A STUDY OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE MALAY LANGUAGE

Social Change and Cognitive Development

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CONTENTS

PREFACE vii

INTRODUCTION ix

I. LANGUAGE AS LINGUA MENTALIS 1

II. MALAY COGNITION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE 23

(a) The Hindu-Buddhist Legacy 26
(b) The Malay Non-Literate Tradition 33
(c) The Islamic Legacy 69
(d) The Colonial Impact 95

III. PLANNING THE COGNITIVE SYSTEM 107

(a) Secular Aspects 107
(b) Religious Aspects 134

IV. MALAY AS AN EVOLVING COGNITIVE SYSTEM — CONCLUDING REMARKS 145

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 155
As a major language in Asia, Malay has undergone considerable alteration and development in the last few decades. Though the *lingua franca* for much of island Southeast Asia during the pre-colonial period, it was supplanted by the languages of the colonial powers in the areas of public administration, education and international trade from the 18th century onwards. It was only in the post-independence period that systematic and concerted efforts were made to upgrade its status to make it a language for modern communication. Today, the vocabulary of modern Malay is to say the least, quite astounding whether one sees it in terms of the growth in the number of lexical items or in terms of the structural complexities of its morphology.

This book is therefore written to acquaint the reader with the processes of change undergone by the Malay language from the Indic period of Malay history to the present focusing specifically on the cognitive aspect. The term "cognition" suggests that a language is not merely a means of communication or an instrument of thought but equally a way of understanding, describing and interpreting reality. This implies that the growth and development of a language cannot ignore its accumulated cognitive elements in order to preserve its character nor can it neglect the communicative demands arising from the expanding cognitive horizons of its speakers. The key question then is how has the Malay language coped with the two seemingly competing requirements — one stressing preservation and the other change. This study is essentially an attempt to address this fundamental issue.

The preparation of this study took me to three universities overseas between 1987 and 1988 namely, Cornell University, Ithaca; University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur; and Cambridge University, England. The trip was made possible by a grant of sabbatical leave from my university (National University of Singapore) for which I am extremely grateful. It made it possible for me to reflect on the subject of study and to apply myself consistently to the task ahead.

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INTRODUCTION

Language suffuses human life so completely that there is a tendency for the uninitiated to equate it with thought and culture. The Malay term for language (bahasa) is of Sanskritic origin (bhasha). In antiquity it was also used to denote several associated meanings of a cultural-cognitive character such as courtesy, breeding, manners and civility. Language was considered an indication of descent (Bahasa menunjukkan bangsa) and an exemplification of the soul (Bahasa jiwa bangsa). Thus language, culture and psychology were seen to form one inextricable whole.

That language has a close relationship with thought and culture is an incontrovertible fact. However, language is not coterminous with either thought or culture. Language as a system of symbols for the expression of thought is not the whole of thought. Similarly, language or linguistic processes should not be equated with thought processes. Language can be regarded as a meaning system and a cognitive system. In this connection language has close connexions with culture as an evolving or changing entity. Language as a system of meaning does not encapsulate all meaningful acts of communication. Meaning and cognition are related, however. Jackendoff (1983: 3), for instance, has argued that “to study the semantics of natural language is to study cognitive psychology” and that “the grammatical structure of natural language offer an important new source of evidence for the theory of cognition”. Finally, thought and cognition (while they imply each other in practice) are also conceptually separable. For convenience, thought may be regarded as a mental act (process) or a mental representation (concept). Cognition as understood in this study refers to the selective use of perceptions, impressions, and sensations for the structuring of concepts and thought. In both instances, language may or may not be involved. However, because both cognition and thought are normally realised in linguistic forms (particularly in abstract or sophisticated discourse), facts derived about language structure would help to throw light on the cognitive elements given prominence in a language. The cognitive elements underlying the meaning system of a language are therefore, phenomenologically interesting. They give a language its character and uniqueness. This study argues that languages not only differ importantly in the cognitive elements given realisation in words and concepts but that such differences are a function of cultural, historical and structural factors. As to whether such differences are crucial for the purposes of achieving cross-cultural communication will constitute an important concern of this study.

