

The Truth Behind Rojak Language in Malaysian English and Singlish of Singaporean English: Code Mixing and Code Switching Phenomenon in Commonwealth Countries

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Abstract

Language is the most important communication medium for humans. With language, humans can express thoughts, ideas and feelings. Language differences between speakers are the main communication problem. With the existence of a connecting language, it will facilitate the process of communicating between speakers. English is a language that is widely used in the world, especially in member countries of the British Commonwealth. The arrival of English language triggered changes in the structure of local languages in these countries, as occurred in Malaysia and Singapore. Many new dialects and variants have emerged as a result of the assimilation of English and local languages, for example Rojak Language in Malaysian English (ME) and Singlish from Singaporean English (SgE). The purpose of writing this article is to analyze the code switching and code mixing used in Rojak Language and Singlish. The method used in this research is the Mimicry and Mockery theory which was coined by Homi K. Bhabha. It is hoped that this research can provide good education to readers who are interested in learning about these languages.

Keywords: Analysis, Code Mixing, Code Switching, Singlish, Rojak Language

Introduction

Communication is a vital activity for humans. Without language, communication will not run smoothly as it should. Language itself is described by Knott and Sanders (2003) as the most effective tool for conveying one's feelings, opinions, thoughts, messages, ideas and goals to other people. Meanwhile, Narrog (2005) argues that language is a set of sentences that have an arrangement that meets the criteria to be considered a sentence, and as a rule in language that is useful in distinguishing between sentences and non-sentences.

One of the most commonly used languages in the world is English, which is the main reason for English to be called as international language. English is recognized as a lingua franca, especially in Commonwealth member countries, the majority of which are former British colonies. The Commonwealth, as reported on its official website, is defined as an association whose membership is voluntary, whose members are countries that are independent and have equal status with each other (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2025). This organization also has traces of history originating from the British Empire.

The use of English in Commonwealth countries has triggered changes in local languages in these countries. Some interesting phenomena to highlight are the emergence of Rojak Language, which belongs as a part of Manglish (Malaysian English), a non-formal dialect of Malaysian

Standard English (MSE) and Colloquial Singaporean English (CSE) or often called as Singlish, which is the vernacular of Singapore Standard English (SSE). These two languages heavily relies to the use of code mixing and code switching between the local native languages with English, which became the unique characteristic of them.

Putra (2023) defines code mixing as a linguistic term that refers to the use of two or more languages in one utterance or sentence. Meanwhile, Wardhaugh explains code switching occurs when language used, changes accordingly situations in which users encounter themselves. The speakers here change one code to another code or they talk in one language to another (2006: 98).

This article will examine the reasons behind the high use of code switching and code mixing in these languages from the perspective of post-colonial theory put forward by Homi K. Bhabha, namely Mimicry and Mockery theory. In this paper the author also uses the theory of Orientalism initiated by Edward Said and the concept of as a complement to what has been conveyed by Bhabha. This article uses descriptive qualitative research methods, data obtained from written sources. It is hoped that this article can contribute to research in the field of linguistics and culture, as well as increase public awareness of the close relationship between language, culture and history and their influence in shaping human social life.

Research Method

The researcher decides to use qualitative method to analyze the data. Moleong (2013) defines qualitative research as a method aimed at understanding phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as behaviors, perceptions, motivations, and actions. This approach provides a holistic and descriptive view, presented in words and language, within specific natural contexts and using various scientific methods. Meanwhile Creswell (2003) explains that the qualitative approach involves understanding knowledge through constructivist views, which focus on the different meanings of experiences shaped by social and historical contexts, or through advocacy and participatory views, which aim to address issues, promote change, or both.

Thus, it can be concluded that qualitative research is a versatile and in-depth approach to studying the richness of human experiences which uses holistic and descriptive approach, focusing on perceptions, actions, and motivations expressed through words and language, while also considering the social and historical context. By exploring diverse perspectives and addressing specific issues or promoting change, qualitative research provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex human behaviors.

