



IS SABAH MALAY A REAL LANGUAGE?

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INTRODUCTION

- The Main Question:
 - Is Sabah Malay a Real Language or Not?
(Not questioning whether it is a language Vs a Dialect).
- More Questions:
 - What is a Real Language?
 - Who, what defines a language?
 - What is Sabah Malay?
 - Realisation vs. Recognition
 - Assumption vs. Fact



WHAT IS A REAL LANGUAGE?

- What Defines a language?
- There are many definition in dictionaries and linguistics books.
- But in this paper, I will try to define Sabah Malay as a language through:
 - the **complexity** and **systematic** of Sabah Malay **linguistic structure** as any language should have;
 - the **social and cultural** functions of Sabah Malay to serve as central **vehicles** of group **identity and pride** and to have **expressive power** as any language does.



WHAT IS SABAH MALAY?

○ Realisation vs. Recognition

- It has been noticed that there is a distinctive variety of Malay spoken within the state of Sabah and a few areas closer to Sabah such as Labuan, the Federal State, Temburung, Brunei and Limbang, Sarawak (Collins, 1993)
- Yet, not much has been studied on this particular variety of Malay spoken in Sabah as compared to other native languages which are “more original, more primitive and more exotic” to researchers (Collins, 1995).
- Unlike the Malay dialect spoken in the neighbouring state of Sarawak which is clearly known as Sarawak dialect, references have not been made to ‘Sabah dialect’ or ‘Sabah Malay’ (Asmah Hj Omar, 1988)

WHAT IS SABAH MALAY?

○ Realisation vs. Recognition

- There are not many Malay dialectology studies on Sabah Malay done by scholars, linguists or *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*.
- Out of the 115 entries, in *Kajian Bahasa-bahasa Bumiputera di Sabah: Satu Renungan* (Nathesan, 1995), there are only 3 entries on Sabah Malay and another 3 entries on studies of Malay language (*Bahasa Melayu*) in Sabah.
- There is no entry for Sabah Malay in any bibliography of Malay dialectology (Collins 1988 & 1990).



WHAT IS SABAH MALAY?

○ THE ASSUMPTIONS

○ Status:

- Broken variety of Malay/poorly spoken
- Deviation/ poorly learnt
- Unclear distinctiveness/Not much differences from Standard Malay or Brunei Malay

○ Function:

- Limited function/mainly in market places
- Belongs to no one or ethnic group/No L1



THE ASSUMPTIONS

○ Lexical:

- Unique Particles/Critics
 - random, excessive use ‘bah’, ‘anu’

○ Syntax:

- Reverse Structure/ No Grammar Rule
 - makan sudah, besar sangat, mana ko?

○ Phonological:

- It is the “a” variant, thus does not have [«]
- Many variations /No homogeneity



THE ASSUMPTIONS

- Vowel Variation:

- i. / « / → [a], [i] & [u]
‘four’ [«mpat] > [ampat]
‘small’ [k «tSI] > [kitSI]
‘fat’ [g «mU?] > [gumuk]
- ii. / e / → [i]
‘look’ [tengU?] > [tinguk]
- iii. / o / → [u]
‘brain’ [ota?] > [utak]
- iv. / O / → [a]
‘buffalo’ [k «bau] > [karabau]



THE ASSUMPTIONS

- Consonant Variation:

ii. /k/ → [k] ~ [ʔ]

‘head’ [k «pal «] > [kapala]

‘face’ [muka] > [mukaʔ]

‘brain’ [otaʔ] > [utak]

‘tree’ [pokoʔ] > [pukuk]

‘grandmother’ [neneʔ] > [niniʔ] ~ [ninik]

‘younger sibling’ [adlʔ] > [adiʔ] ~ [adik]

iv. /h/ → [h] ~ [O] ~ [ʔ]

‘nose’ [hiduŋ] > [iduŋ]

‘shoulder’ [bahu] > [bahuʔ] ~ [bauʔ]

‘bad’ [dZahat] > [dZahat] ~ [dZaat]

‘tongue’ [lidah] > [lidah] ~ [lidaʔ] ~ [lida]

‘land’ [tanah] > [tanah] ~ [tanaʔ] ~ [tana]



THE FACT

○ Status :

- Sabah Malay is a Malay variant spoken in Sabah by most Sabahans.
- It is based on Brunei Malay
- It differs from the Standard Malay, Brunei Malay, Kedayan Malay and Cocos Malay
- It is not a deviation, broken Malay or badly spoken Malay
- Actually, there is an entry of Sabah Malay in the *Ethnologue* of the world languages with the three-digit ISO code of “msi” (Wong, 2000).



THE FACT

○ Function:

- Sabah Malay is not merely a bazaar Malay.

lingua franca > vernacular > L1

- The Malays in Sabah do speak their own mother tongues i.e. either Brunei Malay, Kedayan or Cocos Malay as L1. They speak Std Malay L2 or L3, which they have learned at school. Besides that, they also speak Sabah Malay to everyone else as L2.

