

Social Variation of Non-Malays in Kota Bharu, Kelantan: A Study on Accent, Identity and Integration

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Abstract

Language variation is conveyed through its regional or social dimension. In line with that proposition, this paper discusses the social variation of Malay language spoken by non-Malays in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia by focussing on their accents. This paper analyzes the status of national accent and local accent among the informants. The discussion is based on a sociological urban dialectology research. For the analysis, five phonological variables are chosen. They are open-ended vowels (a), such as *kita* ‘we’, close-ended (i), such as *bilik* ‘room’, close-ended (u), such as *masuk* ‘enter’, initial (r) or (r)₁, such as *rumah* ‘home’, and post-vocalic (r) or (r)₂, such as *pasar* ‘market’. Issues on accents are studied through four different degree of formality of speech styles, namely reading word list style (WLS), reading passage style (PS), conversational style (CS) and story-telling style (STS). Three social contextual variables - socio-economic status, sex, and age groups of the informants will be considered in the analysis. The use of national accent compared with the local accent will be linked to issues of identity and integration.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a very potent cultural element for integration and as a symbol of identity within a multi-racial nation and between separated geographical locations of a country. According to Crystal (1987), “the most widely encountered symbol of emerging nationhood is language” and “language seen as the primary outward sign of a group’s identity”. For Malaysia, the Malay language, which is a national and official language, plays the above-mentioned role. In the context of regional differences, Malay language acts as an integrating device between the people of the Malay Peninsula with Sabah and Sarawak states in Borneo. The Malay language was implemented as a national and

official language of Malaysia on September 1st 1967 for the Malay Peninsula, 1973 for Sabah, and 1985 for Sarawak state (Awang Had 1993). Prior to that, English was the national and official language of the nation.

MALAYSIAN NATIONAL ACCENT

Standard Malay accent as a national language in this study is the accent that is normally spoken in a formal official government broadcasting agency - Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) news, government official meetings, and in national schools and higher learning institutions. In sociolinguistics, this concept of accent is called 'received pronunciation' (RP). RP refers to the accent which is used by educated and prestigious members of the society (Asmah 1985; Holmes 2001).

OBJECTIVES

This paper discusses accent differences of the five Malay language phonological variables in four formal speech styles among the non-Malays city dwellers of Kota Bharu, Kelantan. The accents referred to here are the national/standard accent and local accent. The accent differences will be analyzed from three social variables, specifically the socio-economic status (SES), sex, and age of the informants. The discussion will lead to the issues of national and local identity and integration.

In this study, city dwellers were selected because they were the group of people who went through social and linguistic changes earlier than others as a result of development. Thus, city dwellers were regarded as a dynamic group of people. In addition, city dwellers in this country have increased to 65 percent. This figure was based on the statistics from the Ministry of Rural and Territorial Development which affirmed that in 2005 rural dwellers comprised only 35 percent of the population (Mingguan Malaysia 25 Mac 2007). Therefore, focusing on city dwellers is deemed appropriate for this study in discussing the national accent of this dynamic group of people.

The city of Kota Bharu in Kelantan is situated in East Malaysia. In addition to being the capital city and centre of administration for Kelantan, it is also a business and cultural

centre for Kelantan. Kelantan has many races; Malays, Chinese, Indian and others. Kelantan, also known as Cik Siti Wan Kembang's state, has about 1.2 million population. The majority of its population are Malays. However, there are also other races in the state as in Table 1. Chinese, Indian and others are minorities. The focus of this study is Chinese [as non native speakers] when using the national language; Malay language.

TABLE 1: Population in Kelantan
(Source: Economic Planning Unit of Kelantan)

Malay	1,108,416	93.8%
Chinese	54,357	4.6%
Indian	8,277	0.7%
Others	10,635	0.9%
Total	1,181,680	100.0%

Teo Kok Seong (2005: 69) in *Asimilasi Dialek Melayu Kelantan Dan Dialek Thai Kelantan Dalam Bahasa Cina Peranakan Kelantan* said that Chinese Peranakan in Kelantan is a small minority ethnic group of Malaysian chinese. Their usage of Malay language as their first language is not unusual for this minority group. In fact, among the conditions put forward by the Chinese Peranakan Kelantan council for a person to be accepted as a member includes the condition that Malay Kelantan dialect must be one of the languages which a person must be fluent in (Mesyuarat Penubuhan Majlis Peranakan Cina Peranakan 1987: 7). This is not a big problem for Chinese Peranakan since they are very fluent and proficient in the Malay language [Kelantan dialect]. For some of these Chinese Peranakan, Kelantan Malay dialect is their first language because of their failure to master their own mother tongue to enable them to be involved in communication among themselves effectively, what more with the pure Chinese group (Teo Kok Seong, 1992: 17).

