

Noor Azam Haji-Othman
James McLellan
David Deterding *Editors*

The Use and Status of Language in Brunei Darussalam

A Kingdom of Unexpected Linguistic
Diversity

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Preface

Brunei Darussalam is a small country, but it exhibits substantial linguistic diversity: Brunei Malay is generally the lingua franca, Standard Malay is taught in schools, different groups speak a range of other indigenous languages such as Kedayan, Dusun, Tutong and Iban as well as various dialects of Chinese, and English is also widely spoken especially by the well-educated. Description of the ways that these languages are used in Brunei therefore provides a fascinating snapshot of the kind of multilingual diversity that tends to occur in Southeast Asia.

This book offers insights into various facets of the linguistic diversity of Brunei, including the status of minority languages in the country, the language of shop-signs, the pronunciation of Brunei English and Brunei Mandarin, the acquisition of Malay, attitudes of university students towards non-native teachers, language choice among foreign workers, code-switching in the courtroom, the adoption of Malay compliment strategies by young people, the lexical choices and discourse of online texts, the English and the Malay of newspaper articles, literature in Brunei, and language in education in both secular and religious schools. All of these represent new studies, most of them based on the substantial analysis of fresh data.

The book should be of crucial importance to students and scholars in Brunei, but it will also be of considerable relevance to everyone interested in language usage and linguistic diversity throughout the world, as it provides a diverse collation and in-depth analysis of material occurring in a country with some fascinating patterns of language usage. We hope that a wide range of students, scholars and researchers as well as general readers will appreciate this rich collection of fresh material.

February 2016

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The original version of the book was revised: For detailed information please see Erratum. The erratum to the book is available at
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Gary M. Jones is Associate Professor at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, where he is Director of the Institute of Asian Studies. His teaching is on bilingualism, language planning and language acquisition, and his research focuses on language in education and language planning, especially in Brunei Darussalam.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Noor Azam Haji-Othman, James McLellan and David Deterding

1.1 Rationale for This Volume

There is an advertising slogan that is widely seen in Brunei, promoting the country as ‘A Kingdom of Unexpected Treasures’, and the subtitle of this book, ‘A Kingdom of Unexpected Linguistic Diversity’, makes a direct allusion to this slogan. We suggest that, just as there is an abundance of dense jungle in the country that represents a hugely important treasure trove of flora and fauna, at the same time the kingdom is home to a fascinating range of languages and patterns of linguistic usage that are equally worthy of detailed scrutiny. Furthermore, we firmly believe that celebrating and preserving linguistic diversity in a place such as Brunei is as important as maintaining the forests, for just as trees provide oxygen for us to breathe, linguistic diversity supplies the vital cultural energy that enables human communities to thrive.

The topic of this volume is the current state of language usage in Brunei Darussalam, including Malay, English, Chinese and other minority languages in social interactions, education, the courtroom, the media, on the web, and in literature. It is inspired by and envisioned as a follow-up to Martin et al. (1996), the first book-length volume which attempted to present a sociolinguistic profile of Brunei Darussalam. 20 years later, much has changed, and we, the editors and contributors, perceive the need for an updated volume with wider coverage, something that will be of considerable value not just to students and researchers in applied linguistics, but also to sociolinguists, educationalists, and language policy makers and planners, as well as those interested in multilingualism and World Englishes.

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The earlier volume had separate sections on Malay, English, and the other languages of Brunei. The present volume follows a different organising principle, thematic rather than language-based. In line with the ways in which the country has developed and changed, fresh avenues for research are developed in many of the chapters, as fields such as language acquisition, literature, the linguistic landscape, and online language use are covered. Several of the chapters are co-authored by Bruneians and non-Bruneians, and overall there is a greater contribution by Bruneian scholars compared to the 1996 volume.

Brunei is known for consistency, stability and maintenance of its core traditions and practices: hence we aim to build on, rather than replace, the knowledge and insights contained in Martin et al. (1996).

Some chapters focus on pronunciation, specifically the intelligibility of Brunei English when spoken to speakers from elsewhere and the vowels of Brunei Mandarin, while others look at the grammar and discourse of Malay, the use of language on-line, the language of shop signs, the status of Dusun, and English and Malay literature in Brunei. There is therefore a diverse range of material, all of which is fresh, written especially for this volume, and based on current research. We believe that this collection of chapters on language usage in Brunei Darussalam will constitute essential material for researchers and students in Brunei and elsewhere for many years to come.