The data collection method in this research is the documentation technique. Documentation involves gathering information through visual, verbal, and written means. According to Zuriah (2009), it is the process of collecting data from reliable sources, such as archives, books, theories, opinions, arguments, laws, or other materials relevant to a research problem. Documents serve as records of past activities, events, or occurrences, compiled into a single archive. These documents can take various forms, including written text, images, or significant works created by individuals.

Result and Discussions

Rojak Language

Rojak language refers to a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when Malay (Melayu) language is mixed with other foreign languages, including English. It also combines another local language in Malaysia such as Chinese and Indian. The term "rojak" is derived from a type of dish made by combining various ingredients, symbolizing the mixed nature of this language (Awang Sariyan, 2006: 546). This language also could be categorized as an pidgin (Hassan, 2015). Pidgin language is a simplified means of communication created in situations when there is no common language between speakers. It is categorized as a pidgin because this language originally emerged as a trade language (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). This language emerged as a solution to the lack of language between the speakers. For this reason, the rojak language does not have standardized and structured rules because it is only used according to need.

Lee et al. (2010) described the English language as a legacy of British colonial rule in Malaysia, emphasizing that it became an integral part of the nation's history. The influence of the English language grew further with the introduction of the National Language Policy in 1967, which established English as Malaysia's second language. Since then, it has been widely used across various fields, including government administration, education, law, business, and the media (Augustin, 1982)

In Malaysia there is a school division system based on race and language, namely Vernacular schools. This vernacular school has attracted controversy because it is seen as one of the causes of reduced interest in the Malaysian language. The use of Malaysian as a national language is considered very low compared to other languages such as English, Chinese and Tamil (Indian language). Malaysian/Malay is rarely used to communicate between ethnic groups in Malaysia. They prefer to use English, because many non-Malay ethnic people are not fluent in Malaysian, instead they are used to speak with their own mother tongue from their each respective ethnic culture (Ahmad, 2020).

Ahmad (2020) further argues that Malay/Malaysian language is looked down upon because it is only used locally, not globally, and does not have economic value and a high professional impression like other languages, for example English. In addition, the strength of Malaysian language practitioners among the Bumiputera is only 60 percent. What's worse, some Bumiputeras (Malay natives) don't practice Malay and prioritize English when speaking at home or outside. A handful of citizens consider Malay a peripheral or non-standard language, while English is the language of development.

This aligns with the theories proposed by Bhabha and Said. In his essay *Of Mimicry and Man*, Bhabha introduced the concepts of mimicry and mockery. Mimicry refers to the act of adopting, adapting, or imitating elements such as language, culture, behavior, and ideas, often to an excessive degree (Bhabha, 1994: 86). Said, on the other hand, discussed Orientalism in his seminal 1978 work *Orientalism*. He defined Orientalism as the Western media's tendency to portray East Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African cultures through an imperialist perspective. These depictions often rely on stereotypes that characterize these cultures as backward, trapped in unchanging traditions, and incapable of engaging with modernity.

Orientalist narratives also emphasize exoticism, danger, and otherness, exaggerating themes of mystery and sensuality. Said argued that such portrayals were a means for imperialist nations to reinforce their sense of cultural and political superiority (Hepler, 2023).

There are two types of orientalism, which are latent and manifest orientalism. Latent orientalism refers to the underlying, unconscious assumptions and beliefs about the "Orient" (the Eastern world), while Manifest orientalism describes the visible, explicit expressions of those assumptions in policies, academic disciplines, and cultural representations, essentially the active application of the latent ideas about the Orient in the real world.

It can be said that the attitude of disinterest towards the Malaysian language and Malay in Malaysia by its native citizens is an example of an attitude of latent and manifest orientalism. The mindset has been ingrained in their minds that their language is inferior to the languages of western nations, especially English, thus causing them to choose other languages, especially English, to start their conversations. This makes sense because Malaysia is a former British colony and has definitely received the doctrine of colonialism. England itself is known for its habit of spreading cultural and linguistic influences to its colonies. Similar things happen in other Commonwealth countries that suffer a similar fate, they tend to use English rather than the local language, or use languages that have elements of a mixture of their mother tongue and English, thus creating new pidgins, creoles and vernacular languages.