Chinese Peranakan were also said to have a high linguistic proficiency. Besides having the linguistic proficiency such as the grammar of Kelantan Malay language, communication style, their interaction style, body gestures during interaction and using appropriate pauses in oral Kelantan discourse (Teo Kok Seong, 1996: 347). In fact, it was said that Kelantan Malay language is a more important language than the mother tongue of this community itself.

This research discusses briefly about the accent used by the Chinese in Kota Bharu, Kelantan as non native speakers in a minority area when using the national language; the Malay language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the sociological urban sociolinguistics approach which was pioneered by Labov in New York City, and later by Trudgill in Norwich and Milroy in Belfast. The study investigates the interrelation between linguistic (phonological), style of speech, and social variables and is conducted in the city of Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia. The details of the research methodology are as follows.

Social Variables

The social variables which are taken into consideration in this study are age, and socio-economic status (SES) (combination of level of education, types of occupation, and income items) of informants.

Speech Styles

Four different speech styles were formed as the basis for this study, namely reading word list style (WLS), reading passage style (PS), conversational style (CS), and story-telling style (STS). WLS and PS involved the use of text, and were considered as 'text style'. Text style involves informants reading a list of words and a reading passage whereas CS and STS were considered as 'non-text style'. These four speech styles differed in their degree of formality, with WLS being the most formal, and STS the least formal [most casual].

Phonological Variables

There were five (5) phonological variables studied in the four (4) speech styles mentioned earlier- the final syllable open-ended vowel (a) such as in *kita* ‘we’, final syllable close-ended vowel (i) such as in *ini bilik* ‘room’ and close-ended vowel (u) such as in *masuk* ‘enter’, initial consonant (r) or (r)₁ such as in *rumah* ‘home’, and (r) in word final position (rhotic) or (r)₂ such as in *pasar* ‘market’. Among the five phonological variables, two (2) were the most significant in relation to accent and identity- (a) and (r)₂ (see Asmah 1985). Accents for the five phonological variables were categorized into two variations - national / standard accent (NA) and local accent (LA).

The occurrences of the phonological variables for CS and STS were not predetermined but subjected to their emergence in the informants’ utterances. For CS, the researchers prompt informants to converse by posing relevant questions. Among the questions raised were about themselves and their views on the city of Kota Bharu. For STS, the researchers motivated the informants to narrate a story about their previous experiences; pleasant or bad. There was minimum interruption from the researchers.

RESEARCH AREA AND INFORMANTS

The research in Kota Bharu was carried out on 31 Mei – 5 Jun 2007. The researchers approached informants around school areas, restaurants in the middle of the city, Buluh Kubu market and Khadijah market, Chinese housing areas, government offices and clubs. The focus informants were 25 Chinese in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia. 15 [60 percent] of the informants were males, and 10 [40 percent] were females.

From the scores of the two SES items, the informants were grouped into four categories: middle lower group (MLG), upper lower group (ULG), lower middle group (LMG), and middle middle group (MMG). The distribution according to SES group was MLG, [12%] LMG [24%], MMG [12%] and ULG [40%].

The distribution according to age group shows that four age groups were present in the study. Age group 1 (15-25 years old) accounts for 8 percent [2 males], age group 2 (26-40 years old) for 24 percent [3 males and 3 females], and age group 3 (41-55 years old) for 56 percent [7 males and 7 females]. Meanwhile age group 4 (56 + years old) accounted for 12 percent and was represented only by 3 male informants. Distribution details for these percentages are shown in Table 2.

Informants

TABLE 2 : Profile of Informants in Kota Bharu

Socio-economic Status of Informant (SES)	Sex		Age group /Age				Total
	M	F	1 15-25 Adolescent	2 26-40 Early adulthood	3 41-55 Adult	4 56+ Old	
2 – MLG	2	1	-	-	1	2	3 (12)
3 – ULG	10	3	2	2	8	1	13 (52)
4 – LMG	2	4	-	3	3	-	6 (24)
5 – MMG	1	2	-	1	2	-	3 (12)
Total	15 (60)	10 (40)	2 (8)	6 (24)	14 (56)	3 (12)	25 (100)

Research Procedures and Data Analysis

This study involved audio recordings of the informants' speech in the text style and non-text style which were specially designed. The recordings and the fieldwork were carried out by the researcher herself. The recordings were then listened to with the assistance of two linguistics Masters students who had been trained to identify the pronunciation variations of the two (2) phonological variables and the frequency of their occurrences,

and record them. The raw data gathered were then analysed in a form which was specially designed for the purpose of this analysis. The frequency of accent occurrence whether the standard accent or the local accent, in both the styles, was also converted into percentages. Personal details and SES of the informants were transferred to a coding form. The informants were categorized into groups based on the SES scores and age group.