There is a wealth of books on language in Singapore, including monographs describing pronunciation, grammar and discourse, as well as edited collections of research, and these have become essential reading for students of World Englishes. But there is no reason why investigation of language usage in Brunei should not inspire equal enthusiasm around the world, particularly as there is just as much diversity that can be investigated even though the country is so small, with less than one tenth the population of Singapore. In providing wide-ranging research materials on language usage in Brunei Darussalam, we hope that the current volume will fill this niche perfectly and become an exceptionally valuable resource for researchers and scholars around the world.

1.2 Overview of Chapters

The sixteen chapters in this book are divided into five sections:

- Language Status
- Pronunciation and Grammar
- Language Choice
- Discourse
- Language and Literature in Education

Here, we offer a brief overview of all the chapters in these five sections.

1.2.1 Section 1: Language Status

Section I includes three chapters, all of which highlight the multilinguality that is evident in Brunei. Chapter 2, by the three co-editors, describes the language situation in Brunei, and serves both as essential background and as a taster for the more detailed and narrowly-focused chapters that follow.

Chapter 3 reports on the state of the languages of Brunei's ethnic minority groups. Noor Azam and Siti Ajeerah first provide an overview of the ongoing language shift towards Brunei Malay, and the consequent level of endangerment of the languages of Brunei's six other *puak jati* (indigenous ethnic groups) aside from Brunei Malay. Their model highlights the centrality of what they refer to as 'pan-Bruneian Malay' as distinct from the Brunei Malay which is the first language of the Brunei Malay community who were the original inhabitants of Brunei's *Kampung Ayer* (the Water Village). In addition, they discuss the results of a study into language use in the Dusun community.

In Chap. 4, Susilawati Japri uses Linguistic Landscape methodology to present an analysis of multilingual language use in shop signs in a commercial complex located near Brunei's international airport. Issues of the status of the languages occurring in signs are central here, as Brunei has laws which prescribe that the name of the business in *Jawi* (Arabic-based) script should be at the top and twice the size of the name in *Rumi* (Roman) script or in English, but not all shops adhere to these guidelines.

1.2.2 Section 2: Pronunciation and Grammar

Chapter 5, by Ishamina Athirah, is concerned with the role of fast speech as a factor causing misunderstandings in spoken communication between Bruneians and non-Bruneians. She demonstrates how, in many instances, intelligibility is compromised as a consequence of conversation participants speaking too quickly.

In Chap. 6, Shufang Xu provides a comparative investigation of vowels in the speech of Bruneian speakers of Mandarin Chinese with the speech of standard Mandarin speakers in Beijing. This study is a welcome addition to the still small inventory of research into language use among Chinese Bruneians.

Aznah Suhaimi and Noor Azam's Chap. 7 is on the developing comprehension of aspect markers by children acquiring Brunei Malay as their first language. This offers a counterbalance to the predominance of research into first language acquisition of English, and it highlights the role played by aspectual markers in Malay, as distinct from the inflectional morphemes which mark tense and aspect in English.

1.2.3 Section 3: Language Choice

Clearly language choice is a central research topic in any multilingual society. In Brunei the choices involve not just languages but varieties within languages, especially Brunei Malay or Standard Malay.

How do Bruneians feel about Standard British, US English, and Brunei English? In Chap. 8, Debbie Ho investigates student perceptions and preferences concerning the English accents of their lecturers, and her findings show how these attitudes have shifted to a certain extent over the past 20 years.

In Chap. 9, Fatimah Chuchu and James McLellan present preliminary findings on a previously unresearched topic, the patterns of language use among foreign workers in different sectors in Brunei. As foreigners currently make up about one-third of the total workforce in the country, this is clearly an important topic. The chapter presents findings from a survey and from interviews with workers and their employers in the construction industry, in retail trades including catering, and in spa therapy centres.

Another under-researched area is the focus of Chap. 10, contributed by Hjh Masmahirah Hj Mohd Tali: language use in the Brunei civil law courts. Officially the law courts constitute a domain where the use of English is expected, but her study of language choice in courtroom interactions reveals instances of bilingual Malay-English negotiation by participants, including judges and magistrates, lawyers, witnesses and defendants. The complex relationship between language and power is foregrounded in this formal interactional setting.

