

Basic and Derivative Varieties of Malay/Indonesian

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Colloquial dialects of Malay and Indonesian are still widely looked down on as broken and corrupt language varieties. Underlying the use of epithets such as "broken" and "corrupt" are two distinct presuppositions, the first *judgmental*, holding that such language varieties are bad, the second *ontological*, maintaining that colloquial language varieties are derived from a more basic form of the language, generally taken to be one of the standard varieties of Malay/Indonesian.

Contemporary descriptive linguistics is founded on the premise that all language varieties are of equal value; it rejects the application of judgmental attitudes to particular language varieties. Nevertheless, such attitudes linger on amongst many scholars of Malay/Indonesian, even those who would claim to reject them; such attitudes are often intertwined with the ontological presupposition that colloquial varieties of Malay/Indonesian are derived from the corresponding standard varieties. In particular, they continue to underlie, albeit sometimes covertly and even unwittingly, the widespread practice of describing colloquial dialects of Malay/Indonesian from the vantage point of the standard varieties.

For example, when talking about the colloquial variety of Jakarta Indonesian, many linguists characterize the verbal suffix *-in* as combining the functions of the two standard Indonesian suffixes *-i* and *-kan*, or assert that a verbal voice prefix can be "omitted", in contrast to the standard language where it is obligatory. This perspective is perhaps most clearly evident in the works of Jim Sneddon, who, following on his definitive grammar of standard Indonesian, produced a companion description of Jakarta Indonesian, in which he takes standard Indonesian as a point of reference, and describes Jakarta Indonesian systematically in terms of the ways in which it differs from the standard language.

This paper argues against the presupposition that colloquial varieties of Malay/Indonesian are derived from the standard varieties. Instead, this paper suggests that the tables should be turned, and that it is the standard varieties of Malay and Indonesian that are derivative of their more basic colloquial counterparts. Five arguments are provided in support of this claim:

(1) *Acquisition*

Colloquial Malay/Indonesian is acquired naturally as a native language by pre-school-age children; standard Malay/Indonesian is acquired at a later age, largely though formal schooling.

(2) *Distribution*

Colloquial Malay/Indonesian is spoken by many millions of people with little or no knowledge of standard Malay/Indonesian; standard Malay/Indonesian is spoken by few if any people with no knowledge of colloquial Malay/Indonesian.

(3) *Ubiquity*

Colloquial Malay/Indonesian is used in a wide range of everyday contexts; standard Malay/Indonesian is used much less frequently and in a much more restricted range of contexts.

- (4) *Diachrony*
Colloquial Malay/Indonesian came first; standard Malay/Indonesian was derived from colloquial varieties by subsequent processes of language engineering, many involving the transition from oral to written media.
- (5) *Areal typicality*
Colloquial Malay/Indonesian exhibits typical grammatical features of a Southeast Asian language; standard Malay/Indonesian exhibits more grammatical features that are atypical of the region, and instead characteristic of western languages that influenced the process of standardization, such as Arabic, Dutch and English.

The above five arguments show that it is the colloquial varieties of Malay and Indonesian that are ontologically basic and the standard varieties that are derivative thereof. In this respect, then, standard Malay and Indonesian resemble other specialized language registers such as ludlings, youth jargons like *bahasa gaul*, and the stylized language of poetic forms such as *pantun*, all of which are of a clearly derivative nature. This in turn suggests that it is the standard languages that should be described in terms of how they deviate from their colloquial counterparts, not the other way around. Describing Jakarta Indonesian in terms of how it differs from Standard Indonesian is rather like trying to write a grammar of English by beginning with Pig Latin and then undoing its special ludling rules.

While the focus of this paper is on the Malay/Indonesian of Southeast Asia, the conclusion will briefly touch on the relevance of these issues to Sri Lankan Malay. Unlike colloquial varieties of Malay and Indonesia spoken in Southeast Asia, Sri Lankan Malay is a colloquial variety without a corresponding derivative standardized national language. Instead, in this respect Sri Lankan Malay resembles the other 800 plus languages of Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as a large majority of the world's languages. To put it plainly, Standard Malay and Indonesian are completely irrelevant to Sri Lanka Malay. Speakers of Sri Lanka Malay may or may not wish to enrich their vocabulary with borrowings from Southeast Asian varieties of Malay/Indonesian; however, they should resist any attempts to impose the alien grammatical patterns of Standard Malay and Indonesian onto their rich, beautiful and distinctive language.

Of course, Sri Lanka Malays may desire to enhance their cultural and economic ties with Malaysia and Indonesia; but in doing so they are confronted with the same practical linguistic dilemmas faced by other Sri Lankans or anybody else for that matter: try to get by with English, or else learn a Southeast Asian variety of Malay/Indonesian, and if so which one? Although Sri Lanka Malays will have a serious head start in comparison to, say, their Sinhalese and Tamil compatriots, learning a Southeast Asian variety of Malay/Indonesian is still best considered by Sri Lanka Malays as engaging with a foreign albeit very closely related language.