Findings And Discussions

The discussion starts off by expounding the reality profile of Malay language accent as the national accent by examining each of the five phonological variables. Subsequently, it will look into the use of accent by means of the five phonological variables, based on three sociological variables; social economic status [SES], sex, and age category.

Reality of National Accent:

Overall Findings

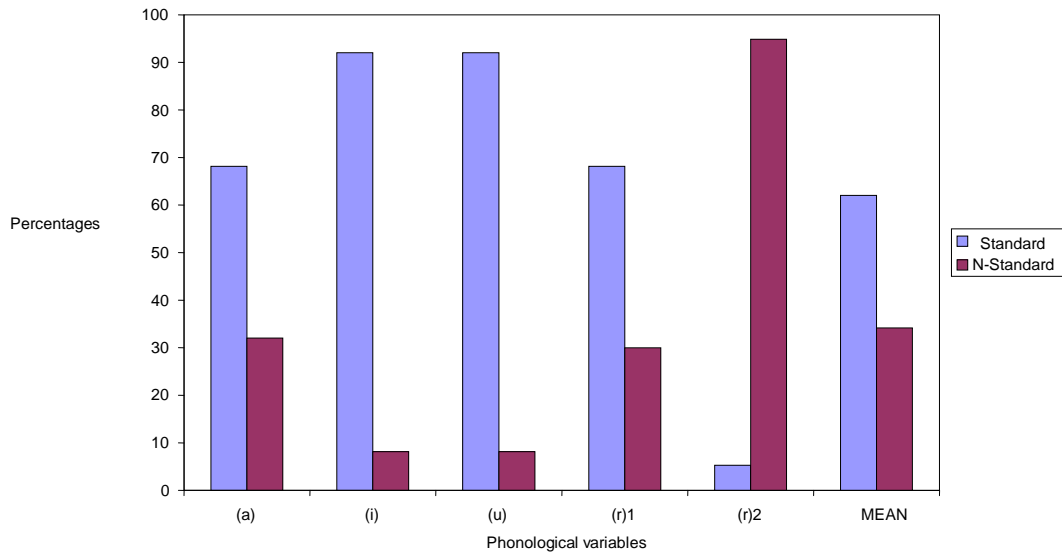
The majority of the informants in Kota Bharu used standard accent (variation) more frequently than non standard accent (local). This is depicted in the total mean of all phonological variables which shows 65 percent for standard accent, as compared to local accent which is only 35 percent. Refer to Table 3 dan Figure 1. The increased use of standard accent was mainly impelled by four phonological variables- (a),(i), (u), and (r)₁ with 68 percent, 92 percent, 92 percent, and 68 percent respectively. However, for variables, (r)₂, the usage is only 5 percent .

The result shows that there are two categories of phonological variables : first category, (r)₂; and (r)₂; second category, [a], [i], [u], and (r)₁. Variable (r)₂ were mainly used as non standard accent (95 percent).

TABLE 3 Overall Profile of Standard Accent of non Native in Kota Bharu

ACCENT	PHONOLOGICAL VARIABLE [%]					MEAN
	(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) ₁	(r) ₂	
Standard (S)	68	92	92	68	5	65
N- Standard (NS)	32	8	8	32	95	35

Figure 1 Accent in Kota Bharu



Accent And Speech Style

Overall, even though there seems to be a relationship between the choice of accent and speech style variation, it is not consistent. The mean for the most formal style (WLS) for standard accent is 68.8. However, in the less formal style (PS), it increases to 71 points. As for CS, it decreases again to 56.2 and in the least formal style (STS), it again increases to 61.8. Refer to Table 3. Nevertheless, if we look in the context of text style and non text style in general, there is a relationship between speech style and accent with 67.9 and 58.8 respectively. This may be due to the fact that (r)₂ and (r)₁ are used more

frequently in a standard accent for all styles whereas for (a), (i), (u), are consistently used as standard accent in all the speech styles.

TABLE 3: Malay Accent in Kota Bharu Based on Speech Style

SPEECH STYLES	ACCEN T	PHONOLOGICAL VARIABLES (%)					
		(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) ₁	(r) ₂	MEAN
WLS	S	73	86	89	68	8	64.8
	NS	27	14	11	32	92	35.2
PS	S	81	98	96	73	7	71
	NS	19	2	4	27	93	29
Text Style	S	77	92	92.5	70.5	7.5	67.9
	NS	23	8	7.5	29.5	92.5	32.1
CS	S	65	97	92	27	0	56.2
	NS	35	3	8	73	100	43.8
STS	S	69	100	96	42	0	61.4
	NS	31	0	4	58	100	38.6
Non-Text Style	S	67	98.5	94	34.5	0	58.8
	NS	33	1.5	6	65.5	100	41.2

The rationale why informants generally used non standard accent for (r)₂ may be due to the their difficulties in pronouncing the phonological variable (r)₂ .

