middle class (cf. Trudgill 1974).

In the division and measurement of such classes, one can use certain objective criteria such as education, occupation and income (Labov 1972), occupation alone (Horvath 1985), or education and occupation (for a detailed survey, see Jassem 1987: Ch. 4; 1993b: 34-37). These criteria have been variably utilized in the measurement of social classes in this paper (see below).

2. The Phonetic Variables

A few variables in Malaysian English pronunciation were examined from the perspective of variation and change: namely, post-vocalic (r), (th), and (dh). The first occurs in words like *car* which can be pronounced with and without [r]; the second in *thing* which can be said as *thing* or *ting* in the main although other variants such as [s], [f], and $\varnothing$ are possible; and the third in *this* which can be pronounced as *this* or *dis*. Thus, each variable has two variants: one prestigious (standard and correct) and one non-prestigious (non-standard and incorrect). In this study, only (r) and (th) will be considered, though.

In addition, the phonetic variable (r) in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, was studied for comparative purposes. In final position as in *khabar* 'news', it has three pronunciations: [r], [gh] as in Parisian French [r], and [Ø].

3. Research Methodology

3.1 The Speech Data

The data had been collected and analyzed under my supervision and direction by many student fieldworkers (around 80), taking ENGL 3050 Sociolinguistics Course over two years from 1995 to 1996. It was initially meant to give them a hands-on experience into fieldwork sociolinguistic methodology and analysis. The students worked in groups mostly although some opted to do that separately. They obtained their speech data in the form of taped 10-15-minute conversations and reading materials from mostly hand-picked people.

These conversations were transcribed by the students themselves under my guidance and supervision as course tutor. They were later divided into five styles (ways of speaking): namely, casual style (e.g., between friends and relatives), careful style (e.g., between strangers), reading passage style, word list style, and minimal pairs style. Style classification followed standard Labovian techniques in the field (Labov 1972, 1994, 2001, 2010; Trudgill 1972; Jassem 1993, 1994b, 2013).

3.2 The Population Sample

The sample consisted of 69 speakers from all social classes and sexes of the society. More precisely, there were 8 (4M, 4F) speakers on (r) and 51 (28M, 23F) speakers on (th) in Malaysian English. As to Bahasa Malaysia, there were 10 (5M, 5F) speakers on (r). The ration of males and females was almost equal.

The speakers were divided into different socio-economic classes, employing different criteria in each variable, following in the footsteps of leaders in the field (Labov 1972, 2010; Trudgill 1974; Wolfram 1969). On (th), for example, the classification of 8 people was based one fathers' occupation (e.g., Trudgill 1974), according to which four classes were specified: namely, lower working, upper working, middle class, and upper class. In another project, the assignment of 25 International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) staff was made on the basis of occupation, education and income (e.g., Labov 1972, 2010), thereby distinguishing five classes: MMC (e.g., heads and deans), LMC (e.g., lecturers and assistant lecturers), UWC (e.g., senior officers, STAD, bursar), MWC (e.g., clerks, librarians), and LWC (security guards and canteen workers).

3.3 The Statistical Analysis

The percentage formula was used for calculating the ratio of standard forms or variants, which is obtained by dividing the number of standard forms over the total number of all (standard and non-standard)

forms multiplied by a 100. For example, suppose the total number of (th)-containing words is 100, of which 90 are standard. The percentage of standard forms is calculated thus: 90/100 = 9 X 100 = 90%. No significance tests were applied to the data in line with early standard practice in the field (for a survey, see Jassem 1987, 1993, 1994).

4. THE RESULTS

Different results were obtained for (r) and (th) in Malaysian English, which are given below.

4.1 The Variable Post-Vocalic (r)

Although many students worked on this variable separately and in group, the general conclusion was that post-vocalic (r) is not socially significant in Malaysian English, unlike New York City English and other English accents (Labov 1972, 2010; Trudgill 1974; Chambers et al 2008; Jassem 1993b: 143, 168). For example, in her examination of the variable in eight Malay speakers of four classes- UMC, LMC, UWC, and LWC- and four styles- WLS, RPS, formal speech, and casual speech, Aida Mokhtar (1996) reported no class, gender or style differences. Most educated Malaysian speakers pronounced this phoneme English-wise; i.e., with silent [r] as in Southern England speech.