To say that language changes is to state a truism. However, it is perhaps more correct to say that a language is more often than not characterised by dynamic
equilibrium. At any one time, there is a core of elements, whether linguistic or cognitive, that gives it stability, and therefore continuity. Statements made about language and its cognitive elements are either synchronic or diachronic — the former focusing on a specific point in time and the latter across time. Change and stability are inherent in all linguistic and cultural phenomena. The task, therefore, is to make a systematic explication of their relevant parameters.

It is evident that language has many dimensions — psychological, sociological, historical, political, to name the more obvious ones. It is not surprising, therefore to see over the years, an increase of interest among various social science disciplines in the phenomenon of language. This fact suggests that language should be seen as an inherent part of the larger institutional structure of a society. Language is not merely a vehicle of communication but responds actively to socio-cultural developments. Indeed, a language should be seen as an evolving entity subject to laws dictated by socio-cultural processes. As a developing and changing phenomenon, language may be said to have a history and a habitat.

Essentially, therefore, issues relating to language and cognition or language and thought must be seen to relate to the processes of growth and becoming. Only then can the permutations of thought and cognition in all their manifestations be made intelligible. This is particularly the case with languages in developing societies where language planning is not merely to give form and substance to nationalism but equally to lend support to cultural and cognitive enrichment. The latter is brought about by cultural contact resulting in the cumulation of knowledge and the widening of intellectual horizons. Interpreted in another way, language development in such societies is not merely a question of modernisation (the attaining of greater “inter-translatability” and “intellectualisation” to use the terms by Haugen and Tauli respectively), but equally a conscious and purposive effort at achieving identity. Language development (and in this context to be understood specifically as cognitive development) exemplifies in essence, a struggle toward realisation. The growth of cognitive awareness or the process of cognition itself, is therefore mirrored in the growth of the language. Or alternatively, the growth of cognitive awareness is paralleled by the growth of social self-awareness. This does not imply that there is a one-to-one equivalence between social change and linguistic change nor does it attribute to the social a necessary causal role. Language or linguistic change implies social change. Social change implies cognitive change. Thus language, cognition, and the social framework form one intricate web of relationships — a trichotomy of interacting parts. However, these must be seen as a process, moving from an initial state characterised by lack of differentiation to a series of states where differentiation, realisation and hierarchic integration become progressively realised (Werner and Kaplan, 1956).

Language or cognitive development is basically dictated by the emergence of new needs whether of a linguistic or non-linguistic character. In meeting such needs, there is, more often than not, a confrontation between new linguistic or
cognitive elements with the old — leading generally to accommodation, adaptation, assimilation or fusion as the case may be. The result is an expanded lexicon, a more complex cognitive system and greater structural differentiation in the grammar of the language.

In an important sense, language development, like all growth processes, exemplifies a struggle to achieve identity. However, new identities are built on pre-existing ones — the old and the new merge to produce innovative structures of greater potential. There is a cognitive mutuality between the term ‘identity’ and such terms as ‘realisation’, ‘equilibrium’, ‘stability’, and ‘fulfilment’, the use of each, of course depends on the circumstance or context of discourse. Identity, as it were, is both cause and effect. It gives impetus to action but it is at the same time the end — condition toward which all processes move, to be sure, in relation to time and space. Identity does not exist in an absolute or unchanging state.

In extension, the term ‘identity’ as used in this study of the cognition of Malay denotes the existence of an identifiable unity between the language and the socio-cultural conditions associated with it at a specific period of Malay history. For instance, one could regard the language of the Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals) as exemplifying the language of sixteenth-century Malay aristocratic society. Similarly the Tuhfat al-Nafis (The Precious Gift) could be regarded as exemplifying the Malay language of nineteenth-century Malay society in Riau and Johor. The early twentieth century is represented by the language of modern novels, newspapers and Munshi Abdullah’s autobiographical writings, that is to say, the period when Malay society and culture came under colonial domination. Finally, the post-independence period is marked by concerted and comprehensive efforts at developing the Malay language and its cognitive system for cultural, political and educational objectives. The significant influence in shaping the development of modern Malay, however, remains to be the English language. More crucially, it is the impact of the cognitive system of English on the evolution of the Malay language.