Accent and Socio-Economic Status

Informants who belong to MLG, ULG, LMG and MMG cluster of social economic status (SES) have the tendency to use standard accent more frequently. This is revealed from the mean of all the five phonological variables for each SES cluster. Two middle class clusters; LMG dan MMG used standard accent at 73.2and 71 percent respectively, in comparison to MLG dan ULG which used 52.2 and 62.4 percent [Refer Table 4].

The SES cluster variable also denotes the separation between the two category of phonological variables. it was discovered that all SES clusters used more standard accent compared to non standard accent for variables (a), (i), (u) dan (r)₁. [except MLG for (a) which used a little more non standard accent but the difference is not obvious]. For (r)₂ all SES clusters used non standard accent far more than standard accent.

These findings show that there is a relationship between the informants' socio-economic status (SES) and the choice of Malay language accent in formal style context.

TABLE 4 : National Accent in Kota Bharu Based on
Socio-Economic Status (SES)

SOCIAL VARIABLE		PHONOLOGICAL VARIABLE					
SES	ACCENT	(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) ₁	(r) ₂	MEAN
MLG	S	41	87	72	59	2	52.2
	NS	59	13	28	41	98	47.8
ULG	S	67	92	94	58	1	62.4
	NS	33	8	6	42	99	37.6
LMG	S	76	93	96	84	17	73.2
	NS	24	7	4	16	83	26.8
MMG	S	87	84	95	85	4	71
	NS	13	16	5	15	96	29

Accent and Sex

Female informants show more awareness of standard accent than males. The mean for standard accent of all the five phonological variables for female informants was 69.8 percent, compared to only 61.6 percent for male informants. Refer Table 5. The awareness of female informants in reference to standard accent is also revealed in four

phonological variables ; specifically (a), (i), (u), and (r)₁. For variable (i), both male and female informants show about the same level of awareness for standard accent that is, 91 and 92 percent respectively. For phonological variable (r)₂, male and female informants used only 1 and 11 percent standard accent respectively.

TABLE 5 : National Accent in Kota Bharu Based on Sex

SOCIAL VARIABLE		PHONOLOGICAL VARIABLE (%)					
SEX	ACCENT	(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) ₁	(r) ₂	MEAN
Male	S	64	92	89	62	1	61.6
	BS	36	8	11	38	99	38.4
Female	S	75	91	95	77	11	69.8
	BS	25	9	5	23	89	30.2

Accent and Age

The study shows that age does play a role in the choice of accent used. Generally speaking, informants who fall under the category of adolescent, early adulthood and adult are more sensitive to standard accent compared to the elderly informants. Informants below 55 years old used standard accent more often than those aged 56 and above.

Category age 1 (15-25 years old) recorded 70.8 percent standard accent usage, while category age 2 (26-40 years old) 71.6 percent and category age 3 (41-55 years old) 63.8 percent. Refer Table 6. This scenario can be linked to the effects of national education and also to the mobility factor among the younger informants.

Two categories of phonological variables were identified in relation to their usage and age cluster. First, (r)₂ was used as local accent to a great extent for all the four age clusters. Second, (a), (i), (u), and (r)₁ were mostly used as standard accent.

TABLE 6 : National Accent in Kota Bharu Based on Age

SOCIAL VARIABLE	PHONOLOGICAL VARIABLE (%)						
	ACCENT	(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) ₁	(r) ₂	MEAN
1 - (15 – 25 years old)	S	81	96	94	78	5	70.8
Adolescent	NS	19	4	6	22	95	29.2
2 - (26 – 40 years old)	S	72	98	97	81	10	71.6
Early Adulthood	NS	28	2	3	19	90	28.4
3 - (41 – 55 years old)	S	70	89	94	62	4	63.8
Adult	NS	30	11	6	38	96	36.2
4 - (56 + years old)	S	37	89	69	57	2	50.8
Old/Elderly	NS	63	11	31	43	98	49.2

National Accent In Kota Bharu:

Identity And Integration

This research was carried out in a formal context. Formal here signifies that the researchers and the informants did not know each other and the interview questions were specifically constructed for this purpose. Based on this formal context, this research concludes that non native minority in kota bharu have the tendency for national identity and integration .

This is depicted by the cluster of informants based on SES, age clusters, and female informants, especially for (i), (u), and (r)₁ phonological variables. Local identity is more apparent when informants used phonological variable (r)₂ in cases of sex, age, and SES.

These findings illustrate that in the context of formal situation, national identity and integration are shown through accents by non native speakers of malay language in this

minority area. These findings also show that most Kelantan Chinese do not just integrate in the Malay Kelantan community but also in the using the standard national accent.

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