4.2 The Variable (th)

This variable was examined by several groups of students, three of which will be reported here. In one project, Mohd Farid bin Mohd Arif and Redzuan bin Muhamad (1996) studied the speech of 16 (8M, 8F) Malay IIUM students, who were assigned their social status based on their fathers' occupation (cf. Trudgill (1974). Altogether four classes were specified: lower working, upper working, middle class, and upper class. Only word list style was used, which consisted of 27 words altogether. The linguistic context (i.e., position in the word) was included also. The results are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1 : % non-standard (th) by Class, Sex, and Context in WLS

Class	Sex	Linguistic Context			
		Initial	Intervocalic	Final	All
UC	M	O	22	22	15
	F	22	O	22	15
	All	11	11	22	15
MC	M	22	44	44	37
	F	44	44	44	44
	All	33	44	44	41
UWC	M	77	66	88	77
	F	88	77	100	88
	All	83	72	94	83
LWC	M	88	77	100	88
	F	100	88	100	96
	All	94	83	100	93

The table shows linguistic and social variation. For most speakers, the final position in which [th] occurs as in *bath* is more likely to be said with a non-standard variant. The four classes are clearly separated: the lower the class, the greater the use of the non-standard. Furthermore, there is a clearer division into two rather than four classes: UC-MC (range 15-41) versus UWC-LWC (range 77-93). The gender pattern is not consistent: UC and MC women and men are undifferentiated whereas UWC and LWC women use the non-standard form more than men.

In another project, Halina Yusoff, Nurhayati Yusup and Noor Azian bt. Fakurazi (1996) selected 25 (15M, 10F) individuals, all International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) staff. On the basis of occupation, education and income, they distinguished five classes: MMC, LMC, UWC, MWC, and LWC (see above). They

also obtained four styles which were formal style, casual style, reading passage style, and word list style. The speech data was recorded 'secretly with a tape-recorder in a saddlebag'. The following table shows the results.

Table 2: % non-standard (th) by class, sex and style in IIUM Staff

Class	Sex	Style			
		CS	FS	RPS	WLS
MMC	M (5)	28	3	0	0
	F (∅)	0	0	0	0
	All (5)	28	3	0	0
LMC	M (3)	22	10	5	0
	F (2)	18	6	3	0
	All (5)	20	8	4	0
UWC	M (2)	60	52	10	3
	F (3)	24	24	6	1
	All (5)	42	38	8	2
MWC	M (2)	55	53	33	18
	F (3)	37	35	11	6
	All (5)	46	44	22	12
LWC	M (3)	62	52	41	18
	F (2)	38	44	27	14
	All (5)	50	48	34	16

*Bracketed figures indicate number of speakers.

The data shows stylistic and social variation. The percentage of the non-standard feature [t] increases with speech informality and lower social status as well as male gender. Women use it fewer than men in every single case (with the exception of the MMC which lacks women). Moreover, the social status scale splits into two: the MC, on the one hand, and the WC, on the other hand.

A third project was conducted in December 1995 to March 1996 by five students, each one of whom dealt with a single class: namely, Nazlina Nordin (UMC), Lalynia Mustapha (MMC), Zurahani Abdel Rahim (LMC), Siti Hajar Abd. Kader (UWC) and Sheraz AbuSulayman and Mersada Camdzic (LWC). They investigated the speech of 10 (5M, 5F) people in five classes of two speakers in each class (1M, 1F). Furthermore, five styles were distinguished. The results are given below.

Table 3: % standard [th] by Class, Gender and Style

		CS	FS	RP	WL	MP
UMC	M	nd	nd	90	80	90
	F	nd	nd	100	100	100
	All	nd	nd	95	90	95
MMC	M	nd	nd	50	70	100
	F	nd	nd	100	100	100
	All	nd	nd	80	85	100
LMC	M	25	100	100	100	100
	F	00	00	00	00	00
	All	12.5	50	50	50	50
UWC	M	00	nd	00	46	00
	F	00	nd	00	40	00
	All	00	nd	00	43	00
LWC	M	00	nd	00	00	00
	F	00	00	00	00	00
	All	00	00	00	00	00

The table shows social and stylistic differences concerning the use of the standard form [th]. The social classes divide into two large ones: The middle class versus the working class. As to style, there is no data for many speakers in several styles. Stylistic differences are inconsistent. For WC speakers, the non-standard form is used throughout while for MC ones the opposite picture obtains. The sex pattern varies with class: the MC women favour the correct form more than men except for the LMC female who could have been mistakenly grouped here. WC men and women are equal.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although the above data and description is tentative in nature which must be taken as a rough guide to the sociolinguistic situation in Malaysia, it, nevertheless, shows interesting and revealing patterns as follows.