1.2.4 Section 4: Discourse

Chapter 11, the first chapter in the section on discourse, is by Kamsiah Abdullah, who investigates the discourse-pragmatic features of compliment responses by Bruneians. She adapts the conceptual framework of politeness theory and maxims of politeness and applies these to examples collected from interactions between young Bruneians. Compliment responses are classified in terms of their frequency of occurrence, thereby enabling comparison between the strategies used by Bruneians when responding to compliments and those reported elsewhere by other researchers using the politeness theory framework.

In Chap. 12, Alistair Wood provides an overview of recent research into language use, including code-switching, in Brunei's vibrant social media. Research into language use in social media is a major growth area worldwide, and this chapter includes data from text messaging (sms), Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter and an interactive online gaming forum. His analysis suggests that the social media discourse of Bruneians is distinct from both face-to-face conversation and from written communication, and that, just like their counterparts elsewhere, young

Bruneians are adept at innovative linguistic usage, including coining new words when these are appropriate.

Mayyer Ling's Chap. 13 is yet another ground-breaking study, investigating the discourse of media releases from a Brunei bank. Using corpus-based methods, she discusses global-related and national-related lexis as well as the use of names and titles to mark solidarity in order to investigate the way that the bank addresses its target audience through its media releases.

Media discourse is also the focus of Chap. 14, co-authored by Sharifah Nurul Huda Alkaff, James McLellan and Fatimah Chuchu. They offer a comparative corpus-based study of 'hard news' texts in the Brunei Malay- and English-language print media, *Media Permata* and the Borneo Bulletin respectively. Their findings challenge the a priori assumption that Malay texts are longer and more complex than those in English, and they show that Malay news reports may sometimes be more graphic and sensational. The textual analysis is complemented by findings derived from interviews with some of the reporters and editors who are the text producers for the two newspapers.

1.2.5 Section 5: Literature and Language in Education

In Chap. 15, Grace Chin, Kathrina Daud and Maslin Jukim offer a comparison between contemporary Brunei literature in Malay and English. Their study outlines both the opportunities and the constraints experienced by those working in the domain of creative literature in Brunei, and they observe a growing divergence between official mainstream literature written in Malay and literature in English which is more of a response to global trends. Their chapter also discusses ways in which the languages come together in literature, for example in the use of *bahasa rojak* (code-mixed Malay and English) in literary works.

Noor Azam in Chap. 16 opens up another new research area of central importance, by comparing mainstream government schools with Islamic religious schools (*Ugama* schools) in terms of language use and medium of education policy and practice. He suggests that the predominant use of Malay in the religious educational domain counterbalances the bias towards English which is evident in mainstream schools in Brunei, especially under the current policy which uses English as a medium of instruction for some subjects from pre-school onwards.

Recent developments in language policy in education are also the topic of the final chapter, Chap. 17, contributed by Gary Jones. He makes a direct comparison between the early 1990s and the present, and his overview of the development of education policy is grounded in an analysis of the changing economic climate, both in Southeast Asia and globally. Discourses of economic diversification and the employability of school leavers and graduates impact on the current language policy in education, and will continue to do so.

1.3 Significance of This Collection

We believe that the research presented here is not just important for students and scholars interested in language usage in Brunei, but that it also has substantial relevance beyond the narrow confines of this small country. In a small but highly connected multilingual polity that is located in a dynamic region of immense geopolitical significance, Brunei exemplifies the complex interplay of local and global discourses.

There are also considerable implications from the material in this book for policy makers and planners, both locally and abroad. For example, the contributions on education provide a timely reflection on the current state of language usage in Brunei schools, the analysis of detailed transcripts from magistrates courts provides plenty of food for thought about effective language usage in the legal system, and the chapter on local literature suggests that more effort and resources might be allocated to stimulating the development of creative writing in the country. In addition, we note that many of the minority languages of Brunei, such as Tutong and Dusun, are under serious threat of extinction, and we believe that additional resources could be allocated to efforts to preserve them. Brunei is keen to encourage tourists to visit its pristine forests while at the same time appreciating its rich culture; but if we lose some of the varied heritage that is preserved and handed down from generation to generation by means of this linguistic diversity, a vitally important cultural component will disappear forever.

