

# The English language in Brunei Darussalam

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper attempts to give a brief overview of the variety of English spoken in the small sultanate of Brunei Darussalam in Northwest Borneo. After outlining the role played by English in the country and, in particular, in the Bruneian education system, the paper describes some of the grammatical and lexical features which differ most obviously from the imposed exonormative educational model, Standard British English. The transcribed interviews and examples included have been taken from a corpus of spoken data recorded between 1990 and 1993 by the author in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei. The article also attempts to place Brunei English within the context of the other varieties of English spoken in Southeast Asia and suggests that, once the effects of the country's nationwide Malay-English bilingual education policy have taken full effect, there will be further distinctive developments in the variety of English spoken in Brunei Darussalam.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although studies of the variety of English spoken in Brunei Darussalam are at present being carried out by a small group of researchers who are, for the most part, either current or former members of the Department of English of Universiti Brunei Darussalam, very little published material on Brunei English has, as yet, appeared. This paper has three aims: first, to give a brief account of the role of English in Brunei, second, to show how some of the grammatical and lexical features of spoken Brunei English differ from the exonormative educational model, Standard British English, and, third, to place these Brunei English features within the context of Southeast Asia and the varieties of English spoken in the region.

All the examples given in the paper have been taken from a corpus of spoken data I recorded in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei between 1990 and 1993. The two sources of recorded data were interviews with undergraduate students at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, and largely unscripted radio programmes involving Bruneian speakers of English, which were broadcast by the English Section of Radio Television Brunei (RTB).

## 2. THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE SITUATION IN BRUNEI

The sultanate of Brunei Darussalam ('darussalam' comes from the Arabic for 'abode of peace') is situated in the northwestern part of the island of Borneo and currently has a population of approximately 265,500 (Statistics Division, Economic Planning Unit, 1991). The largest ethnic group, which accounts for 69 percent of the total population, is Malay in origin. Approximately 18 percent of the population are of Chinese origin, and other indigenous groups (e.g., Dusun, Belait, Murut, etc.) make up 5 percent of the population. The remaining 8 percent are foreign workers from Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, etc. (see Martin, 1990).

Prior to 1985, the medium of instruction in Bruneian secondary schools was either Malay or English. In general, pupils who performed well in the Primary Certificate of

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Education (PCE) examination were selected for English-medium secondary schools, while pupils with lower PCE scores would go to Malay-medium secondary schools. This division served to foster the belief amongst many Bruneians that English was a language of higher academic status than Malay. In early 1985, a system of bilingual education, the *Sistem Pelajaran Dwibahasa*, was introduced nationwide by the government. The aim was to replace the previous separation of Malay and English-medium education with one bilingual system which would lead to improved proficiency levels in both languages.

Under the Dwibahasa (bilingual) system, pupils take three years of lower primary education, using Malay as the medium of instruction except in English language classes. From the fourth year of primary education through to the final year of secondary education, subjects relating to Malay culture (Malay language, Islamic Religious Knowledge, Civics, etc.) are taught in Malay, while other subjects (such as Science, Mathematics, English language and Geography) are taught in English. Ahmad (1992) has calculated that, by the time a pupil reaches lower secondary level, 65 percent of his/her time is spent studying through the medium of English and 35 percent is spent studying in Malay.

Since secondary school pupils take courses leading to the Cambridge Board's GCE Ordinary and Advanced Level examinations, the variety of English currently functioning as a theoretical model for teachers and pupils is Standard British English. In January 1993, there were approximately 230 British and Irish teachers of English language working in Bruneian primary and secondary schools, either as employees of the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) or on government contracts. A much smaller number of native speakers of English from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States also work in Bruneian schools and colleges. In addition, English is taught by a small but growing number of Bruneian English language teachers as well as by language teachers from Malaysia, the Philippines, India, Pakistan and other Asian countries. Thus, as in many other countries where English has been institutionalized as one of the languages used in education, a number of linguistic contrasts can be found between the imposed exonormative variety and the different varieties of English actually spoken in the classroom by teachers and students.

