The attitudes and beliefs of some educated Malaysians with respect to grammatical and lexical features of Malaysian English

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Introduction

This paper deals with the results of part of a recent survey of the usage, attitudes and beliefs with respect to English of educated Malaysian users of the language (mostly as a second-language). This constituted part of a project on Malaysian English funded by the Australian Research Council in 1994-95 [1] (fieldwork conducted in Kuala Lumpur). This section of the study involved informal 'Labovian' interviews with a Malaysian associate investigator (see Newbrook 1997).

The main focus in terms of linguistic level was upon grammar and the use of international lexis. The variables were chosen on the basis of earlier studies of Malaysian and Singaporean English (Baskaran 1987, 1994, Lowenberg and McArthur 1992, Soo 1990, Wong 1983; also Brown 1992, Crewe 1984, Elliott 1983, Foley 1988, Newbrook 1987, Platt et al. 1984, Tongue 1979). Within the Malaysian English continuum, the focus was upon the 'acrolect' and the higher 'mesolects'. For this reason, subjects were selected (by contact and judgement) on the basis of their perceived proficiency in English and/or prior exposure to the language; most were university students or graduates.

The study explored the subjects' perceptions with respect to the relative standardness/'correctness' of variants, their own usage, and the usage of most Malaysians. The official (*de jure*) norm promulgated (by intention) in Malaysia is a native-speaker norm, specifically Standard British/English English where this differs from other standard varieties. This is not entirely realistic for contemporary Malaysia; but for grammar and international lexis it is still accepted by many and there is as yet no rival local *de jure* norm, although some subjects may have already accepted the notion of a local endonormative standard based on acrolectal Malaysian usage (which already constitutes a *de facto* standard). In some cases, a *de facto* local norm form appears a particularly likely candidate for inclusion in a possible future local *de jure* endonormative standard.

Subjects

Twenty-nine subjects were used here, classified (with 100% agreement between interviewer and investigator) into two groups: 'more' or 'less' proficient speakers of English. There were 18 more proficient speakers; their recorded spoken usage formed the main body of spoken data. The other 11 subjects were judged less proficient. One consequence of the relatively small number of subjects (despite efforts to complete more interviews) is that numerical results can be no more than indicative (further study of larger samples is needed). The subjects broke down as follows in respect of non-linguistic classifications:

Ethnicity:
More Proficient: 7 Malay, 6 Chinese, 3 Indian, 2 'Others'
Less Proficient: 9 Malay, 2 'Others'

Strongest language (self-report):
More proficient: 7 Malay, 6 Chinese (any type), 1 Tamil,
                  1 other language (indigenous, from East Malaysia),
                  1 unclear response, 2 English
Less proficient: 10 Malay, 1 English

Sex:
More proficient: 9 female, 9 male
Less proficient: 6 female, 5 male

Age:
More proficient: 1 teenaged (19), 15 in 20s, 2 in 30s
Less proficient: 10 in 20s, 1 in 30s

Nine of the 11, but only seven of the 18, were Malay; this may be related to differing patterns across the ethnic groups involving educational success and acquisition of English, but further investigation is needed here. For two of the three subjects reporting English as their strongest language, these self-assessments are most unlikely to be accurate (on the evidence of the data). These responses probably reflect an exaggerated impression of speakers' own proficiency (not uncommon in Malaysia), although another factor may be the common local characterisation of languages which are not official or are not usually written as '(only) dialects'.

Methods

Nineteen grammatical/lexical variables (mostly not closely connected with each other) were presented in a series of twenty printed sentences in a fixed, scrambled order (as numbered below): nineteen of these sentences displayed the variant of the relevant variable which appears characteristic of 'acrolectal'/'mesolectal' Malaysian English, while the remaining sentence (Sentence 4) displayed what may be a more characteristically Singaporean variant of the variable exemplified in Sentence 14. Subjects were invited to write a gloss of each sentence, making as explicit as possible the meaning

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they ascribed to it; this facilitated examination of cases where a key difference between Malaysian and British/international English involves meaning rather than form. The subjects were also asked to rate the sentence from 1 to 4 in respect of the quality of the English, thus revealing which forms they perceived as high and low in prestige. A rating of 1 indicated 'perfect' English, 2 acceptability but not 'perfection' (minor infelicity), 3 more serious infelicities and 4 total unacceptability. These results are presented below. Where subjects failed to respond for a particular sentence, a B = 'blank' was recorded, and these are totalled separately below. Figures in **bold** represent the most popular rating(s) for each sentence.