We hope that readers will agree that this volume achieves its objectives of providing up-to-date information on current research on the state of language in Brunei, and that it also opens up new avenues for further collaborative and comparative research between scholars based in Brunei and those working elsewhere; and we further hope that the chapters in this book contribute to an understanding and celebration of language variation in the country, enabling it to continue to be a kingdom that exhibits abundant linguistic diversity, though maybe, as a result of our contribution, this diversity will no longer be quite so surprising to readers around the world.

Reference

Martin, P. W., Ožóg, C., & Poedjosoedarmo, G. (Eds.). (1996). *Language use and language change in Brunei Darussalam*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies.

Part I
Language Status

Chapter 2

The Language Situation in Brunei Darussalam

James McLellan, Noor Azam Haji-Othman and David Deterding

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an introduction to Brunei Darussalam for readers, giving essential background information for the other chapters in this volume and also offering a valuable overview of language issues in the country.

Negara Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei) is a small Malay Islamic sultanate on the northern coast of the island of Borneo. Apart from the South China Sea to the north, it is entirely surrounded by the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. It is divided into two parts, with the rural district of Temburong separated from the three other districts by the Malaysian district of Limbang. The capital, Bandar Seri Begawan (often referred to as BSB), is located in the smallest district, Brunei-Muara, and most of the rest of the population live in towns along the coast, especially Kuala Belait and Seria in Belait District and Tutong in Tutong District (see Fig. 2.1).

Brunei has a population of about 429,000 (World Population Review 2015), the majority of whom are Malays, though there are also a substantial number of minority groups such as the Kedayan, Dusun and Murut (Lun Bawang), and also about 40,000 Chinese. In addition, there are many expatriate workers from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Bangladesh, as well as from more distant places such as the UK, USA, and Australia.

Brunei is ruled by a Sultan. His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, the 29th Sultan, has reigned since 1968, and the national philosophy and ideology is called *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB, ‘Malay Islamic Monarchy’) which incorporates the

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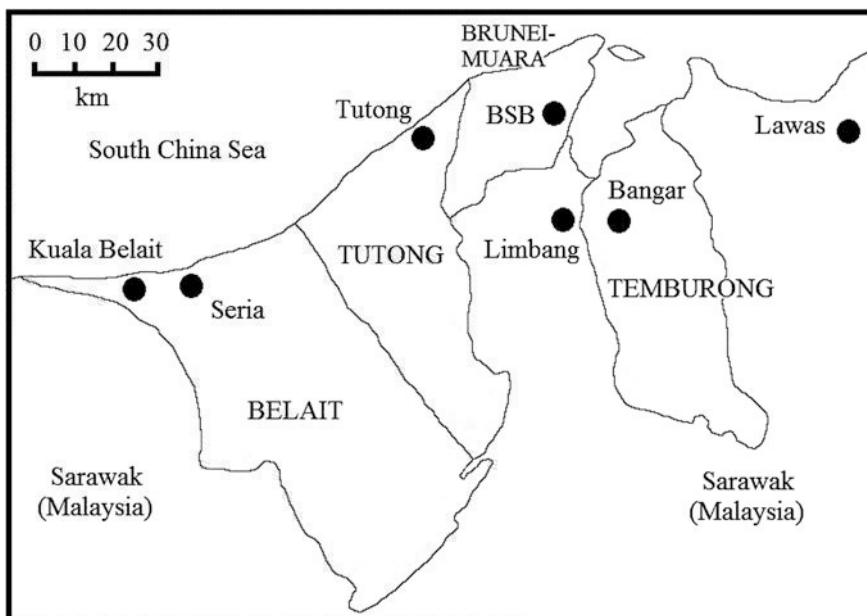


Fig. 2.1 Map of Brunei, showing the four districts and main towns

three core elements central to the identity of Bruneians: the Malay language and culture, respect for the Islamic religion, and loyalty towards His Majesty the Sultan.

Formerly the centre of a large maritime empire, Brunei became a British protectorate in 1888. The previous Sultan, Omar Ali Saifuddin III, oversaw the drafting of a constitution, signed in 1959 (Hussainmiya 1995), which eventually led to the restoration of full independence in 1984, when Brunei became a member of the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (now known as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation).