In a study of 570 Bruneian citizens carried out by Martin and Ozog (reported in Ozog, 1992), English was perceived as being the most important language in the country by 30.5 percent of those questioned. This figure was higher than that for the official language, Bahasa Melayu (Standard Malay), which only 21.9 percent considered to be the most important language. The local variety of Malay (Brunei Malay) was perceived to be the most important language in Brunei by 41.1 percent of those questioned. Although Bahasa Melayu (Standard Malay) is the country's official language and is the variety taught at school and used in the mass media, Brunei Malay is the language of everyday communication for most Bruneians and acts as a sign of a speaker's wish to identify himself/herself as a Bruneian.

With regard to English usage, Martin and Ozog found that, of the 570 Bruneian citizens who took part in the survey (Ozog, 1992), 393 claimed that they used English regularly in their daily lives. Of this number, 297 (75 percent) were under the age of thirty-five, suggesting that at least the occasional use of English is widespread amongst young Bruneians.

Although the theoretical model for English language teaching in schools is Standard British English, a number of grammatical, lexical and discourse features which differ from the educational model have emerged in the spoken English of Bruneians. At present, there tends to be much less awareness amongst Bruneians than there is amongst, for example, Singaporeans (see Pakir, 1993; Tay, 1993), that the variety of English spoken in the

country differs from Standard British English. Bruneian speakers are usually aware that their pronunciation is different and that they use certain lexical items which are not used in Standard British English, but they are generally unaware of the grammatical differences existing between the two varieties. The following extracts are taken from recorded interviews with two high school teachers who, at the time of the recording, were enrolled in an in-service degree programme at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. The extracts are included because they provide useful insights into both the grammatical forms of spoken Brunei English and the linguistic views of two highly educated Bruneians.

### *Extract 1*

*Graeme Cane:* How would you classify your accent?

*Student 1:* I think my accent is Asian, you know, Brunei style.

*GC:* And you're happy to have a Brunei-style accent?

*S1:* Oh yeah. As far as I speak correct English, you know, so I don't mind about that. I don't think I can change it.

*GC:* You wouldn't want to change it?

*S1:* Not really in Brunei. I don't think so.

*GC:* If you went to live in England, would you change your accent?

*S1:* I have to, I think, to make the others understand about it, you know. So if I speak my Brunei English, they probably have problems in understanding.

*GC:* What do you think the differences would be between Southeast Asian English and British English?

*S1:* There is different [*sic*], I think, very much in accent. But, ah, when it comes to writing, you know, sometimes I think no different.

*Hajjah Rosnah Haji Ramly:* If a Bruneian were to speak with a distinct British or American accent, would people here find it peculiar?

*S1:* In Brunei we speak like a British accent, I think. Those who have been abroad, they don't mind about that, you know, when we use that accent like at a university, at the right, you know, place. But if you speak like British accent maybe at a wedding, they probably will find it strange, you know.

*GC:* People will laugh, you think?

*S1:* Not really. They don't laugh.

### *Extract 2*

*GC:* Do you think there is such a thing as the Brunei variety of English?

*Student 2:* Yes, there is.

*GC:* What is this then?

*S2:* Maybe that's the way we are talking. Well, I think we can recognize it, you know. When we are talking among us, you know. Even if we are talking to our lecturers, those who are non-native speakers, we tend to use that type of variety of English.

*GC:* But when speaking to me, you tend not to use it.

*S2:* I'm conscious avoid it.

*GC:* You try to avoid it?

*S2:* Yeah.

*GC:* Why is that?

*S2:* I think because of the context itself, you know. We know that we are talking to these native speakers, so we tend to, you know, select which variety to speak, to be used.

*GC:* Do you think you can handle both these varieties equally well?