The Rojak language, due to its heavy use of English words without any localization into Malay as the native language of Malaysia and without a standard structure can be considered a perfect example of mimicry and mockery. The clearest example that can be seen of the form of mimicry and mockery in the rojak language is code switching and code mixing carried out by native Malay speakers who consciously shift and change their language at the beginning, middle and end of sentences in conversation. Their (colonized) efforts to imitate Western culture (the colonized) were carried out imperfectly because the language they imitated was not the same as the language they imitated. This is in line with Bhabha's claim that colonial Mimicry embodies the desire to construct a "reformed" and identifiable Other—one that is almost identical but still feels different (Bhabha, 1994, p. 122). He also states that mimicry can contain teasing and threats. This is shown by the structure of the Rojak language which is considered ambiguous for many people, so it does not deserve to be considered proper and standard English because it is considered an insult to official English and Malay, as well as a threat to official standard English.

Hassan (2015) in his article, "Bahasa Rojak: Malaysian way of speaking English?" explains four various types of code mixing and code switching that occurs in Rojak Language. The definitions and examples of each types is written below.

1. Code mixing means the use of specific words borrowed from another different language.

Examples:

- Honestly, saya rasa dia penat sangat hari ni.
- Now, wo bu xiang chi fan.

The first sentence start with the english word 'Honestly' then continued with a Malay sentence which means "I think he/she is so tired today". The same occurrence exist in the second sentence which uses an english word 'Now' first, and then added a whole mandarin sentence which means the speaker currently not in the mood for eating (wo bu xiang chi fan).

2. Intra-sentential code-mixing. This involves mixing elements of different languages within a single sentence. Usually, words or phrases from one language are inserted into the sentence structure of the another.

Examples:

- Kita nak *hang out* lepak kat mana malam ni?
- Dia tu memang *veetla thaan*, duduk saja kerja tak buat.

The English phrase in the first example 'hang out' is mixed with other Malay words to form one solid, complete sentence. 'Veetla thaan' in the third example is a Tamil (Indian) phrase which means "always at home".

3. Inter-sentential code-switching referred to the complete switch from one language to another language in different sentences. Each sentence remains grammatically correct in its own language.

Examples:

- Esok ada mesyuarat penting. *I hope it goes well.*
- *Wo hai bu tai mingbai.* Can you explain it again?

In the first sentence, a complete English sentence is used with another complete Malay sentence. While in the second sentence, a complete English sentence is used together with a complete Mandarin sentence which means "I still don't quite understand".

4. Code-mixing in a word. Morphemes (parts of words) from different languages combined to form a new hybrid word.

Examples:

- Can you *installkan* software ni? (install + -kan)
- Account tu dah *diblock*, tak boleh login. (di- + block)

'Installkan' is a result of the fusion between the English word 'install' and a Malay suffix 'kan'. This combination also happens with the word 'Diblock'. It is created from the mix of the 'block' word derived from English and Malay prefix 'di'.

Singlish Language

Singlish originated in Singapore as a result of prolonged contact between English speakers and speakers of various Asian languages. It is a creole language, blending English with elements from other languages. The roots of Singlish can be traced back to the arrival of the British in Singapore and the establishment of English-language education in the early 19th century. In the early 1900s, institutions of higher learning were founded, with English as the medium of instruction. As a result, proficiency in English became crucial for social mobility, particularly for access to higher education and employment. English soon became a language of prestige and was widely used as a common language between different ethnic groups. This widespread use of English laid the foundation for a colloquial variant, Singlish, which emerged in informal settings, influenced by the various local languages and dialects spoken (SG101, n.d.).

In 1960, a year after the People's Action Party (PAP) came to power, a bilingual policy was introduced, making English a mandatory subject in primary schools. This policy was expanded to secondary schools in 1966. English was adopted as the official *lingua franca* of post-independence Singapore due to its neutrality across ethnic groups and its economic advantages in international trade and access to English-language educational resources (SG101, n.d.).

