

Bahasa Dalam: Continuity, Change and Preservation

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Abstract

Bahasa Dalam, the variety of Malay that is the palace language in Brunei, has been used for centuries and represents a rich cultural heritage. Its existence is based on the system of monarchy, loyalty to the Sultan and his dignitaries, and traditional social stratification in Brunei Darussalam. As long as the system of monarchy remains, Bahasa Dalam will continue to be used. However, just like other Malay dialects, Bahasa Dalam can undergo linguistic change, despite the restrictions of prescriptive codification. This paper presents a study of Bahasa Dalam from three perspectives: continuation, change, and preservation. In addition, it presents the findings of an analysis of questionnaire responses from 30 young adults in Brunei, showing the ways in which their knowledge of Bahasa Dalam is limited.

Introduction

In the sultanate of Brunei Darussalam, various forms of Malay are found: Standard Malay, Brunei Malay, Kedayan, and other regional and social variants (Martin & Poedjosoedarmo, 1996). Of these variants, Bahasa Dalam (the 'Palace Language') has served for centuries as the special register of the Sultan's inner court. In this term, Bahasa means 'language' and Dalam (literally 'inner') indicates the palace (Brown, 1970, p. 179).

Bahasa Dalam can be defined as the language register used by royalty and the palace household, but it is also a language of respect used by others conversing with royalty and nobles. Wilkinson (1959, p. 250) refers to Bahasa Dalam as 'Palace diction'. Marsden (1812, p. xvi) notes that Bahasa Dalam takes its name from the word *dalam*, signifying 'a royal palace' or 'court'. According to Brown (1970, p. 179), Bahasa Dalam is a style of speech that is used in the palace or during ceremonial occasions. Hamdan et al (1991, p. 67) define it according to its function, type and usage. Functionally, it includes words or phrases with special meanings that are suitable for addressing or referring to members of the royal family and other nobles. The type of language characterised by Bahasa Dalam is polite, respectful and cultured. Finally, its usage involves conveying meaning through the application of metaphor and innuendo.

Thus Bahasa Dalam is a respectful language used for communication between people of different classes, such as among nobles or between nobles and non-nobles, and this sort of interaction includes both formal or informal occasions. Formal occasions include all ceremonial occasions attended by the Sultan and titled dignitaries. Informal occasions involve communication with these high-ranking people in situations such as impromptu meetings in public places.

In general, Bahasa Dalam is a refined language intended to demonstrate the supreme cultural values of the Malays, especially courtesy and good breeding. Since it is associated with the royal court, it has become the highest form of courtesy handed down from generation to generation in Brunei Darussalam. Therefore it is regarded as highly significant for relevant government agencies to promote the use of Bahasa

Dalam as a means of instilling pride in and respect for the nation's heritage and traditional institutions.

The Existence of Bahasa Dalam

There are three important factors connected with the existence of this court language. First, archeological evidence indicates that a civilization has existed in the Brunei Bay area since about the 7th Century (Hussainmiya, 1992), and as a social register of the Malay language, Bahasa Dalam developed to reflect the status of the monarchy.

The second factor is that Brunei was founded on a social contract as illustrated in the following statement (from Yusuf, 1975, p. 43):

Raja tidak boleh zalim dan rakyat
tidak boleh derhaka kepada raja,
Raja wakil rakyat yang mutlak.

(The ruler may not be tyrannical and the people
cannot commit treason against the ruler;
The ruler is the plenipotentiary of the people.)

Arising out of this contract, Bahasa Dalam is one of the ways that the people of Brunei show loyalty towards the monarch.

The third factor is the presence of the traditional stratification which still exists in this sultanate. This stratification stimulated the evolution of Bahasa Dalam as a system of communication among people of different status levels, and it continues to facilitate the elaborate expression of social distinctions between royalty, nobles, and commoners.

The government encourages the wider use of Bahasa Dalam among the populace for several reasons. The first is the belief that its use promotes respect for the status of the Sultan. The second is that it reinforces the principles of MIB (Melayu Islam Beraja, or 'Malay Islam Monarchy'), the national philosophy promoted as the guiding principle of the country following independence from Great Britain in 1984. The third reason is that Bahasa Dalam is expected to reinforce a fundamental concept of absolute loyalty towards superiors and a concept of Bruneian cultural identity and thereby to form a barrier against liberal influences. Since Bahasa Dalam is an integral part of Bruneian culture, lack of knowledge of this court language is seen to reflect an ignorance of Brunei's traditions. In contrast, the use of this royal code is believed to demonstrate courtesy and mutual respect among its speakers.