In the next column, those who rated the sentence 2 or lower were invited to write a 'correction', providing a form which they considered equivalent to the sentence presented but in 'perfect' English (which would not necessarily be their own 'normal' usage).

In 'correcting' the sentences, some subjects (not surprisingly) focused on points other than the intended focus of attention. This is familiar in this context (see, e.g. Newbrook 1987:14ff), and arises largely from the prevalence of *de facto* local norms for English in respect of many grammatical and lexical variables: formal, proficient local usage (at these linguistic levels) is not generally identified as different from the exonormative British norm, and the features in question are treated as 'normal' and uncontroversially 'correct' (see Newbrook 1993). Subjects may thus be at a loss to identify any feature requiring alteration if the sentence is to be 'improved'. Here, subjects were advised that some sentences might require no 'improvement', and all subjects did rate at least some sentences 1; nevertheless, subjects did tend to search for points to 'improve'. Furthermore, some subjects may have reacted to idiosyncratic preferences for certain variants of some other features inadvertently included in sentences despite all efforts to exclude any such features. All such cases could be identified, because of the instruction to rewrite sentences rated 2-4; and all such ratings were classified separately (but not revised, as it cannot be known precisely what ratings would have been given had no other feature been noticed).

Subjects were asked to indicate (by ticking) whether or not they themselves used or would use each of the original twenty sentences, in spoken/informal contexts, on the one hand, and in written/formal contexts, on the other. Such self-reports are interesting both in themselves and as further evidence as to attitude.

Results

The subjects varied considerably in respect of their concentrations of ratings. For instance, four of the more proficient speakers rated between nine and 11 of the 20 sentences 1, and rated only one sentence, or none at all, as low as 4. On the other hand, two of these subjects each rated only four sentences 1, and one of them rated five sentences as low as 4.

More importantly, an average of 21 subjects out of the 29 (23 if

Sentences 1 and 4, the two most basilectal, are excluded) rated each sentence either 1 or 2; only three (just over one without Sentences 1 and 4) rated each sentence 4. This indicates a high level of acceptance of the Malaysian usage presented (especially given that some lower rankings related to irrelevant features). The disparities between the detailed results for (most) individual sentences, while interesting and presumably indicative of genuine attitudinal differentiation, are not so striking (see below on these).

The first four sentences examined illustrate the three features identified in Newbrook (1997) as possible Malaysian shibboleths (forms found in Malaysia but apparently not found — or found *much* less commonly — in Singapore) — and the 'Singaporean' equivalent of one of these.

The First Four Sentences

1   *Never I am going to see him again*

This sentence illustrates non-inversion of subject and auxiliary after clause-initial *never* (Wong 1983:130, Newbrook 1997:238ff).

14   *The leader already pass away*

This sentence illustrates the grammaticalised use of *already* as a 'completive' aspectual marker, in the 'Malay' (and hence possibly more characteristically Malaysian) position preceding the verb (Wong 1983:136, Newbrook 1997:238ff).

4   *I finish my dinner already*

In contrast with Sentence 14, this sentence also illustrates the grammaticalised use of *already* as a 'completive' aspectual marker, but in the 'Chinese' (and hence possibly more characteristically Singaporean) position following the verb (Newbrook 1997:238ff); on these Singaporean and Malaysian uses of *already*, see, e.g. Brown 1992:5, Soo 1990:208.

7   *I got go there before*

This sentence illustrates a) the use of *got* as a non-past auxiliary, corresponding either with perfective *have* (meaning: 'I have gone/been there before') or with modal *must*/quasi-modal *have (got) to* (meaning: 'I have (got) to go there first') and b) the use with *got* of the bare infinitive of the main verb (Wong 1983:132f, Newbrook 1997:238ff). There was a very clear preference (revealed through glosses and 'corrections') for taking *got to* be equivalent here to perfective *have*: of the 29 subjects, only two interpreted *got* as modal, with one finding it ambiguous.

Results for these four sentences are shown in table 1.

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*B*	*Total*
Sentence 1						
More proficient	–	4	7	7	–	18
Less proficient	–	2	3	6	–	11
Total	–	6	10	13	–	29
Sentence 14						
More proficient	2	12	4	–	–	18
Less proficient	4	7	–	–	–	11
Total	6	19	4	–	–	29
Sentence 4						
More proficient	2	12	3	1	–	18
Less proficient	1	7	2	1	–	11
Total	3	19	5	2	–	29
Sentence 7 (all 29 subjects; but see above)						
More proficient	2	2*	5*	10	–	18[2]
Less proficient	–	1	2	8	–	11
Total	2	3	7	18	–	29

[2] The total for the more proficient speakers appears to be 19 rather than 18 because one subject, as noted, regarded the usage as ambiguous and rated it differently for the two senses; the cells in question are marked with asterisks (*).