Oil and natural gas exports have been the major exports and the main source of Brunei's development and wealth since the mid-20th century. Earnings from these primary products have brought about rapid improvements in the infrastructure of Brunei and the standard of living of its residents, and the development of these industries has contributed to Brunei's global connectedness as well as to an influx of foreign labour.

In this chapter, we offer an overview of the language situation in Brunei. We include a brief look at the history of language usage in Brunei, a description of the range of languages that are spoken, an overview of the domains of usage of Brunei Malay, Standard Malay and English, and a discussion of the status of some of the threatened minority languages. In addition, we consider the education system, including the history of separate English and Malay streams, the rationale for the adoption of the *Dwibahasa* ('Two Language') system in 1985, and the introduction

of SPN21 (*Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad Ke-21*, ‘National Education System for the 21st Century’) in 2009.

2.2 History of Language Use

As noted above, *Melayu* (Malay) is one of the three core elements of Bruneian identity, referring to both Malay ethnicity and the Malay language. Traditionally, the majority of the Bruneian people spoke Brunei Malay, a conservative variety of Malay that is substantially different from Standard Malay, which is the official language of the country and the lingua franca of Malaysia (Clynes and Deterding 2011). Officially, seven subgroups of indigenous people are recognised in Brunei, each with their own distinctive language: Brunei Malay, Kedayan, Dusun, Bisaya, Tutong, Belait and Murut. In addition, there are a number of Iban people, especially in the enclave of Temburong, who are not recognised as natives of Brunei. They constitute the largest group in neighbouring Sarawak (Asmah 1983, p. 483; Coluzzi 2011), and most of the Iban people in Brunei migrated into the country from elsewhere in Borneo in the past century.

The use of English in Brunei gradually expanded during the period of the British protectorate from 1888 to 1984 (Gunn 1997; Hussainmiya 2005), especially after the introduction of the bilingual system of education in 1985 (Jones 1996; see also Chap. 16, by Noor Azam, and Chap. 17, by Gary Jones, in this volume). Brunei Malay remains the most widely occurring lingua franca, but English is frequently spoken, especially among the educated elite (Ozóg 1996), and there is substantial code-switching even in the most formal of contexts (McLellan 2010). Some of the minority languages are now no longer used, and others are threatened with extinction, something we will discuss further in the next section.

2.3 Range of Languages Spoken

Martin and Poedjosoedarmo (1996) provide an overview of the languages spoken in Brunei, and the situation is similar today. Brunei Malay (Clynes 2014) is spoken by about two thirds of the population, many of whom traditionally lived in *Kampung Air*, the Water Village that is at the heart of the capital of Brunei. Brunei Malay is closely related to Kedayan (Soderberg 2014), the language of the land-dwellers who traditionally planted rice and tended orchards, whilst the Brunei Malays were seafarers and fisherfolk. Nothofer (1991) reports that the level of lexical cognates between Brunei Malay and Kedayan is 94 %, while that between Brunei Malay and Standard Malay is 84 %.

Of the other Austronesian minority languages, Dusun and Bisaya are similar, some people describing them as varieties of the same language (Nothofer 1991), and Belait and Tutong are also closely related (Martin and Poedjosoedarmo 1996).

The other language recognised as an indigenous language of Brunei, Murut, is mostly spoken in the Temburong District. It is also known as Lun Bawang, and it is a major indigenous language in Lawas District in neighbouring Sarawak (Martin 1996). Lun Bawang is also closely related to the Kelabit language that is spoken by people living in Bario in the mountains south of Brunei and close to the border of Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo.

Iban is spoken by a few thousand people especially in Temburong, but also in Tutong and Belait districts. It is quite closely related to Malay (Asmah 1983, p. 483; Nothofer 1991, pp. 157–158), and serves as a lingua franca in rural upriver areas of the Belait, Tutong and Temburong Rivers where Iban people live alongside other ethnic groups.

The Chinese residents of Brunei traditionally spoke a range of dialects, including Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka, but most of the young people now speak Mandarin, as well as Malay and English, and nowadays they may have only a limited knowledge of their heritage languages (Dunseath 1996).

