

Why Malay/Indonesian Undressed: Contact, Geography, and the Roll of the Dice

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In a series of publications, McWhorter (1998, 2000, 2001a,b) has argued that the grammars of creole languages are simpler than those of non-creole languages. In response, Gil (2001) claims that the grammar of at least one non-creole language, Riau Indonesian, is actually simpler than that of a typical creole language such as Saramaccan, and suggests that the correlation between creoles and simplicity should be weakened to a unidirectional implication: whereas all creole languages have simple grammars (as per McWhorter), the grammars of non-creole languages may range from simple to complex (pace McWhorter). Further cross-linguistic support for the above conclusion is provided in subsequent typological studies by Gil (2007), Parkvall (2008) and Nichols (to appear).

Addressing the particular case of Malay/Indonesian, McWhorter comes back with two related counterarguments. In earlier work, McWhorter (2001c, 2006) argues that Riau Indonesian, and by extension most other colloquial varieties of Malay/Indonesian, are actually creole languages. In subsequent work, McWhorter (2008) develops a more nuanced notion of Non-Hybridized Conventionalized Second Language (NCSL), arguing that such languages are generally simpler than their non-NCSL relatives by dint of their acquisition as second languages; along with other major world languages such as Hindi, Arabic, Swahili and English, he then argues that Malay — both colloquial and standard — is such an NCSL. Tying these two strands together, McWhorter (this conference) suggests that contemporary Malay/Indonesian is the product of "two stages of significant grammatical simplification" involving language contact and second-language acquisition, and that its observed simplicity is due in its entirety to such processes: nothing "just happens", languages do not "undress" spontaneously and without reason, and therefore historical explanations should not be couched in probabilistic terms invoking the "role of the dice".

This paper argues that McWhorter's diachronic story is part of the reason for why Malay/Indonesian is the way it is, perhaps even a large part — but not the whole story. The first part of this paper takes up McWhorter's earlier claim that colloquial varieties of Malay/Indonesian are simple because they are creoles. While some may indeed be, see for example Tadmor (2007) for Jakarta Indonesian, others, in particular those spoken in historically ethnic-Malay regions of Sumatra, such as Riau Indonesian, provide not a shred of external evidence supporting a creole or creole-like history. However, if Riau Indonesian remains "suspect" as a contact variety or regional lingua franca, one may instead examine other "classical" Malayic varieties, associated with specific ethnicities and regions, and therefore more likely to be considered straightforward descendants of an ancestral proto-Malayic. Accordingly, we present a contrastive analysis of Riau Indonesian and two such classical varieties: Siak Malay, a dialect of Malay spoken in rural areas of Riau province, and Minangkabau, the Malayic language spoken by the eponymous ethnic group in the province of West Sumatra. The contrastive analysis examines a range of features, including phonological inventories, morphological structures, the grammatical voice system, and associational semantics, as defined in Gil (2007). The results of the contrastive analysis show that in toto, Riau Indonesian, Siak Malay and Minangkabau are of roughly similar levels of overall complexity. Thus, even if, contrary to fact,

Riau Indonesian were a creole, Siak Malay and Minangkabau would suffice to make the point that non-creole languages can be as simple as any creole.

The second part of this paper addresses McWhorter's later claim that Malay/Indonesian is simple because it is an NCSL. In a detailed table examining 9 grammatical features in Malay and 12 other "Indonesian-type" but non-NCSL Austronesian languages, McWhorter shows that Malay is simpler than all of the other languages, and argues that this is due to its nature as an NCSL. However, closer inspection of McWhorter's own table casts doubt on this story. Other than Malay, the two simplest languages in the table are Minangkabau and Iban. But these are *exactly* the other two Malayic languages in the table: the remaining 10 languages, including Sundanese, Nias, *Tukang Besi* and others, are all non-Malayic, and are all more complex than their Malayic counterparts. What this means is that most of the simplification that characterized the development from an ancestral Western-Malayo-Polynesian language all the way to contemporary Malay must have taken place prior to the diversification of Malay, Minangkabau and Iban, that is to say prior to proto-Malayic. Now although we do not have an agreed-upon date for proto-Malayic, it may be safely assumed that it was not spoken later than the middle of the first millennium AD, which was when Malay first arose as a major language of trade and empire, and as a contact language with a substantial population of second-language speakers. Thus, while its nature as an NCSL can account for the simplification of Malay with respect to proto-Malayic, it cannot explain the even more substantial prior simplification of proto-Malayic with relationship to an ancestral Western-Malayo-Polynesian language.

McWhorter is clearly right that language contact and second-language acquisition give rise to the kinds of simplification evident in creoles and NCSLs. However, the arguments put forward in this paper suggest that these are not the only reasons Malay/Indonesian undressed. Although one can talk meaningfully of the overall degree of complexity of a grammar, grammatical complexity is not a single holistic property, but, rather, a property of individual components of the grammar, each of which has its own story to tell. For example, Malay/Indonesian is simpler than most languages with respect to, among others, inflectional morphology, syntactic category inventory and associational semantics. However, examination of Malay/Indonesian in geographical context reveals that each of these three properties constitutes a distinct Sprachbund relating Malay/Indonesian to a different subset of its neighbors. Consider Thai, Tagalog and Mentawai. Although each of these three languages is of considerably greater overall complexity than Malay/Indonesian, Thai resembles Malay/Indonesian in the absence of inflectional morphology, Tagalog shares with Malay/Indonesian the under-differentiation of syntactic categories, while Mentawai looks like Malay/Indonesian with regard to its simple associational semantics. Thus, each of these three features reflects a distinct diachronic story of language contact (or inheritance) involving Malay/Indonesian and different subsets of its neighbors. What's exceptional about Malay/Indonesian is that it just happens to lie at the confluence of the above (and other) diachronic processes and thus in the intersection of their associated Sprachbunds. Taking grammar to be a set of autonomous components, each of which may vary in complexity independently of the others, than it is indeed most appropriately viewed as a matter of chance, a roll of the dice, before a language shows up which, for all kinds of diverse and unrelated reasons, turns out to be simple with respect to most or all of these components. And Malay/Indonesian happens to be that language.

Invoking chance does not mean sacrificing a deterministic view of language change; it is merely an acknowledgement that, as things stand now, and as they are likely to stand for the foreseeable future, we are nowhere near being able to account for all the gory details of why Malay/Indonesian became the way it is. Of course, simplification due to language contact and second-language acquisition is part of the story; but there's lots more that must have happened that we don't yet and may never know.

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