While English was taught in colonial schools, it was often mixed with local languages such as Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. Over time, English elements spread beyond the classroom, evolving into a pidgin language used by non-native speakers. Singlish became the mother tongue for many children, eventually developing into a fully formed creole language, which later transforms into a pidgin.

The mimicry and mockery processes that occur in Singlish are almost similar to those that occur in Rojak Language. Its spread began with the arrival of British imperialism and colonialism and was studied as a pidgin. The difference is, Singlish was passed down to the next generation of first speakers and became the mother tongue of the generations after, and became a pidgin. However, this language is considered not to meet standard standards of good and correct English, so its use in public spaces, especially in formal situations, has reaped pros and cons.

One movement that is against singlish is The Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) was launched on April 29, 2000, by then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to encourage Singaporeans to use proper English that is easily understood by everyone. It was started in response to concerns that Singlish was becoming too common, which could hurt Singapore's goal of becoming a top global economy. The movement has been held every year since then, focusing on different themes and groups of people. A variety of events and programs are organized to reach out to people from all walks of life (National Library Board, n.d.).

In response to the SGEM, the Speak Good Singlish Movement (SGSM) was anonymously launched in September 2010 to celebrate Singlish and differentiate it from incorrect English. This movement showcased the growing confidence in Singlish, rejecting any discomfort surrounding its use, especially in light of the SGEM. In 2016, Singlish speakers gained further confidence when the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) included 19 new "Singapore English" words, bringing the total number of Singlish words in the esteemed dictionary to 27. (National Library Board, n.d.).

Singlish is a unique language with several distinct features. These are five key characteristics of Singlish in speech form (Eton Institute, 2024, "5 Unique Features of the Singlish Language").

1. Functional particles. Singlish speakers use pragmatic particles like "lah," "ah," "mah," and "hah," often borrowed from Southern Chinese dialects like Hokkien. These words serve different purposes, such as showing uncertainty ("ah"), making a statement ("lah"), or asking questions ("mah," "hah").

Example sentences:

- "Her dress is too short *lah*."
 - "Take this away, *hah*?"
 - "The first door to the left *ah*?"
 - "Mary was the one who brought the food to you, *mah*?"
2. Verb groups with no subjects. In Singlish, subjects are often left out because they can be inferred from context. This is influenced by shortened Mandarin sentences.

Examples:

- "(You) Go to airport."
- "(I) Still got headache."
- "(I) Don't want lah."

3. Conditional clauses without conjunctions. Singlish speakers sometimes skip conjunctions like "if" or "when" in sentences that would need them in Standard English.

Examples:

- "(If) You sit there, then where I sit?"
 - "(If) Shout again, I go."
 - "(If) I stand here, can hear also."
4. Missing verbs. Singlish speakers may omit the verb "to be" from sentences, a habit derived from Chinese phrases.

Examples:

- "She scared" (is).
 - "Today, I going shopping" (am).
 - "Your book there" (is).
5. Borrowed vocabulary. Singlish includes words from other languages, especially Malay and Chinese. These words have specific meanings and uses.

Examples:

- "Alamak" (Malay) – expresses surprise or dismay.
- "Sian" (Chinese) – indicates boredom.
- "Susah" (Malay) – means "useless."
- "Kiasu" (Chinese, Hokkien) – literally means "afraid to lose", a term which refer to selfish, ambitious, overly competitive person.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the phenomenon of code-mixing and code-switching in Malaysian English and Singaporean Singlish highlights the dynamic interplay of languages in Commonwealth countries. These linguistic practices reflect the influence of various cultures, social contexts, and the evolving nature of communication. Whether in casual conversations or formal settings, speakers fluidly alternate between languages, demonstrating their linguistic adaptability. The rise of both Malaysian English and Singlish further enriches these nations' cultural diversity, illustrating the complex relationship between language, society, and global influences. While these languages displays heterogenic nature of society in Malaysia and Singapore, it's also shown the occurrence of mimicry and mockery in the field of language especially it's application in people's daily lives.

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