*S2:* I can't say that. I don't know whether I am competent in both but, well, I think I can.

GC: But when speaking to me now, you would say you are not speaking the Brunei variety now?  
 S2: Well, I try to avoid most of the way I talk to my friends or talk to non-native speakers. So sometimes I'm conscious of especially the vocabulary. We tend to use different words.

As readers will have noted, the above extracts contain a number of grammatical features which differ from Standard British English. The following section discusses some of these features.

### 3. GRAMMATICAL FEATURES

Grammatical differences from Standard British English occur consistently throughout the collected Brunei data. With regard to the verb phrase, two major differences are (a) the use of the present tense where other tenses would be required in Standard British English, and (b) the use of the base form of the verb in the present tense of both regular and irregular verbs, regardless of person or number. Examples of (a) above occur in sentences 1–3 below.

1. This song reminds me of the old days when *I'm* with the group, 'The Mixtures'.
2. And I *begin* liking this song and I *play* it over and over.
3. A group of us was leaving for Kota Kinabalu to climb the mountain in 1973, that is. And as we *board* the plane, we *hum* this particular song softly and it was so touching.

Examples of (b) above occur in 4–6:

4. I think it's also the same the word that he *use*.
5. For me, for me a Bruneian, my accent *tend* to be . . .
6. Any caller who *give* us one of them will be considered the winner.

With regard to the noun phrase, one general characteristic is the tendency in Brunei English towards greater grammatical flexibility (i.e., a higher degree of acceptance of different morphological forms) than is the case in Standard British English. There is, for example, greater acceptance of variable singular or plural marking within the noun phrase. The following nouns are considered to be uncountable in Standard British English, but in Brunei English they often (but not always) take pluralized forms: equipment/equipments; staff/staffs; information/informations.

The reclassification of countable and uncountable nouns, such as that occurring in the above examples, is, of course, a commonly described feature of many of the varieties of English which have emerged across Asia and Africa. Brunei English seems here to be following the established New Englishes pattern. (See, for example, Platt *et al.*, 1984: 51).

A Bruneian speaker of English may choose to mix singular and plural marking in two occurrences of the same countable noun in one utterance, demonstrating the present instability of singular/plural marking for many Bruneian speakers of English.

7. I like this *song* very much, for no particular reason, but I just like the *songs*.  
 (The speaker was referring to one song only.)

The following examples are further illustrations of the less rigid distinction between uncountable and countable nouns and the flexibility in singular/plural marking found in spoken Brunei English.

8. And here's *an advice* for you all.

9. In the village we have *gathering*.
10. When *student* get bored, especially in the afternoon.
11. I used to play this *songs* from the Carpenters over and over again.  
(The speaker was referring to one particular song here.)

There is also more tolerance of variation in article omission or insertion than in Standard British English, as examples 12–16 illustrate. As Platt *et al.* have reported (1984: 55–57), this feature is also shared by a number of other New English varieties.

12. I think we have problem with their accent, you see.
13. 'Just When I Needed You Most' is beautiful song.
14. A: You will get a consolation prize from RTB.  
B: Is it big one for me?
15. I mean you can understand native speakers who don't speak the RP accent.
16. I think Philippines because they are using the American accent.

It is possible to argue that the above features have been produced as a result of contact with Malay, the mother tongue of most Brunei English speakers, since there are no direct equivalents of the English definite and indefinite articles in Malay, and pluralization is marked differently from the way it is marked in English (Cane, 1993: 88–91). However, in the recorded data, there are also examples of grammatical changes which seem to have arisen without obvious external stimulus and, therefore, not from contact with Malay. These are (a) the creation of new phrasal and prepositional verbs (verb-plus-particle combinations) (see examples 17–19), and (b) different preposition usage from that found in Standard British English, as illustrated in 20–23 below.