(Wong 2000)



THE FACT

- Function:
 - Study (Wong 2012) shows that:
 - Sabah Malay is L1
 - 30.83% to parents, 36.13% to siblings
 - Sabah Malay as Home language
 - 35% to spouses, 35% to children
 - 17th Ethnologue (preliminary study 2015) shows that almost all ethnic groups there is decreasingly worrying percentage their lgs spoken as L1 as children are increasingly speak Sabah Malay as L1.
 - Sabah Malay is a language of identity, intimacy, familiarity, solidarity (Wong 2000)



THE FACTS

○ Lexical:

- Sabah Malay displays phonological variation due to the influence of indigenous lgs and lgs from neighbouring countries.
- Mixed-lexicon
 - Base lg: ‘bubut’, ‘tapuk’, ‘limpas’, ‘tempirang’,
 - Native lgs: ‘gaman’, ‘aramaitii’, ‘atukoi’
 - English: ‘sikul’, ‘gostan’, ‘aisbok’
 - Chinese: ‘ping’, ‘ngam’, ‘cinchai’



THE FACTS

○ Syntax:

- They can be ungrammatical. e.g. the use of 'bah'. It is not random. It does not replace 'lah'
 - Ya lah = ya bah
 - sakitlah = sakit bah
 - *lah mari = bah mari
- Structure of the sentence is not random too
 - Bulih bah kalo ko
 - *Kalo ko bulih bah
 - *Bah boleh kalo ko
 - *Boleh kalo ko Bah



THE FACTS

○ Phonological:

- Distinctive, predictable and regular phonological features of SM (Wong, 2012).

- Trill [r] in /r/word-final:

‘big’ [b«saŋ] > [basar]

‘sleep’ [tidoŋ] > [tidur]

‘lips’ [bibi«] > [bibir]

- Velar Stop [k] in /k/ word-final:

‘brain’ [ota?] > [utak]

‘tree’ [poko?] > [pukuk]

‘grandmother’ [nene?] > [nini?] ~ [ninik]

‘yg/sibling’ [adl?] > [adi?] ~ [adik]



THE FACTS

- h-deletion in all positions of /h/ or glottal stop[ʔ] at word-final:

‘nose’ [hiduN] > [iduN]

‘shoulder’ [bahu] > [bahuʔ] ~ [bauʔ]

‘bad’ [dZahat] > [dZahat] ~ [dZaat]

‘tongue’ [lidah] > [lidah] ~ [lidaʔ] ~ [lida]

‘land’ [tanah] > [tanah] ~ [tanaʔ] ~ [tana]

- insertion of glottal stop [ʔ] or glottal fricative [h] in open syllable word-final position:

‘head’ [k«pal«] > [kapalaʔ]

‘who’ [sijap«] > [sijapah] ~ [sijapaʔ]

‘what’ [ap«] > [apah] ~ [apaʔ]



THE FACTS

- Use of [a] in /«/
 - ‘four’ [«mpat] > [ampat]
 - ‘narrow’ [s«mpit] > [sampit]
 - ‘what’ [ap«] > [apa]
- Use of [i] in /e/ word-initial & word-medial.
 - ‘tail’ ekor [ekoɯ] > [ikor]
 - ‘look’ [tengU?] > [tinguk]
- Use of [u] in /o/ word-initial & word-medial.
 - ‘brain’ [ota?] > [utak]
 - ‘knock’ [k«tuk] > [katok]



THE FACT

- Phonological:
 - Wong further argues that the differences are influenced by social factors (Wong 2012)
 - **Age**: Variables («), (e), (o), (h), (k), (tʃ), (r) and (?) have strong correlation with age variation
 - significant between 15-44 and 45-64
 - The younger age group use more of the standard variants & older –non standard



THE FACT

- **Social Stratification:** variables (a), («), (e), (o), (h), (k), (r), (t) and (?) have significant correlation with S/S variation
 - significant between Lower Working Class (LWC) and Mid Middle Class (MMC).
 - the higher the social class, the more the standard variants are used and vice versa.



THE FACT

- **Ethnic Membership:** variables («), (e), (h), (k), (r) and (?) have social variations based on ethnic membership.
 - The ethnic groups of Bugis (BGS) and Other Bumiputera (BMP) use more of the standard variants than other ethnic groups



THE FACT

- **Gender:** variables (a), («), (e) and (h) have a correlation with gender variation.
 - Females use more of the standard variant in (e) word-initial (in Reading Passage Speech) and (h) word-medial (in Formal Speech).
 - Males use more of the standard variants in (a) word-final and («) word-middle (both in Formal Speech and Casual Speech)



CONCLUSION

- So, is Sabah Malay a real language?
- Structurally, may it be in phonology or syntax, Sabah Malay displays a variation and complexity but it is **conditional** and **systematic**. It has the same kind of **expressive power** as any language.
- Functionally, Sabah Malay has expanded from lingua franca > L2 > L1. It performs the same **social and cultural functions** as other languages, serving as central vehicles of group **identity and pride**.



CONCLUSION

- Thus, Sabah Malay is a real language spoken by real people.
- Linguistically it is a dialect of the Malay language.
- Sabah Malay reflects the speakers and the identity of the people of Sabah.
 - It is as diverse as the people--so mixed with other influences coming into the language
 - It is as adaptable as the people--so flexible with so many variations
 - It is the language of the people of Sabah.



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Thank You!