Table 1

The numbers of more proficient speakers who claimed to use each form are shown in table 2. Totals are out of 17 as one such subject failed to complete the relevant question. The set of subjects reporting use in written/formal settings is often but not always a proper subset of the set reporting use in spoken/informal settings (some subjects reported using some forms **only** in the former settings).

The forms exemplified in Sentences 14 and 4 are clearly much more acceptable to these subjects than the other two, though all four are frequently reported as own usage (at least in spoken/informal settings) and though even these two are scarcely obvious candidates in respect of a possible local *de jure* standard variety. Contrary to expectations, Sentences 14 and 4 patterned in similar ways (although there was some very marginal evidence that Malays/Malay-speakers might prefer Sentence 14, as predicted).

	Spoken/informal settings	*Written/formal settings*
1	15	2
14	15	7
4	15	5
7	13	4

Table 2

The Remaining Sixteen Sentences

2   *What they are discussing here?*

This sentence illustrates non-inversion of subject and auxiliary in direct questions (Crewe 1984:90, Elliott 1983:96ff, Soo 1990:213). For responses see table 3 and for comparison with Sentence 13 see under the latter.

3   *Last time I work in Ipoh*

This sentence illustrates the Malaysian and Singaporean use of *last time* to mean 'in the past', 'formerly', rather than 'on the last relevant occasion' (see Soo 1990:207, Tongue 1979:83). For responses see Table 4.

5   *She is having a cold*

This sentence illustrates the strong tendency in Singaporean and Malaysian English to use progressive aspect in a number of constructions and senses where simple aspect is usual elsewhere, notably with the stative uses/senses of *have* (Soo 1990:208, Tongue 1979:45f, Platt et al. 1984:72f). For responses see table 5.

6   *I feel very tensed at the moment*

This sentence illustrates the use (presumably hypercorrect, at least in origin) of non-finite -*ed* - in this case with an adjective — which is common in the region in a range of environments (Newbrook and Goh 1987, Soo 1990:209, Tongue 1979:52). For responses see table 6.

8   *He gave me some useful advices*

This sentence illustrates the pluralisation in Singaporean and Malaysian English (as in South Asian and some other L2 varieties) of nouns which in most other varieties are 'mass' or 'non-count' nouns and do not usually take any plural formative (Baskaran 1994:29, Crewe 1984:16f, Platt et al. 1984:50ff, Soo 1990:209, Tongue 1979:49f). For responses see table 7.

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	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	2	8	5	3	–	18
Less proficient	–	7	3	1	–	11
Total	2	15	8	4	–	29

Table 3

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	2	12	–	4	–	18
Less proficient	1	8	2	–	–	11
Total	3	20	2	4	–	29

Table 4

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	17	–	1	–	–	18
Less proficient	5	4	2	–	–	11
Total	22	4	3	–	–	29

Table 5

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	6	7	2	2	1	18
Less proficient	6	4	1	–	–	11
Total	12	11	3	2	1	29

Table 6

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	13	4	1	–	–	18
Less proficient	10	1	–	–	–	11
Total	23	5	1	–	–	29

Table 7

9   *My friend was warded at the hospital*

This sentence illustrates the Malaysian use of the verb *ward* (not otherwise found) to mean 'place/keep in a (hospital) ward' (Soo 1990:212). For responses see table 8.

10   *This word is spelt with three alphabets*

This sentence illustrates the Singaporean and Malaysian use of certain nouns, which elsewhere refer unequivocally to sets as wholes, to refer either to sets or to the members of those sets; thus *alphabet* can mean 'letter (of the alphabet)', as in this sentence, as well as having its mainstream sense (Brown 1992:4, Elliott 1983:90, Tongue 1979:66). The sentence was intended to favour the distinctively SE Asian interpretation very strongly indeed (subjects' glosses were checked, and no subject clearly interpreted *alphabets* in its standard sense). For responses see table 9 and for comparison with Sentence 15 see under the latter.

11   *If you do this you won't regret*

This sentence illustrates the Singaporean and Malaysian tendency to omit object pronouns in cases where they can clearly be understood as intended (Baskaran 1994:29, Tongue 1979:44f). For responses see table 10.