Bahasa Indonesia is an important influence as well. Originating from Malay, bahasa Indonesia has developed independently under the influence of Dutch. Indonesia’s numerous regional languages have also contributed to its growing lexicon. While certain Indonesian terms are readily assimilated into the lexicon of Malay (partly because of their availability at an earlier period when Malay terms were yet to be coined), borrowing has been selective. The current tendency is to fall back on the linguistic resources of Malay. It should, however, be mentioned that for the speaker of Malay today, terms available in bahasa Indonesia and Malay represent two alternatives in his repertoire. For instance, an Indonesian speaker is likely to use the term ‘mobilisasi’ (mobilisation) in preference to the Malay term ‘kerahan’ because of its currency and culturally neutral quality. The Malay term was used exclusively in the past to mean ‘conscription’ or ‘exaction of labour by the district chief or ruler without payment or compensation’ (corvee).
Labour obtained in this way was utilised for a multiplicity of purposes. The term ‘mobilisasi’ being culturally neutral has wider application and therefore greater versatility.

What can be established from the foregoing is that a linguistic category or word has two types of meaning: denotative and connotative or direct and indirect. Words which are purely denotative in meaning intent are more easily transferred because the pertinent cognitive elements are not historically or culturally specific to their language. Therefore, in keeping with the use of the terms ‘denotative’ and ‘connotative’, one could define the former as words of a language which share similar cognitive elements with equivalent words in another language, and the latter as words of a language which do not share similar cognitive elements (partially or fully) with equivalent words in another language. Thus, the denotation may be similar but the connotation may show significant variation. Clearly, the term ‘cognition’ should not be considered as similar to the term ‘meaning’ though some linguists have regarded them as being so. There are essentially three defining functions in cognition: the cultural context, the historical milieu, and the ecosystem linked to a language. These collectively shape and influence the perceptions, aesthetic awareness, and emotions of the linguistic community associated with the use of a language, in short their cognition. Thus, the term ‘cognition’ may be referred to as the ‘collective psychology’ of a language community whereas the term meaning is what is understood of a word as signifier.

Seen in a different way, a language may be defined as a system of meanings or as a cognitive system. To separate the two in practice is admittedly difficult. Linguists have defined the term ‘meaning’ as ‘image’ (Sapir, 1921: 10–12); ‘typical image’ (Brown, 1958: 85–89); ‘the sum total of the linguistic contexts in which it occurs’ (Hill, 1961: 466); ‘the feature common to all the situations in which it is used’ (Bloch and Trager, 1942: 6); ‘reference’ (Ogden and Richards, 1923); or ‘signified’ (F. de Saussure, 1916). In doing so, they have emphasised meaning as essentially a linguistic manifestation where linguistic contexts and structural semantic relationships pertaining to the use of linguistic categories or words are crucial considerations. However, linguistic categories or words not only convey meanings in the way they are understood in linguistics, their usage is also governed by sets of rules which are cognitive in nature. Therefore, when a speaker is said to know the meaning of a linguistic category, it is implied that he also knows the cognitive contexts associated with its use. Put differently, a cognitive system should be differentiated from syntax or the grammar of a language in the conventional sense. Cognition, to summarise, deals with two aspects of thought in relation to language viz., the structural or constitutive elements that go to form linguistic concepts (and as explained earlier, this has a direct relationship with the culture, history and existential milieu of a linguistic community) and the rules governing the use of linguistic concepts in communication. Both are critical parameters in any effort to explicate the term
'meaning'. Knowing a language (and its meaning system) implies knowing both its grammar and cognitive system. Meaning and cognition are the constitutive components of the semantic system of a language.

The term 'languages in contact' postulates the meeting of two or more languages (and therefore cognitive systems) consequent on certain historical-sociological developments. This normally results in structural changes taking place in both languages — phonological, morphological, syntactical or semantic (Weinreich, 1968). The conditions of contact, as intimated, are non-linguistic in origin. They could be political, economic, religious or cultural. Changes that occur in a language as a result of contact do not necessarily come about as a result of coercion (as for example when the language of a conquering group dominates the language of the conquered group). More often than not, languages change because of perceived advantages arising from contact. Linguistic change, therefore parallels and relates to socio-cultural change in a society. Cognitive change provides evidence of the linkage between linguistic change and socio-cultural change. The latter has direct connection with the growing cognitive awareness of a speech community as a result of cultural-linguistic contact.