As to the variable /r/, it is sociolinguistically insignificant. In final position, Malaysians drop it, just like English-English speakers do. The reason for this is probably the influence of Bahasa Malaysia in which /r/ can be pronounced in a number of ways, one of which is deleted in final position. Thus the non-pronunciation of [r] by the lower classes especially does not mean that Malaysians target RP in this respect.

On the other hand, the variable (th) is socially significant, which varies by class, gender and style. That is, it is a sociolinguistic marker indeed (Labov 1972, 2010). The lower classes mispronounce it under the influence of Bahasa Malaysia which lacks this phoneme altogether. The inconsistent and contradictory results in students' reports are due to various factors, the most important ones of which might relate to sampling errors, time constraints, and team coordination drawbacks. When these constraints are eliminated, consistency will be obtained. To sum up, the overall picture for (th) is as follows:

a)   The gender pattern is interesting since it is in consonance with the English pattern reported for English accents in the US (Labov 1972, 2010; Wolfram 1969), Britain (Trudgill 1974), and elsewhere (see Jassem 1993b; 1994b for an overview). In general, 'educated' Malaysian women favour prestigious forms more than men.

b)   The class pattern is also revealing, which shows that Malaysian society is socially stratified where one can distinguish at least two larger classes: a WC and a MC. This roughly resembles Western societies in New York (Labov 1972), Norwich (1974), and so on. Until more rigorous studies have been conducted, no firm conclusions can be deduced, however.

c)   The style pattern is in harmony with what Labov (1972) described for (th) in New York City, a sociolinguistic marker indeed. But this sort of style analysis has been criticised by many linguists on many counts (for an overview, see Jassem (1993b: 46-52)). Therefore, an alternative stylistic analysis might yield better results.

d)   The linguistic context is also important in conditioning variation. Other factors than position may yield more interesting results, though.

How true are the above patterns of the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. They hold equally well, indeed. Preliminary research showed that the usage of Bahasa Malaysia varies according to linguistic, social and stylistic factors. A number of linguistic variables had been examined by my students, especially those of Semester II, 1996. One group of five students- Mazni Muslim (UC), Jay Syuhaida (UMC), Wan Faridatul (LMC), Roslina Kushairi (UWC) and Siti Nurul Qalbi (LWC)- studied the variable (r) in final position. It occurs in such words as *lahir* 'born', *mahir* 'skilled' in which /r/ can be pronounced [r], [gh] as in Parisian French, or $\varnothing$. These students defined five social classes, one each. Each class had two adult subjects: one male and one female. They also defined two styles: word list style and reading passage style. The results are shown in the following table.

Table 4: % Final /r/ by Class, Gender and Style in Bahasa Malaysia

Class	Sex	RPS			WLS		
		[r]	[gh]	∅	[r]	[gh]	∅
UC	M	69	23	8	70	17	13
	F	74	20	6	77	16	7
	All	71	21	7	73	17	10
UMC	M	69	20	11	67	23	10
	F	72	17	11	73	20	7
	All	70	19	11	70	21	9
LMC	M	54	26	20	43	30	27
	F	94	00	16	77	16	7
	All	74	13	13	60	23	17
UWC	M	38	29	32	26	47	27
	F	58	32	8	50	33	17
	All	49	31	20	38	40	22
LWC	M	26	46	28	23	40	37
	F	63	37	00	50	33	7
	All	45	41	14	36	42	22

N.B: Total no. of tokens = 35 in RPS; in WLS = 30

The table shows an interesting class and gender pattern which is similar to what has been described above. There are two classes: the middle class on the on hand (range 71-74%) , and the working class on the other (range 45- 49). The females use non-standard variants less often   than men. As to style differences, the two styles are about the same.

Other students' projects varied: some replicated the same findings; others gave a different picture. On the whole, these results corroborate Jassem (1994a) who stated that Malaysian women favour standard variants more than men. Why Malaysian females favour prestige and correct language has been discussed elsewhere (Jassem 1994a), to which the interested reader may refer.

Finally, future research can build upon and take the above picture further. In particular, research is needed into the following:

a)   The measurement of social class should be done more rigorously and in collaboration with sociologists.

b)   Stylistic analysis using the Labovian framework, would be ok but not the best choice for sure; students were not impressed with this framework either.

c)   Investigating syntactic and phonetic variables is needed such as consonant clusters, vowel phonemes like /O/ as in *road, moan*, and triphthongs as in *fire, tower, lower, player*.

d)   Employing social network analysis, whether at the level of peer groups or adults might throw up interesting results. It seems that students find this line of study *more* interesting than social class.

e)   Investigating language attitudes towards English in Malaysia is needed.

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