12   *We use to live in PJ now*

PJ here refers to Petaling Jaya, a major suburb of Kuala Lumpur. This sentence illustrates the Singaporean and Malaysian use of *use* to as a revived or locally created present tense for the defective past tense form *used to* (Brown 1992:140, Tongue 1979:44). The form is either homophonous or almost homophonous with standard *used to*, and the spelling of both forms is variable. These issues were largely resolved by including in the sentence a time adverbial (*now*), forcing the present interpretation. For responses see table 11. At least six of the more proficient speakers showed some awareness of the non-standard status of the local usage, and only one clearly endorsed it. Anecdotal reports that it is becoming less common may well be correct. The sentence also displayed the lowest total of self-reports for spoken/informal settings, and the usage no longer appears a strong candidate for inclusion in a local *de jure* standard.

13   *They asked him what is he doing there*

This sentence illustrates inversion of subject and auxiliary in indirect questions (Crewe 1984:90, Elliott 1983:96ff, also Baskaran 1994:30). For responses see table 12. Sentence 13, illustrating inversion in an indirect question, was found more acceptable than Sentence 2, illustrating non-inversion in a direct question, which might be deemed the more basic/low-level non-standardism. Sentence 13 was also reported more frequently as written/ formal usage.

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	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	9	4	5	–	–	18
Less proficient	8	1	2	–	–	11
Total	17	5	7	–	–	29

Table 8

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	6	6	4	1	1	18
Less proficient	8	2	1	–	–	11
Total	14	8	5	1	1	29

Table 9

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	9	6	3	–	–	18
Less proficient	5	6	–	–	–	11
Total	14	12	3	–	–	29

Table 10

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	2	9	1	3	3	18
Less proficient	3	3	2	2	1	11
Total	5	12	3	5	4	29

Table 11

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	4	8	6	–	–	18
Less proficient	6	4	1	–	–	11
Total	10	12	7	–	–	29

Table 12

15 *My aunt is a staff at the university*

Like Sentence 10, this sentence illustrates the SE Asian use of certain nouns, which elsewhere refer unequivocally to sets as wholes, to refer either to sets or to the members of those sets. Thus *staff* can mean 'member of staff', as in this sentence, as well as having its mainstream, collective sense (Brown 1992:125, Elliott 1983:90, Tongue 1979:67). For responses see table 13. Sentence 15 was found more acceptable than Sentence 10, which illustrates a more complex phenomenon; the former was also reported more often as own usage (especially written/formal). The patterning for Sentence 15 resembled that for Sentence 8, which illustrates an associated phenomenon.

16 *All the letters did not arrive*

This sentence illustrates the interpretation of *all* (or *both*) with a following negative. In many mainstream varieties, notably in those of the UK, if this construction is used at all the scope of the negation is intended as including *all*, so that this sentence, for instance, would mean 'Not all of the letters arrived'. In some other mainstream varieties, and in all Asian L2/FL varieties examined, the construction is much more frequent and the scope of the negation does *not* include *all*; the sentence thus means 'All the letters failed to arrive'. For some native speakers, the usage is ambiguous between the two senses, at least in writing. (On the dialectological background to this question, see Brown 1992:83, Loh and Harrison 1988 (mainly on *both*), Newbrook 1992:15ff, Tongue 1979:41) Here, predictably, no subject clearly interpreted the usage in the first sense, while 13 clearly interpreted it in the second sense and 15 treated the interpretation as obvious (there was one unclear response). For responses to the main question see table 14.

17 *I study two kinds of language, Malay and English*

This sentence illustrates the East Asian use of *kind* (etc) as a pseudo-classifier: *two* (etc) *kinds of X* often means 'two (etc) Xs' (Newbrook 1991.I:15). For responses see table 15.

18 *I hope that your work would improve this term*

This sentence illustrates the general SE Asian preference for *would*, which is considered especially 'polite', in future and other statements and constructions where only *will* would be usual elsewhere (Brown 1992:147f, Newbrook and Chinniah 1987:254ff, Tongue 1979:42). This is part of a wider pattern involving the 'present-past' pairs of modals, and presumably arose originally by way of hypercorrect extension from the small, specific range of environments/meanings (notably requests, as in *Would you...* as opposed to *Will you...*) where *would, could* etc, genuinely are deemed more 'polite' than *will, can* etc but are otherwise exact equivalents. Among the most proficient users of English in the region, some more 'sophisticated' localisms have arisen from what is still a rather marginal awareness of the

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	**14**	1	2	1	–	18
Less proficient	**10**	1	–	–	–	11
Total	**24**	2	2	1	–	29

Table 13

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	**9**	5	3	–	1	18
Less proficient	**5**	3	2	–	1	11
Total	**14**	8	5	–	2	29

