

# LANGUAGE BOOM

**I**NDONESIAN must be one of the fastest-growing languages in the world. Have you bought an Indonesian dictionary lately? I own a few that I have bought over the years. They get thicker all the time. Vocabulary is expanding enormously. The 1988 first edition of the official Indonesian language dictionary (the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*) had 62,000 entries. The 4th edition (2008) has 90,049. This does not include specialized technical vocabulary which is found in separate dictionaries.

But it is not just a question of the expansion of vocabulary. There is also the fundamental change over the past two decades of Indonesian evolving as a true first language for people over the archipelago. This has influenced not only vocabulary, but the way people speak. There are so many kinds of Indonesian around these days, not just different regional accents and color, but the Indonesian of Twitter, of hip hop, of abuse, of TV soaps, of bureaucracy, of prayer. When I first came to Indonesia in 1970, my Javanese friends rarely spoke Indonesian, except to their lecturers, to non-Javanese or foreigners. Their children, born in the 1970s and 80s, spoke both Javanese and Indonesian to their friends, and Javanese to their parents. Today, their children - my friends' grandchildren born in the last decade or so - mostly speak Indonesian to everyone. Indonesian has become the language used at home.

Yet *Bahasa Indonesia*, which means 'the language of Indonesia' or 'the Indonesian language,' is relatively new. What I am referring to is the renaming that took place in 1928 of *Bahasa Melayu* (the Malay language), with the name of a place, the still dreamed for nation-to-be, Indonesia. Malay is an old language, of course, with a rich history and literature. There are and always have been numerous varieties of Malay spoken over a huge area that includes modern Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, southern Thailand, Timor Leste and Brunei. One variant, a kind of 'high Malay' close to that spoken in east Sumatra, was fostered in Indonesia as the national language of communication across ethnicities. Dubbed 'Bahasa Indonesia,' it became the unifying language or '*bahasa persatuan*.' Standard Malaysian and standard Indonesian are both varieties of Malay. If it were not for national sensibilities, the national language of Indonesia would more properly be called 'Indonesian Malay.'

Naming Malay 'Indonesian' was a nationalist statement and an act of appropriation, marking distinction and national boundaries. 'This language is ours,' it said, 'and we will mark



ourselves as a nation by using it in our own way.' Perhaps the history of English would be different if, after America's declaration of independence, English had been renamed 'American' and enshrined as the national language in the Constitution. American would probably have developed apart, and by now we might even consider it a different language. English is a global language today not just because of colonialism and power, but because the separation of nation with the name of the language happened centuries ago. No one thinks of English being bound to the national boundary of England. It has grown and developed with huge variation, but is still considered 'English.'

JENNIFER LINDSAY



This makes the language easy to travel.

Indonesian, though, which from the beginning was so defined by its name as a language of place, has grown within the national boundaries of Indonesia. And it has been made different. Education systems and the media have fostered differences between the standard Malay of Indonesia and Malaysia, and today many Indonesians think of Malaysian Malay as a different language. But national boundaries, as far as language is concerned, are increasingly meaningless these days. Media ignores

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them. People are connected as never before. Technology, the media, and mobility all help to reveal that national boundaries are quite arbitrary, and in the case of Indonesian/Malay, they are a relatively recent imposition on a shared language spoken with huge variation over a very large area.

Differences are not so much 'national' any more. These still exist, of course: there are clear, broad differences between standard Malaysian and standard Indonesian. But differences within Indonesian are growing. Wide variety in Indonesian is something one now hears every day, not just differences in accents and dialects between places, but between generations and for different uses. Indonesian is becoming more heterogeneous. Standard Indonesian is just one kind of Indonesian, and its use seems to be shrinking.

When I came to Indonesia in 1970 and lived in Yogyakarta, I did not hear Indonesian much. Although I was learning to speak it, I rarely heard it as speech. Indonesian was mainly a monologue—for speeches, formal presentations, the news and national radio. It was performed as dialogue in very stilted drama. Indonesian was what people read—newspapers particularly—and what people wrote. When people spoke Indonesian, it was like the written language. This made it easy for a foreigner to learn. It was predictable and clear. But the variety—all the joking, intonation, abuse and banter—was going on in local languages—in what people spoke in their daily lives. After a while, learning one thing and hearing something else which sounded much more fun, I gave up. I stopped Indonesian lessons and started learning Javanese. But if I were starting out today, I'd probably be more drawn to Indonesian.

The fact that spoken Indonesian used to be closer to the written language contributed to the impression that it is an easy language. As a foreigner, you could do your language lessons from a text book somewhere, then come to Indonesia and communicate without too much trouble. You would even get praised for your beautiful grammar. These days, it is not so clear cut. Perhaps the flourishing varieties of Indonesian will make people more aware that the language is complicated. So, the next time someone says you speak good Indonesian, take it with a grain of salt.

\*YOGYAKARTA- AND SYDNEY-BASED WRITER.