17. This will *shorten up* the times of getting confirmations.
18. And not *forgetting for* Salina of Miri.
19. It's a good way to *grasp at* what he means.
20. Congratulations *for* your engagement.  
(Standard British English = *on*)
21. That depends on how close I am *with* the lecturers.  
(Standard British English = *to*)
22. We used to dance *with* this beat.  
(Standard British English = *to*)
23. Sorry *for* that.  
(Standard British English = *about*)

How these features relate to the grammatical features found in other Southeast Asian varieties of English is discussed in Section 5 below.

#### 4. LEXICAL FEATURES

The collected data show that, in topics which are perceived to have a specific Malay or Islamic cultural identity, certain key Malay or Arabic words are retained, probably because Bruneian speakers of English consider these words to be culturally more appropriate than the English equivalents. The following examples illustrate this type of lexical borrowing. Items 1–6 below demonstrate borrowings from the Malay language.

1. *bomoh* – a traditional medicine man
2. *dadah* – illegal drugs. The media in Brunei refer to ‘the war against dadah’ or the ‘anti-dadah campaign’.
3. *parang* – a type of knife similar to a machete.
4. *M.I.B.* – the Malay Islamic Monarchy concept.
5. I’d like to wish *Selamat Hari Raya* to all my friends. (‘selamat’ = happy; ‘Hari Raya’ = the celebration at the end of Ramadan)
6. *Mat Salleh* – a European.  
The term is thought to come from combining a common Malay name (‘Mat’ is an abbreviated form of ‘Mohammad’) with the English ‘mad sailor’. (Lugg, 1984: 14).

One lexical feature borrowed from Brunei Malay which occurs in informal spoken Brunei English is the *bah* particle. Ozog and Martin (1990) have identified some of the pragmatic functions carried by *bah* in Brunei English such as concurring, inviting and closing a conversation. The following are some examples of the use of ‘bah’ taken from their recorded data.

7. A: You want to come with me?  
B: Bah. (i.e., concurring)
8. A: That girl is very talkative, ah?  
B: Au bah. So noisy.  
(= Yes, bah.)
9. A: See you.  
B: Bah. (i.e., closing conversation)

As the above examples indicate, *bah* tends to be used in informal speech contexts but not in formal ones. The particle is rarely used, for instance, in radio interviews involving Bruneian speakers of English, presumably because a public broadcast is perceived to be a fairly formal speech context.

Examples 10–13 below, taken from Radio Brunei programmes or announcements, all contain Arabic lexical borrowings relating in one way or another to the Islamic religion.

10. And also for Y of Lumut, Kuala Belait, *Assalamwalaikum*. How are you and do sleep well tonight.
11. Now is the time to perform the *Zuhul* prayer. (In Brunei English, prayers are always ‘performed’, not ‘said’.)
12. Radio Announcer: The next one (record request) is coming up from Mardini of Tutong. *Aleikumsalam* to you too, Mardini.
13. Happy belated birthday and may *Allah* bless you.

The recorded data also contains examples of collocations which would not generally be found in Standard British English. The following examples (14–18) are included to illustrate this dynamic tendency, found especially in the speech of teenagers, to create new collocations and idioms.

14. Radio programme presenter: So again, Momin, *happy smashing birthday*. Now let’s listen to the next song.
15. To all guys and girls who know me, *happy merry Christmas*.
16. It was quite a new experience for us since it’s our first time overseas and we went out to buy

new shoes, new earrings and did our hair for the special occasion. And the food was *quite OK* as well because it's buffet style.

(*Quite OK* here would seem to be the equivalent of 'very good', i.e., using 'quite' with the same meaning it has in the Standard British English collocations 'quite perfect' and 'quite right', not with the less enthusiastic meaning it has in Standard British English 'quite nice', 'quite pretty', etc.)

17. Keep up the handsome face.  
(= Stay handsome)
18. Have a nice New Year and smile always.

In addition to the lexical features noted above, Brunei English shares a number of non-Standard British English lexical items with other Southeast Asian varieties of English. There is a particularly strong overlap with Singapore English and with Malaysian English, and discussion of these shared features follows in Section 5.

