
OPINION

The miracle of Bahasa Indonesia and Arabic

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It has always been the dream and wish of many Arabs that everyone should speak the same classical Arabic. Arabic dialects are considered by some Arab linguists to be a degenerate form of the language of the Koran, or of the Arabic supposedly spoken by the Prophet Muhammad.

In reality, however, Arabic dialects have always existed, even during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. It would actually have been an anomaly if the Arabian Peninsula would have been a homogeneous linguistic area.

For it is only normal that there are regional varieties in languages spoken over a larger territory. The Arabic of the Koran, therefore, was one of many varieties, also in the past. Language variations that existed at the time of the rise of Islam are even reflected in minor differences in readings of the Koran.

The Arab Islamic armies coming from the Arabian Peninsula and conquering Greater Syria and Mesopotamia, as well as North Africa, all brought their particular dialects with them, and they and their descendants “Arabized” the populations in the conquered regions in their own particular ways. Arabic dialects subsequently developed separately, growing further apart also as a result of language mingling with the various languages then spoken in the conquered territories; the highly diverse Arabic language of today is its natural result.

Among Arab nationalists, the ideal continues to be that all Arabs should speak the same classical language variety. The reality is, however, that nobody speaks classical Arabic, or modern, standard Arabic, as a mother tongue, be it at home or in other informal social environments. It would be unrealistic, therefore, to expect that classical Arabic will ever become the unified social language of the Arabs, which it has never been. Nevertheless, this desire remains of undiminished central importance as a unifying factor for the Arab world.

The development of Indonesian, (originally Malay), has historically been rather different from that of Arabic. A century ago, Malay was spoken only by a

minority in the territory, which today constitutes the Republic of Indonesia. Less than 10 percent of the population spoke Malay as their natural, mother tongue; it was a majority language in particular parts of Sumatra only. From there, and from the Malaysian Peninsula, or the “Malay motherland” in the wider sense, it spread via tradesmen to limited areas elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago where, over the centuries, it developed as a kind of traders’ lingua franca (Melayu pasar). It was only during the 1920s that Malay started to be developed into a new standard language, which was later named Bahasa Indonesia.

The initially somewhat artificial language was based on the former official language used in the royal correspondence of the Malay Johor-Riau Kingdom. This formal language, which was not a spoken, daily language like the Malay dialect of the Riau area, was further developed, initially by Dutch colonial linguists like Van Ophuijsen.

At a later stage, Indonesian nationalist linguists started playing an important role, some with a Sumatran Minangkabau Malay background, like Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, as well as Indonesians from other regions. It resulted in a very successful example of “language planning”; it was a miracle that this language, originally labeled General Cultivated Malay, became, within a century, the official language all over Indonesia, from Sabang to Merauke.

It was a new language in the sense that it had not generally been written, let alone spoken, in this form in Indonesia before the Sumpah Pemuda, or Youth Pledge, of Oct. 28, 1928, or before the end of the Dutch colonial era. The language succeeded in attaining the strong position of a unifying language for most Indonesians.

Although it had apparently been the official intention to teach everyone the same standard Bahasa Indonesia, in practice various forms of colloquial Indonesian dialects developed as well. Malay dialects, which had already been spoken previously, remained relatively unaffected. Jakartan Indonesian developed into the most prominent and prestigious dialect. (It should be noted that Jakartan is not the same as Betawi, which is a much older Malay dialect spoken in Jakarta, formerly Batavia).

In theory, there had been the possibility for Bahasa Indonesia to achieve the ideal, which many Arabs had envisaged for their language, namely to have everyone speak one single official language as a mother tongue. In practice, however, things did not work out that way. This was probably also the result of the fact that teachers of Indonesian mixed the official language with regional elements of their own languages, or with their various Malay dialects.

Having studied only the official form of Bahasa Indonesia, I was surprised to discover that it is nowhere spoken spontaneously in its pure form as a home language or mother tongue. The differences between Bahasa Indonesia and the so-called dialects, whether considered “slang” or not, are generally big enough for non-Indonesians (who only know the official Indonesian) to not fully understand varieties of informal language. Conversely, something similar applies to less educated Indonesians, who may have difficulty in completely understanding the official language.

Is this a negative phenomenon? I think it just reflects the reality that dialects tend to develop next to an official language, and will almost inevitably keep existing alongside it.

This phenomenon, called diglossia, is known to exist in many countries, and as such, is to be perceived as a very normal thing, although this fact is not always recognized or acknowledged. Next to Bahasa Indonesia and a variety of colloquial Indonesian, there are also many Indonesians who know a regional language, such as Javanese, Sundanese or one of the other hundreds of local languages. In a language situation of this sort, we might even have to speak of triglossia, or even multiglossia. For instance, Javanese Indonesians are expected to be able to switch between three varieties, depending on the social context.

There is not much that can be done against diglossia or triglossia, or even multiglossia, except for — in the Indonesian case — creating a strong awareness that a high-level Bahasa Indonesia should be taught in schools and other educational institutions, with the message that it is a very beautiful and sophisticated form of Indonesian, which has played a vital role in uniting the people of Indonesia. This unifying role deserves to be well maintained, just as is the case with Arabic.

Language purists tend to want to enforce certain formal language forms. They can never dictate, however, what people speak at home, and efforts to impose their linguistic standards may even help create a dislike for the official language. What they, and others, can do, however, is to stimulate a strong affection for Bahasa Indonesia in such a way that the people of Indonesia will like to also speak this language in their daily lives.

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