
Arabic language in contemporary Indonesian

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One of the most often heard cliches is that Bahasa Indonesia is a simple language. I find this cliché is mainly used by those who have never mastered the language. Nevertheless, it should be admitted that Arabic is much more complex and difficult to master.

Before being posted to Jakarta, I expected that my knowledge of Arabic would be a great advantage in Indonesia. As I started studying Arabic in the 1960s and have lived and worked in various Arab countries for over 15 years, I thought I would have a soft linguistic landing when assuming my new responsibilities as Ambassador of the Netherlands in Jakarta in August 2005.

I expected things to be even easier because I was aware that Indonesian also contains numerous words of Dutch origin. According to *European Loanwords in Indonesian* (published in 1983 by the Indonesian Etymological Project), some 5,400 words in Indonesian are of Dutch origin.

According to a sister publication, *Arabic Loan-Words in Indonesian* (compiled by Russell Jones who focuses specifically on the root forms of Arabic- and Persian-derived words), there are some 2750 Indonesian words derived from Arabic.

This means that, even if some words in Jones' list are now obsolete, the real number of Arabic words in Indonesian may be more than 3000. This is because Jones' compilation does not include the derivative words which are so abundant in Indonesian. For example, *syair*, which produces *bersyair*, *menyairkan*, *penyair*, *kepenyairan*, *syairi* and so on.

Adding the 2,750 and 5,400 figures led me to suppose that I already knew more than 8000 Indonesian words, even before arriving in Jakarta. During my first ride by car on the highway from Soekarno-Hatta Airport to our new residence in Menteng, I tested my elementary vocabulary by reading the first large billboard we passed. It was the well-known sign warning against the dangers of smoking which reads: *Merokok menyebabkan kanker, serangan jantung, impotensi, dan gangguan kehamilan dan janin* (smoking causes cancer, heart disease, impotence, and pregnancy complications).

Enthusiastically I concluded from this first practical linguistic encounter, that of the ten different words mentioned here, I already knew more than half, because they were of either Dutch, European or Arabic origin: *merokok*, *kanker* and *impotensi* are easily

recognizable by any Dutchman, whereas the Arabic origin of *menyebabkan* (from *sabab*), *kehamilan* (from *hamil*) and *janin* is easily identifiable for anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of both Arabic and the Indonesian system of prefixes and suffixes.

This led me to the optimistic -- albeit somewhat premature -- conclusion that, with my linguistic background, it would be a relatively easy task to learn Indonesian. And the other way around: that I could likely make good use of my knowledge of Arabic in my contacts with Indonesian society. This was also suggested to me by Indonesians on various occasions.

But the reality turned out to be rather different. Of course, I had a big advantage over other foreigners who did not know either Arabic or Dutch. But in practice I discovered that -- despite what many people, including many Indonesians, say or believe -- Bahasa Indonesia has a rich original vocabulary. Therefore I am obliged to consult my Indonesian dictionaries rather frequently.

In fact, I am not able to use Arabic particularly often, because -- despite my expectations - - there are few Indonesians who can actually communicate in Arabic. Nevertheless, speaking Arabic well in Indonesia is generally regarded as something prestigious, deserving of great respect.

I think that the Arabic component of Indonesian is rather overestimated. Certainly this is so when it comes to the real usage and knowledge of the words of Arabic origin in Indonesian daily life. The fact that some 3,000 -- if not many more -- words of Arabic origin can be found in Indonesian language dictionaries does not imply that these words are being used on a daily basis, let alone that their meaning is generally known to the Indonesian public, whether well-educated or not. Nor does it mean that people are generally aware of the particular Arabic origin of words they use in modern Indonesian.

As a participant in an intensive Indonesian language course at the well-known Alam Bahasa Indonesia Institute in Yogyakarta (formerly known as Puri), I was asked by my teacher to translate various texts from English into Indonesian, as part of my homework. Since I had only the Indonesian-Dutch dictionary of Professor A. Teeuw with me at the time, I could translate from Indonesian to Dutch but not the other way around. And so I experimented with searching the dictionary for the Arabic equivalents of the words to be translated. In several cases I found this method satisfactory.