## 5. GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL SIMILARITIES WITH OTHER SOUTHEAST ASIAN VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

With regard to the verb phrase, it was noted in Section 3 that speakers of Brunei English tend to use the present tense where other tenses would be required in Standard British English, and to use the base form of the verb in the present tense, regardless of person or number. The following examples demonstrate that these verb phrase features are also found in other Southeast Asian Englishes. The examples are taken from the varieties of English spoken in Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea. I have included Papua New Guinea because it can be considered to be part of Southeast Asia in geographical terms, as the country shares the island of New Guinea with Irian Jaya, a part of Indonesia. In terms of ethnic and cultural background, however, Papua New Guinea is, of course, very different from the other three countries.

1. That day I *meet* him. I *ask* him about the car. He *want* one thousand, man. (Singapore English) (Tay, 1993: 100)
2. I *go* to Malay primary school. I took no English – was only Malay. (Malaysian English) (Platt and Weber, 1980: 173)
3. The next day, the manager *looks* for me, I came and *work*. (Papua New Guinea English) (Smith, 1978: 21)
4. He *have* gone. (Philippine English) (Gonzalez, 1983: 163)
5. My friend *work* in the bank. (Singapore English) (Tay, 1993: 32)

As in the Brunei English examples given in Section 3, sentences 1–5 above show a similar tendency in other Southeast Asian Englishes to mark tense and concord less strictly than is usual in Standard British English. With regard to the noun phrase, it was shown that the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns and singular/plural marking in general may be less rigid than is generally the case in Standard British English. The following examples show that this feature is shared by other Southeast Asian varieties.

6. Very few *student* can come on Friday. (Singapore English) (Tay, 1993: 32)
7. He has many *luggages*. (Philippine English) (Gonzalez, 1983: 167)
8. A lot of *talks* are going around. (Papua New Guinea English) (Smith, 1978: 20)

9. All Hindi *film* they have Bahasa *sub-title*. (Malaysian English)  
(Platt and Weber, 1980: 176)

Non-Standard British English article omission or insertion is another shared feature, as examples 10–12 illustrate.

10. May I apply for car licence? (Singapore English) (Tay, 1993: 32)  
11. This is very important place. (Papua New Guinea English) (Smith, 1978: 18)  
12. Police, I am concerned that they have used force . . . I am sure when the findings take place, commissioner would be able to find out. (Papua New Guinea English)  
(Smith, 1986: 350)

Readers familiar with the varieties of English spoken in Southeast Asia will be aware that virtually all the non-Standard British English grammatical features noted in Brunei English in Section 3 can be found throughout the English varieties of Southeast Asia, and indeed in many of the varieties found in other parts of Asia and the world. Since verbs in Malay do not inflect for tense, person or number, it might be suggested that the simplification tendency in the verb phrase in Brunei English is a result of interference from Malay, the mother tongue of most speakers. However, it has also been noted that similar verb phrase simplification occurs in other new varieties of English (such as Singapore English, Papua New Guinea English and Philippine English) where the mother tongues of the speakers involved are all different and where, in some cases, verb inflection is found. It would seem reasonable to suggest, therefore, that both interference from Malay and a pan-linguistic grammatical simplification process have contributed to producing the syntactic forms noted in Brunei English.

Poedjosoedarmo (unpublished research in progress) points out that the creation of non-Standard British English phrasal and prepositional verbs, similar to the examples found in the Brunei data, also occurs in Singapore English. She gives the following examples collected in 1993 from the written work of some Singaporean university students:

13. The pre-school *stresses on* not wasting food.  
14. . . . to *manipulate with* the given objects.  
15. to *meet up with* the world's demands.

Smith (1986: 388) provides an example of the same phenomenon in Papua New Guinea English.