Table 14

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	4	**11**	2	1	–	18
Less proficient	3	**6**	2	–	–	11
Total	7	**17**	4	1	–	29

Table 15

issue. One of these is what appears to be (largely) a 'hyper-hypercorrect' preference for *will* over *would* in cases where only *would* would be usual elsewhere (as in *But for that we will win*). For responses see table 16. On the evidence of 'corrections' and glosses, subjects who rated this sentence lower than 1 did indeed often do so because of a preference for *will*. Of the 18 more proficient speakers, six clearly reacted in this way and another five did so to a degree; only four clearly preferred — or even 'tolerated' — *would*. The less proficient speakers patterned similarly. Given the functions of English in Malaysia and the general proficiency and attitudinal orientation of all these speakers, this was completely unexpected. The most plausible explanation might be that these subjects are at an intermediate stage in their acquisition of the English modal system; they have only partly acquired the contrast between the 'present' and 'past' modals, and exhibit a statistical preference for the more straightforward 'present' modals, not the more specifically local pattern of usage with a rival preference for *would* etc, as is common in Singapore. The question of how far the usage actually presented (with *would*) might appear a candidate for inclusion in a possible

de jure Malaysian (as opposed to Singaporean) standard variety is obviously somewhat complex.

19   *This is the first time I'm playing squash*

This sentence illustrates a very strong tendency in Singapore and Malaysia (Tongue 1979:43, Newbrook and Henry 1987): the use of present progressive tense/aspect rather than the traditional present perfective following expressions such as *This is the first time...* For responses see table 17. This sentence was neither as strongly endorsed nor as frequently reported as written/ formal usage as might have been expected (see below). Here, however, almost all the 'corrections' related to unrelated matters. This suggests that this feature itself was generally regarded as uncontroversially 'correct'.

20   *We live in a big city; as such, we have certain problems*

This sentence illustrates the extended use of as such without any nominal (or even adjectival) antecedent, as exactly equivalent to *therefore* (Brown 1992:12, Tongue 1979:62f). For responses see table 18.

The numbers of more proficient speakers who claimed to use each form are shown in Table 19. Totals are again out of 17 (see table 2).

Obviously, most of these sentences are frequently reported as own usage, at least in spoken/ informal settings — especially Sentences 5, 8 and 15 (these also as written/formal usage). None of these cases is surprising, though Sentence 19 might also have been expected to score highly here (but see above).

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*B*	*Total*
More proficient	9	7	2	–	–	18
Less proficient	5	5	1	–	–	11
Total	14	12	3	–	–	29

Table 16

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*B*	*Total*
More proficient	12	2	2	2	–	18
Less proficient	7	4	–	–	–	11
Total	19	6	2	2	–	29

Table 17

	1	2	3	4	B	Total
More proficient	9	6	3	–	–	18
Less proficient	4	2	2	3	–	11
Total	13	8	5	3	–	29

Table 18

	Spoken/informal settings	*Written/formal settings*
2	14	5
3	16	6
5	17	13
6	16	6
8	16	13
9	16	10
10	14	4
11	16	6
12	11	5
13	15	9
15	17	12
16	16	7
17	15	5
18	15	6
19	17	7
20	15	7

Table 19

However, the features illustrated do differ somewhat in respect of subjects' responses in respect of acceptability. The features most widely accepted are those exemplified in Sentences 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 18, 19 and 20, especially 5, 8, 15 and 19. These last four constitute the most likely candidates for a possible local *de jure* standard variety. Perhaps not surprisingly, three of them are also those most often reported as written/formal usage (see above on Sentence 19).

The less proficient speakers were often more 'tolerant' than the more proficient speakers in their ratings of local usage, as might be expected.

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Conclusion

As noted, most of the sentences attracted relatively positive evaluations (clusterings of ratings in the first two categories). In many cases, lower ratings related to subjects' focusing upon features other than those at issue: the intended focus of attention appeared uncontroversial. Most features were also frequently reported as own usage, at least in spoken/informal settings. On this evidence, there is already something of an effective local Malaysian standard for English, even if it is still only a *de facto* standard.

Interestingly, the two features which received the least positive evaluations are among the three which were thought likely to involve shibboleths of Malaysian usage as opposed to Singaporean. The results do not support the notion of significant grammatical and lexical differentiation between these two varieties of English.

These and other aspects of English in the region certainly warrant further attention; but our knowledge of the features of Malaysian English is clearly increasing. As far as this project is concerned, comparison of the results reported here with the actual usage of the same subjects is in progress. This will yield more information of considerable interest.

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