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To my surprise, however, back at the language institute the next day, I found that my knowledgeable teacher did not know some of these Indonesian words of Arabic origin, although they appear in various Indonesian dictionaries.

The same phenomenon was illustrated by Russell Jones, who, after the publication in 1978 of his list of loan words in Indonesian, asked three young university lecturers in Indonesia to examine this list independently. It turned out that they were familiar with only about 10% of the words.

In the era of Dutch Arabist and colonial advisor Snouck Hurgronje, it was apparently still possible to find people in Indonesia who spoke Arabic as their mother tongue. Most of them were from Hadramaut or other parts of southern Arabia. Although Snouck Hurgronje met most of his Hadrami informants while in Mecca, he also spoke with Arabs in the Dutch Indies.

But today we see a different picture. Whereas there are still many Indonesians of clearly identifiable Arab origin (mainly Hadrami), there are hardly any among this community who are still able to speak Arabic, let alone any authentic, colloquial variety of Arabic.

One of the main reasons for the fact that Arabic has almost entirely disappeared as a mother tongue in Indonesia is that most Arab immigrants married Indonesian women and their offspring learned only the language of the mother. Hence, the "father tongue" -- so to speak -- has ceased to be a living language.

It is only through coincidence that I have met Indonesian Arabs who speak their "father's colloquial". And this is primarily in cases where these individuals have migrated from Arab countries to Indonesia. I have not discovered any unique, isolated variety of Arabic existing in Indonesia as a kind of "linguistic island". And I am not aware of the existence of such a phenomenon in the past.

During my first two years in Indonesia, I met very few Indonesians with whom I could communicate in Arabic. At first I found this surprising. On second thought, I realized that it is quite understandable. This is because of the fact that most Indonesians who have

studied Arabic have devoted themselves almost exclusively to studying the Koran or to memorizing parts of it. In addition, they may have studied Arabic texts concerning important subjects such tafsir al-Qur'an, fiqh and the hadith.

However, committing the Koran to memory does not necessarily imply a real understanding of the text. And even if a perfect understanding of the Koran could be obtained, this would not necessarily result in an ability to converse in Arabic about mundane issues.

When visiting a well-known pesantren in Tambak Beras (Jombang, near Surabaya) I met a female student who was studying the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*. She had written a Javanese translation above the Arabic text word by word and was learning it by memory. I was surprised by her ability to work with a text such as this, which is challenging even for advanced students of Arabic. Nevertheless, even very accomplished students of Arabic who have mastered complicated texts such as this would not necessarily be able to communicate orally in classical Arabic.

There are many studies concerning the Arabic component of Indonesian and the way that Arabic words have entered Bahasa Malayu and Bahasa Indonesia.

There are also studies that address the notion that, for Indonesians, studying Arabic may be uniquely challenging because of the Indonesian linguistic background.

These studies indicate that almost all words of Arabic derivation have entered Indonesian via written language. As there are many Indonesians of south Arabian origin, one would expect to find at least some residue of dialects from regions such as Hadramaut or other parts of South Yemen. But this occurs rarely, if at all.

Nearly all the Indonesians I have met who do speak good Arabic have studied or lived for some time in the Arab world, whether Cairo, al-Madinah, Baghdad or elsewhere. Their language competency results from daily exposure to spoken Arabic for an extended period.

It can be concluded that colloquial Arabic has mostly, if not entirely, disappeared as a living language in Indonesia. Knowledge of Arabic among Indonesians is almost exclusively derived from studying the Koran or Islamic subjects in general. Those who fully master Arabic have either studied it at an Islamic university, institute or pesantren, or have studied and lived for a long period in the Arab world. In such situations usage of Arabic is usually obligatory, including in the case of an Indonesian pesantren, such as the one in Gontor, East Java. An "Indonesianized" variety of Arabic, existing as a kind of "linguistic island", separate from dialects such as Hadrami Arabic, does not presently exist -- if it ever did.

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