Continuity

Bahasa Dalam will be used as long as MIB is still practised. In fact, Bahasa Dalam pre-dates the arrival of Islam in Brunei. Official records show that Islam reached Brunei in the 14th Century (Hussainmiya, 2006. p. 2), but the large number of Sanskrit words in Bahasa Dalam indicates that the code was well established before that time.

In terms of its function, Bahasa Dalam serves to acknowledge the roles of the royal family, nobles and dignitaries and to facilitate communication with them and between them. This suggests that as long as the system of monarchy exists in Brunei,

the use of Bahasa Dalam will continue, even if its use is limited to a small circle. The continuity of Bahasa Dalam is further strengthened by the existence of a complex system of social stratification, as it enables the Brunei people to acknowledge their position in the social hierarchy. Furthermore, it maintains a range of concepts such as *awar galat* ('respectful humility') and *yang tua di tuakan* ('respect offered to the old') that are vitally important in Malay society. If these concepts are not upheld, values such as *bersopan-santun* ('politeness') and *berbudi bahasa* ('good manners') are also affected, and then Brunei's rich cultural heritage will be eroded.

The continuity of Bahasa Dalam is supported by the MIB national philosophy. In fact, it is directly connected with all three components of MIB: it is a variety of the Malay Language that is central to Malay culture; it is consistent with social stratification and respect for superiors that is promoted in Islam; and it helps maintain the system of monarchy and loyalty towards the Sultan and his dignitaries. Therefore Bahasa Dalam symbolises the Brunei identity by emphasising the existence of a traditional Malay system of monarchy.

Bahasa Dalam occurs throughout the educational curriculum in Brunei. Indeed, MIB is specified as a compulsory subject for all grades of both primary and secondary school in the revised SPN21 curriculum promulgated in 2009, and it is stated that it "will be integrated across the whole curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 39). Furthermore, it is a required subject for first-year undergraduates at the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD).

However, even though its continued use is thereby promoted, erroneous usage and widespread lack of knowledge is also found, especially among the younger generation. This involves such things as pronouns other terms of address, and the extent of understanding of these terms among young people will be investigated in the final section of this paper. Knowledge of Bahasa Dalam depends on the initiative of individuals or the community who use the language as well as the efforts taken by relevant authorities in generating and promoting knowledge about this unique and complex linguistic code.

Change

Language and culture are inextricably connected in every society, and both are inevitably dynamic. As a result, all living languages exhibit innovation.

Even though it is prescriptive language, Bahasa Dalam is similarly subject to change in terms of its linguistic inventory and functions. Although there are not many changes, they still do occur, and they are not necessarily recent. In fact, when we look back at the lexical inventory of Bahasa Dalam, some of the words borrowed from Sanskrit have been modified semantically since the arrival of Islam. For instance, the term *Seri Rama*, referring to the hero Rama from Hindu mythology, is found in the noble title *Pehin Manteri 32 Pehin Orang Kaya Seri Rama*, so one might say that the term *Seri Rama* has undergone semantic change when it became a component in this Brunei title.

Much of Bahasa Dalam is found in the wordlist from the 1950's referred to by Brown (1970), but a more recent wordlist is fuller and more descriptive. Linguistic innovation and function are also found. In the older wordlist the first person pronoun used when communicating with the Sultan or Raja Isteri ('Queen') was *patik*, and this was used by anybody. However, in the new list, there is a distinction between different speakers, so *patik* is only used by nobles, while non-nobles have to use a

long descriptive phrase *hamba kebawah duli tuan patik* ('the slave below the dust of my lord, I'). The contrast is illustrated as follows. A noble would say:

Patik menjunjung anugeraha mulih ke barung-barung.
 I request permission return to house
 'I request permission to return home.'

while a non-noble would instead say:

Hamba kebawah duli tuan patik menjunjung anugeraha mulih ke barung-barung.
 slave below dust lord I request permission return to house
 'I request permission to return home.'

In this example, the lower the position of a speaker in the social hierarchy, the longer the term of self-reference.