There are a large number of foreign workers from the Philippines, so Tagalog is also heard. Many are domestic helpers (*amahs*), but there are also about 200 teachers from the Philippines in Brunei schools, many of them teaching English. Some foreign workers come from Bangladesh, southern India, Pakistan and Thailand, so Bangla, Tamil, Urdu and Thai are also spoken.

English is widely spoken, both by educated Bruneians and also by the large expatriate community of teachers, university lecturers, and professionals working in the industry. In the past, there have been generous scholarships for Bruneians to study abroad, both as undergraduates and for postgraduate degrees, in the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, so many well-educated Bruneians have an excellent command of English.

Finally, there is a small community of Penan people, the traditional forest people of Borneo, also considered as non-Brunei indigenous people. They are based in a longhouse in the village of Sukang on the Belait River (Martin and Sercombe 1996; Sercombe 2007) and number less than 50.

2.4 Domains of Use of Malay and English

The domains of use of Standard Malay and Brunei Malay may be described using the concept of diglossia (Ferguson 1959): Standard Malay is the H(igh) variety, as it is used in formal contexts such as government speeches, newspapers, and television broadcasts; Brunei Malay is the L(ow) variety, as it occurs in informal situations, in conversations in the home, family and friendship domains. In fact, although everyone learns Standard Malay in school and all can understand it, almost nobody uses it on a regular basis.

All educated people become proficient in English, as it is the medium of education for most subjects from the primary school onwards. However, many people who do not do well at school may end up with just a rudimentary knowledge of

English. For educated people, especially students and academics at *Universiti Brunei Darussalam* (UBD), the main university in the country, the English spoken is developing its own distinct identity as it is spoken competently and fluently but at the same time contributes to world-wide trends in the global evolution of English (Deterding 2014).

Ožóg (1996, p. 159) observes that, for Bruneians, English is the language of knowledge, but Malay is the language of the soul. In fact it is very common for most well-educated Bruneians to code-switch regularly between English and Malay (McLellan 2005, 2010; McLellan and Noor Azam 2012).

2.5 Minority Languages in Brunei

Of the seven indigenous language which are officially designated ‘dialects’ or varieties of Malay, Brunei Malay is dominant, whilst all the others are threatened to a greater or lesser extent (Noor Azam and Siti Ajeerah, this volume, Chap. 3), partly because they are squeezed out by the domination of Malay and English (Noor Azam 2012). Belait is almost completely extinct, and Tutong is also threatened, though there are now university classes offered in the language by UBD in an effort to preserve it.

Dusun and Bisaya are also severely threatened. Of the minority languages, Kedayan has the largest number of speakers, but extensive intermarriage and the high level of similarity between Kedayan and Brunei Malay has resulted in Kedayan also being under threat.

Coluzzi (2011) reports that Murut is in a healthier state, partly because it receives some support from across the border in Malaysia. And he similarly reports that the survival of Iban is more assured, again because of the large number of Iban speakers in Sarawak, where there is some institutional support for the language, including radio programmes and some newspapers.

2.6 The Education System of Brunei

The Bilingual Education System was introduced in 1985 (Jones 1996), with Malay-medium education for the first three years of primary school, and then a shift to English-medium education for most subjects from the fourth year of primary school onwards. One problem with this system was that children started to learn vocabulary for subjects in Malay and then had to relearn the same vocabulary in English in the fourth year of primary school. In 2009, a new system of education was introduced, called *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21* (SPN21, ‘National System of Education for the 21st century’), and from then on mathematics and science have been taught in English from the start of primary school (Jones 2012). This eliminates the sudden switch in medium for these two subjects, though it

remains to be seen if the new system helps improve the overall performance of Brunei children.

The national university, *Universiti Brunei Darussalam* (UBD), was established in 1985 as a bilingual institution, with some programmes in English and others in Malay, and some such as History in a mixture of English and Malay. Although a few programmes such as Malay Language and Malay Literature continue to be taught in Malay-medium, the overwhelming majority of programmes are now English-medium. Originally, programmes in Islamic Studies were mainly in Malay, though Arabic was also offered as a subject and sometimes courses were taught in Arabic. However, in 2007 the *Institut Pengajian Islam Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin* (IPISHOAS) at UBD separated to become *Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali* (UNISSA), Brunei's second national university. There is also a university dedicated to training Islamic teachers, *Kolej Universiti Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan* (KUPU-SB), from which about 230 students obtain a degree or diploma each year.