Though cognition constitutes a mental act it is exemplified in language. Language in turn is an objective fact in so far as it attempts to represent reality. Language, of course, is not reality. However, the fact that languages deal with mental representations of reality emphasises the close relationship between the linguistic and the non-linguistic or between the mental (subjective) and physical (objective). In the words of Humboldt (W. von Humboldt, 1836: 205):

> When in the soul, the idea arises that language is not simply a means of exchange for mutual understanding, but a genuine world, which the spirit, by its own efforts, has to put between itself and objects; then the soul is well on the way to discovering more and more of that world and to projecting the spirit into it.

The preceding does not argue for a relativistic perspective in regard to the relation between cognition and language or between language and reality. Social science enquiry in general has too long been bogged down by the adoption of extreme positions whether of a relativistic or universalistic persuasion as if to imply that no middle path is possible. Elements of cognition exemplified in languages show both convergence and divergence. The universalistic persuasion which stresses the psychic unity of mankind, nonetheless fails to recognise heterogeneity as a cultural-linguistic fact. As a way of dealing with the diversity of human phenomena, it leads inevitably to intellectual sterility. Though underlying psychic processes may be similar yet their realisation in linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour can vary significantly. The task therefore, is to make such variations as there are, intelligible.

Every language and its associated cognitive structure is a unified and unique way of expressing and transposing reality. As such it is fundamentally a subjective
response to it. Interpreted in a different way, the members of a culture confront the world (where are situated other cultures) subjectively or according to its own assumptions. A language, as it were acts as a cognitive window and at the same time gives form to thought. Language like religion (Berger, 1967) is also a social construction of reality with its own laws and history. As such it can be subjected to analytic description and interpretive reflection. The elements of cognition underlying a language can therefore be demarcated, identified and explained with reference to the relevant historical, cultural and existential parameters. To quote Geertz (Geertz, C., 1983: 161) “the problem of the integration of cultural life becomes one of making it possible for people inhabiting different worlds to have a genuine and reciprocal impact on one another”. To do this means to accept the depth of differences that exist among cultures; to understand what these differences are; and to construct some sort of vocabulary in which they can be publicly expressed.

What has been suggested thus far is that the cognitive elements associated with a language are reflective of the history, culture and existential milieu of its speakers. Therefore, technically, it should be possible to make various statements about a word and its meaning based on the three parameters mentioned earlier. Understood in this way the cognitive elements associated with a word represent both its denotation and connotation. The historical dimension underlines how a word has come to be understood; the cultural dimension underlines the role of values (moral, aesthetic and emotional) in relation to the use and understanding of a word; and the existential dimension underlines the domain of practical activities associated with the use and meaning of a word. These dimensions which govern cognitive understanding and awareness operate separately or collectively depending on the circumstances.

In terms of the evolution and development of the Malay language, four cultural-linguistic systems may be identified: the indigenous, the Hindu-Buddhist (Sanskritic); the Perso-Arabic (Islamic), and the Western (Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English). Each of these systems represents at the same time a cognitive component in the Malay language. While it is convenient to recognise the four divisions for the purpose of discussion, all four are integral to each other. It is possible of course to see each cultural-linguistic system as having a preponderant influence in specific cognitive domains of the Malay language such as for example the influence of the English language on Malay scientific and technical terms. However, what is interesting is the manner of their incorporation in the Malay lexicon in particular in relation to the cognitive aspects.

Another parameter that bears on the Malay cognitive system relates to the spatial arrangement of Malay society in the past. Two Malay linguistic categories are useful in explicating this phenomenon: hulu (ulu) and hilir. Hulu refers to the cognitive domain associated with the upper reaches of a river whilst hilir refers to the cognitive domain associated with the lower waters of a river. The Malay