The change outlined above occurred when Brunei Darussalam gained independence in 1984, and one might say that the first person pronoun *patik* went through semantic narrowing, while the social status of an individual became more carefully defined. It also shows the enhancement of the status of nobles.

Modifications in other terms are also found. For example, in the old wordlist (Brown, 1970; Fatimah, 2009), *hamba tuanku* ('the slave of my lord') was applicable when for commoners speaking to princes or viziers, but in the new wordlist from 1990, whereas *hamba duli tuanku* ('the slave of the dust of my lord') is now appropriate for a commoner when conversing with a gahara ('born of a noble mother') prince or vizier, while the original term is only used by a commoner when conversing with a non-gahara prince or vizier. For example, a commoner might now say to a gahara prince:

Hamba duli tuanku menjunjung kasih di atas kurnia itu.
 slave dust my lord offer love over gift this
 'I offer gratitude regarding the gift.'

while the same person speaking to a non-gahara prince would instead say

Hamba tuanku menjunjung kasih di atas kurnia itu.
 slave my lord offer love over gift this
 'I offer gratitude regarding the gift.'

This reflects increased distinctions in the social hierarchy. This change not only involves distinctions between nobles and non-nobles but also those among nobles, as *hamba tuanku* is also used by the non-noble as self-reference when conversing to a gahara princess.

The potential referents of several words have been more limited in the new wordlist, such as *santap* ('to eat', 'to drink', 'to smoke') and *murka* ('angry'), which can no longer be used to refer to common nobles as they did in the old wordlist.

Currently there are two separate salutations that can both be used towards His Majesty the Sultan and Her Majesty the Raja Isteri: *ampun beribu ampun* ('mercy a thousand mercies') and also *ampun beribu-ribu ampun* ('mercy many thousands of mercies').

Fine distinctions have also been introduced in granting a rank. Whereas in the past there was the verb *digelar* ('to be granted a rank'), now *diarak* is for a vizier, *diangkat* is for a cheteria, the next level of noble below a vizier, and *disampiri* is for a pehin manteri. Each word is appropriate for a different rank on the social scale: a vizier has the highest rank, followed by cheteria and then a pehin manteri. The use of the first of these, *diarak*, is illustrated below:

Duli Yang Teramat Mulia Pengiran Muda Haji Muhammad Bolkiah telah diarak gelaran menjadi Pengiran Perdana Wazir Sahibul Himmah Wal-Waqar (Kepala Wazir).

'His Royal Highness Prince Haji Muhammad Bolkiah has been granted the title Pengiran Perdana Wazir Sahibul Himmah Wal-Waqar (Head of Viziers).'

We can see, therefore, that Bahasa Dalam has changed in the last fifty years. In particular, more distinctions have been added. Apparently this did not involve gradual evolution but was implemented by officials who wanted to emphasise social differences. All changes and innovations are not arbitrarily done but must be endorsed by the Jabatan Adat-Istiadat Negara ('the National Office of Customs and Ceremonies').

In one final change that has taken place, in old letters and manuscripts a clause that reads *pacal yang hina* ('humble slave') was placed above the signature, but nowadays this clause is not used anymore because of the unpleasant connotations of *pacal* ('slave').

Preservation

Knowledge of Bahasa Dalam has been spread so that it can be appreciated by the people and used correctly. The government has made continuous efforts through various strategies to promote the palace language that is a rich cultural heritage. One of the ways is through education. Since Brunei Darussalam's independence and the proclamation of the national MIB philosophy in 1984, the Ministry of Education has always stressed the transmission of knowledge of the palace language. This is done across the curriculum. For instance, aspects of Bahasa Dalam are incorporated in subjects like Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language), Sivik (civics), and MIB, in primary and secondary schools and also university. Mass media, both electronic and print, also play a significant role in popularising Bahasa Dalam and increasing knowledge and competency in the language.

Some efforts that have been carried out in the past and present to organise lectures, seminars, talks and also workshops on Bahasa Dalam, and no doubt such activities will continue in the future. Knowledge of Bahasa Dalam focuses not just on ordinary citizens but also officers such as diplomats.

For the preservation of Bahasa Dalam, knowledge about it needs to be encouraged from the beginning, as the younger generation will determine how well it is transmitted to future generations.