16. It's really quite different, you see. That's quite hard for the village people to *catch up to*.

It can therefore be concluded that, even though the specific Bruneian examples quoted in Section 3 may not actually occur in other contexts, the general grammatical tendencies of Brunei English can be found in many of the varieties described as 'New Englishes' by Platt *et al.* (1984).

Since developments in lexis are generally more culture related than changes in grammar, lexical innovations tend to be less widespread across World English varieties than grammatical features. Within the Southeast Asian context, while Brunei English shares many non-Standard British English lexical items with Singapore English and Malaysian English, there is less lexical overlap with Philippine English or with Papua New Guinea English.

What follows is a selection of Brunei English lexical items which have also been noted in descriptions of the lexis of both Singapore English and Malaysian English. (See, for



example, Johnson, 1984; Brown, 1992). As with all the previous examples given in this paper, examples 17–25 have been taken from the corpus of spoken data collected in Brunei by the author. Many more items could be added to the nine given below, demonstrating the close lexical connections between the three varieties of English.

17. Can I follow you?  
(Standard British English = Can I go with you?)
18. I'm frus because unable to solve my problems.  
(= frustrated)
19. Please on the light.  
(= turn on)
20. Please off the light.  
(= turn off)
21. You're still schooling, of course.  
(= going to school)
22. They will scold you for that.  
(= criticize, reprimand)
23. Can someone send me to Tiong Hin?  
(= Can someone take me to Tiong Hin?)
24. You sleep early but we sleep late.  
(= You go to bed early but we go to bed late.)
25. Which part of Lambak do you stay?  
(= Which part of Lambak do you live in?)

While many of the linguistic features of Brunei English can also be found in Malaysian and Singapore English, it is worth noting briefly that the data also reveals a small number of features which occur either much less frequently or not at all in other Southeast Asian varieties of English. There is, for example, a greater tendency to use Islamic lexical items than would be usual in either Singapore or Malaysian English, even in the non-religious context of a radio record-request programme of Top Ten hits.

26. Happy belated birthday and may Allah bless you.
27. Happy birthday to you tomorrow. May God bless you always.

There is also a strong tendency to give names and titles in full in formal spoken contexts. The following examples were taken from radio news bulletins.

28. Doa Selamat (the welcoming prayer) was read by Yang Di-Muliakan Pehin Dato Imam Dato Paduka Seri Setia Ustaz Awang Haji Abdul Hamid bin Bakal.
29. His Majesty's son, Yang Teramat Mulia Paduka Seri Pengiran Muda Haji Abdul Azim, this morning consented to visit the Brunei Shell complex in Seria.
30. Duli Yang Teramat Mulia Paduka Seri Pengiran Perdana Wazir Sahibul Himmah Wal-Waqar Pengiran Muda Haji Mohamed Bolkiah, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, has consented to receive courtesy calls from several delegates attending the 47th session of the United Nations' General Assembly in New York, which Duli Yang Teramat Mulia is attending.

As mentioned above, one exclusively Bruneian lexical/discourse feature is the *bah* particle which is widely used in informal spoken Brunei English. Ozog and Martin's (1990) study suggests that *bah* has a wider set of functions than the *lah* particle has in Singapore/

Malaysian English, and that *bah* is regarded as an important linguistic marker of Bruneian identity.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The collected data show that Brunei English shares many grammatical and lexical features with other Southeast Asian varieties of English, and that there is an especially close overlap with both Singapore English and Malaysian English. While a small number of exclusively Bruneian features have already been identified, greater linguistic distinctiveness may develop once the government's nationwide bilingual policy takes full effect in the country. Further research will therefore be needed over the next few years to investigate possible distinctive developments in the variety. Provided that the Bruneian government is prepared to maintain its current bilingual Malay–English education policy throughout the upper-primary and secondary education system, it seems very likely that there will be an increase in the intranational use of English in the country, and that this increased usage will lead to further developments in the establishment of a distinctive Bruneian variety of the language.

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