There has recently been considerable expansion and development in technical and vocational education. This is driven by concerns over the employability of school leavers, by the need to replace foreign skilled workers with skilled and qualified Bruneians, and by a desire on the part of educational planners to supplant traditional notions of the superiority of so-called academic over technical subjects and qualifications. The *Institut Teknologi Brunei* (ITB) offers English-medium degree-level programmes in fields such as Computer Science and Electrical and Electronic Engineering; other secondary and tertiary-level technical and vocational providers are under the collective Institute of Brunei Technical Education and use both English and Malay as mediums of education.

2.7 Language Use in Schools and Society

There is a substantial linguistic divide in Brunei, between those who attend good schools and become proficient in English and those who go to less fashionable schools and only develop a rudimentary knowledge of English (Deterding and Salbrina 2013, p. 19). In fact, Wood et al. (2011) have shown that pupils in a good secondary school in the capital have a reasonable command of English in year 3 and then they improve by year 5, while similar students in a rural school in Temburong District have much poorer English in year 3 and show little or no improvement at all by year 5. A popular perception, yet to be fully supported or challenged by research, is that the private schools, including Chinese schools, mission schools and international schools, achieve better results in both English Language and English-medium subjects than most government schools.

Although well-educated Bruneians are all proficient in English, Brunei Malay continues to be the language of choice in society, often exhibiting substantial code-switching with English. And even on the UBD campus, Brunei Malay is

generally the lingua franca among students and also among most local staff, even though nearly all students and staff are highly competent in English.

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Chapter 3

The State of Indigenous Languages in Brunei

Noor Azam Haji-Othman and Siti Ajeerah Najib

3.1 Introduction

According to Nothofer (1991), the Austronesian languages and dialects spoken in Brunei are Belait, Bisaya, Dusun, Brunei Malay, Kampung Ayer Malay, Kedayan, Standard Malay, Murut, Tutong, Mukah, Iban and Penan. Nothofer grouped Brunei Malay, Kampung Ayer Malay, Kedayan and Standard Malay together as the ‘Malay group’, and labelled the remaining codes ‘Non-Malay’. Following the treatment of these languages by Martin and Poedjosoedarmo (1996, p. 13), the latter group can be further divided into three groups: the Dusunic languages consisting of Dusun and Bisaya; the Murutic group which just includes Murut (or Lun Bawang); and the North Sarawak group that consists of Belait and Tutong. Dusun, the subject of the case study presented in this chapter, and Bisaya are ‘mutually intelligible dialects’ (Nothofer 1991, p. 155) despite the fact that they are listed as separate ethnic groups in the Brunei Constitution. All of these languages have undergone language shift, with some languages faring better than others.

Language shift in Brunei has rarely been discussed purely on a linguistic basis, but it has often been described within a cultural framework by researchers over the last few years. Leach (1950) was one of the earliest to record sociolinguistic change by saying the ‘ethnic population have become Malay’. Brown (1960, p. 4) then spoke of the ‘merging of lesser ethnic groups with the greater’, while Maxwell (1980) refers to the shifts as ‘semantic reclassification’. Martin (1990, p. 130; 2002) suggests a causal link between ‘cultural and linguistic redefinition’ and the contact and movement of previously rural populations with the coastal culture, which at the same time broke down the social network support for ethnic language and culture maintenance—a process which Jones (1994) refers to as ‘assimilation into the

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coastal culture'. Braighlinn (1992, p. 19) calls the same phenomenon of change a 'convergence on a dominant Malay culture'. In relation to this process of cultural shift, Gunn (1997, p. 6) argues that the linguistic impact from explicit as well as implicit pressure for more use of Malay in Brunei has been a visible shift away from ethnic languages to the Malay language through Islamicization and Malayicization. These processes, sometimes called 'nation-building' or 'Bruneization' (Noor Azam 2005), involve a shift in both language and identity as a result of voluntary acquiescence on the part of the ethnic groups themselves.