Documentation is also important in transmitting knowledge of Bahasa Dalam. It is advisable that relevant authorities such as the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka ('Language and Literature Board') with the cooperation of the Jabatan Adat-Istiadat Negara publish books that include glossaries of Bahasa Dalam (e.g. Jabatan Adat-Istiadat,

1984). This is essential for individuals from different walks of life. All changes or modifications should be made known to the public to enable them to keep up-to-date on the use of Bahasa Dalam. Besides talks and seminars, monitoring of competency and knowledge about Bahasa Dalam, especially among the young generation, is very important. This monitoring can be done through studies, interviews and so on. Monitoring gives us an indication of the level of competency as well as what actions that need to be taken.

Knowledge of Bahasa Dalam

A questionnaire was completed by 30 respondents, 15 male and 15 female. They were aged between 20 to 35 years of age, and all of whom had received an education under the bilingual system that was implemented in 1985 (Jones, 2007). Young respondents were chosen as they are relevant in the survival and continuity of a language, because they will inherit and also transmit the language to the next generation. All the respondents were Malay and they used Malay language as their mother tongue. However not all used Malay to communicate with their children. 20 respondents were already married and working, 15 as government officers and 5 in the private sector, while 10 respondents were still single and students in higher institutions. In addition to personal details, the study also included questions about use of pronouns and terms of address, including appropriate nouns and verbs. This section was in the form of multiple choice questions. The respondents were also asked to state where they learnt Bahasa Dalam.

All respondents stated that they had learnt Bahasa Dalam at school in subjects such as Sivik, MIB and also Bahasa Melayu. Besides studying at school, they were also exposed to Bahasa Dalam in interactions, mass media and asking older people who are more knowledgeable about Bahasa Dalam.

Despite the exposure of the respondents to Bahasa Dalam in the school curriculum and classes in higher learning institutions, and also a range of talks and seminars, clear limitations to their knowledge were found. Their ability to specify certain terms is summarized under three categories: pronouns and terms of address; nouns; and verbs.

Pronouns and Terms of Address

- a self reference term used by a noble when conversing with the Sultan or Raja Isteri (Queen). 15 (50%) of the respondents answered correctly: *patik*
- a self reference term used by a non-noble when conversing with the Sultan or Raja Isteri. 15 (50%) respondents answered correctly: *hamba kebawah duli tuan patik*
- a self reference term used by a male when interacting with a noble. 20 (66%) respondents answered correctly: *peramba*
- a self reference term used by a female when interacting with a noble. Only 3 (10%) respondents provided the correct answer: *kaola*
- a term of address for a gahara prince. 10 (33%) respondents answered correctly: *duli tuanku*

Nouns

- a term used by a non-noble to refer to his house when conferring with the Sultan, Raja Isteri, or viziers. 10(33%) respondents answered correctly: *barung-barung*
- a term used by members of the royal family to refer to their head. 12 (40%) respondents gave the correct answer: *ulu*
- a term used by a pehin manteri when mentioning his child or children during a conversation with a noble. 9 (30%) respondents answered correctly: *irmas*
- subsistence allowance for the royal family, viziers and cheterias. 10 (33%) respondents provided the correct answer: *santapan*

Verbs

- ‘to smoke’ for members of the royal family, viziers and cheterias. 12 (40%) respondents answered correctly: *santap*
- ‘dead’ for the Sultan or Raja Isteri: 11 (36%) respondents gave correct answer: *lindung*
- ‘to sit’ or ‘to reside’ for the Sultan, Raja Isteri and Pengiran Isteri. 18 (60%) provided correct answer: *bersemayam*
- ‘to bestow’ a vizier title on a noble. 8 (26%) respondents answered correctly: *diarak*

This small-scale study shows that young people in Brunei require more exposure if their knowledge of Bahasa Dalam is to be enhanced.

Conclusion

The continued use of Bahasa Dalam is consistent with Brunei’s national MIB philosophy. Indeed, it is inextricably linked with MIB, being connected with all three strands. However, wider knowledge and understanding of Bahasa Dalam should be promoted, and the lack of knowledge among young people suggests that further work is needed in this respect.

Changes and innovation in Bahasa Dalam are not arbitrary but have to be endorsed by the Jabatan Adat-Istiadat Negara. All such changes should be widely disseminated to the public to enable people to keep up to date with current usage. This code can only be preserved by means of continuous effort through a range of promotional strategies.

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