Researchers have also made observations about the specific linguistic impact experienced by the ethnic groups. The study by Martin (1996b) of the Belait community found that their identity has become gradually submerged by their use of a new language, Brunei Malay, and the importance of this code in the Bruneian speech community as a whole (Sercombe 2002). A case in point made by E.M. Kershaw (1994) is that the language shift among the Dusun community was a 'progressive demise' and that the current speakers are 'terminal heirs' of their language and culture. In this regard, Sercombe comments that 'parents have unwittingly aided in the progressive demise of Dusun by encouraging their children to use Malay as a route to academic and material success' (Sercombe 2002, p. 13), and he further notes that younger Murut speakers are also making more and more use of Brunei Malay. According to McLellan and Jones (2015, p. 20), Kedayan is also endangered because of its high shared percentage of cognates with Brunei Malay, and they furthermore confirm the endangered status of Belait, 'with almost no younger speakers' (Clynes 2005). Although Tutong, Dusun and Bisaya have younger speakers, they are generally similarly considered at risk of extinction, by both their communities of speakers and by researchers (McLellan and Jones 2015, p. 20).

On this shift away from indigenous languages to Malay, Sercombe states the following:

Much of the literature reporting on language situations in Borneo suggests a general linguistic levelling process taking place throughout coastal areas of Borneo towards the superordinate code of an area, more often than not Malay, whereby the roles of indigenous minority languages are being usurped for the following main reasons: [i] demographic factors comprising a tendency to migrate towards urban coastal areas where there are greater opportunities for wage employments and access to facilities, such as education and health care as well as a wide variety of material goods; and where language and ethnic identity may be less closely intertwined; [ii] Malay is the medium of education in Malaysia and Indonesia; as well as being the national language in each of these countries and that of Brunei; [iii] Malay also has the status associated with the ruling elites of these countries; and [iv] Malay has acted as a trade language and lingua franca among peoples from different linguistic groups throughout the Malay archipelago for over half a millennium.

(Sercombe 2002, p. 14)

3.2 Language and Dialect Shift

Noor Azam's (2005) study of the indigenous languages of Brunei identified a definite shift among Bruneians, particularly evident among the minority ethnic population, thus confirming earlier findings by Martin (1990, 1996b) and Sercombe (2002). Significantly Noor Azam has also found evidence that among the Malay-speaking communities identified by Nothofer (1991), the Brunei Malay and the Kedayan people, their languages are moving away from their traditional characteristics (as also observed with Kedayan by McLellan and Jones 2015). But at the same time, so are the languages of the traditionally non Malay-speaking communities.

Figure 3.1 shows both dialect shift and language shift occurring at the same time, and the most significant outcome of these processes is the convergence toward a pan-Brunei Malay. The term 'pan-Brunei Malay' is suggested here to highlight its supra-ethnic qualities in terms of its dissociation from any particular ethnic group, including the Brunei Malays, and it refers to the form of Malay that most Bruneian young people are now making their own and speaking as their first language all over the country. It may be described as a variant of Brunei Malay that contains elements of Standard Malay, and also some elements of English, with minor variations in terms of lexis depending on the speakers' location.

3.2.1 Cultural Implications

Of course, language shift cannot happen without cultural implications. R. Kershaw (1998) notes that linguistic and cultural differences between the existing Muslim groups are becoming progressively eroded among the younger cohorts. This is in combination with growing national consciousness in the country. In this regard, Kershaw observes what seems to be happening is not the rise of a new term but an incipient shift of *Melayu Brunei* from its role as synonym for the ethnic Brunei Malays into an aggregative term to include all indigenous Bruneian Muslims. In a deeper sense, R. Kershaw (1998) argues, the use of this new term can mean that officials who are mostly from the Brunei Malay ethnic group have come to perceive

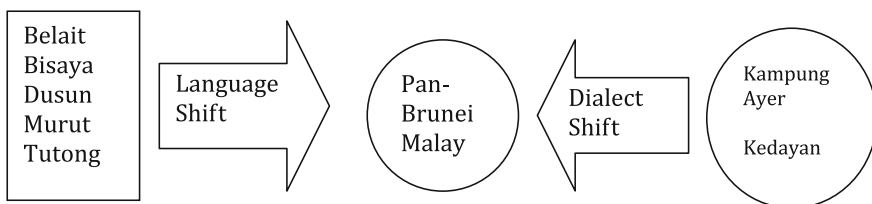


Fig. 3.1 Language and dialect shift