

## BAHASA WHAT?

Do you speak 'bahasa'?  
*Bahasa* what?

No, this is not a kind of 'knock knock' joke.

**I**T has been common ex-pat practice for some time now to refer to Indonesian (in English) as 'bahasa'. The virus is spreading, and these days many Indonesians themselves do the same. Why?

The Indonesian language is called, in Indonesian, 'Bahasa Indonesia', meaning 'the language of Indonesia' or 'the Indonesian language'. It was given that name (renamed from 'Bahasa Melayu', or Malay) in 1928. The word 'bahasa' itself just means 'language'. So English is 'Bahasa Inggris', French is 'Bahasa Perancis', Javanese is 'Bahasa Jawa', and so forth.

The word 'bahasa' has a long history. It comes from the Sanskrit *bhāṣā* which literally means 'speech', and has come to mean 'language'. In cultures and languages influenced by Sanskrit, the word for 'language' is usually a form of that Sanskrit word, so in Burmese it is *bhasa*, in Thai and Lao it is *phasa*, in Khmer it is *phiesa*, and in Javanese, Balinese and Sundanese it is *basa*. It is an important shared word over Southeast Asia, with different nuances just as the concept of 'language' differs. In Malay manuscript writing, as the scholar Henk Maier has pointed out, the word 'bahasa' refers not only to 'language' but to a wider concept of manners and behaviour, more like the English word 'culture'.

So when people ask if you 'speak bahasa', they are asking if you 'speak language'.

Could it be ignorance that makes people call Indonesian 'bahasa'? Perhaps they do not realize that the word just means 'language'? Or perhaps they think that 'bahasa' sounds more academic or sophisticated? Recently I read a long interview in the UK *Globe* with Julian Assange's lawyer, Jennifer Robinson, a young Australian woman who studied Indonesian at school, university, and at in-country courses in Indonesia. Whenever there was a direct quote from her, she correctly referred to the language as 'Indonesian'. But whenever the text moved back to copy, the British *Globe* journalist and editor used the word 'bahasa', presumably thinking they knew better and this word sounded fancier.

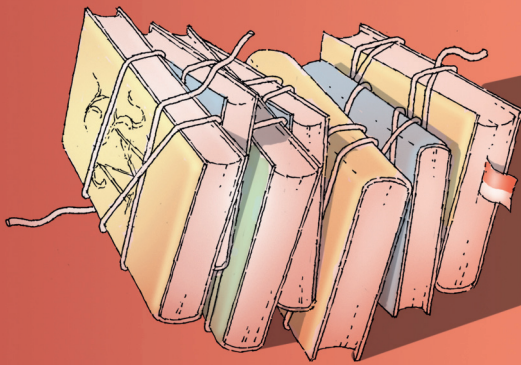
Perhaps it is the same impulse that leads foreign universities to advertise (in English) their Indonesian language courses not as precisely that, but as courses in 'Bahasa Indonesia',

when the same universities would never advertise 'Introduction to la langue française', 'Elementary Deutsch sprache', 'Intermediate Svenska språket', or 'Advanced phāṣā thijy'. Why is it only for Indonesian that the English name of the language is somehow not good enough? (The only similar case I know of is the Maori language which is now often referred to, in English, as 'Te Reo Māori', where 'Te Reo' also means 'language').

But actually I think this 'bahasa' business goes deeper than this. At least university courses usually add the word 'Indonesia' after 'bahasa', so we know which 'bahasa' it is. The creeping tendency to call Indonesian 'bahasa' is, I believe, because it precisely avoids the word 'Indonesia', so people can use the same word to refer to Malay. Or at least, they can be vague about it.



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Singaporeans, Malaysians and Indonesians can all talk about 'bahasa' and not have to use the sensitive, limiting, qualifying word that comes after it (Indonesia, Melayu). I have frequently heard 'bahasa' used this way at gatherings where Indonesians and Singaporeans and Malaysians are present. ('Our discussion will be in English and Bahasa').

It is not easy for Indonesians to acknowledge that their language is a form of Malay, because that feels somewhat treacherous, and also because their idea of Malay is of a language that Indonesian has developed out of, and away from, and so they think of Indonesian as a more modern, sophisticated lan-

guage. Malaysians and Singaporeans on the whole do see Indonesian as a variety of Malay, but then they see Malay more as a language of ethnicity (spoken by Malays) than a language of nation. So Indonesians bristle at their language being seen as a kind of 'Bahasa Melayu', and Malays baulk at their language being called 'Bahasa Indonesia'. But—if you take just the first word, 'bahasa', people can skirt around the issue. We all speak 'bahasa'. Yes, I speak 'bahasa' too, the same as you. Or more or less the same as you.

The tension between establishing nationalistic boundaries and acknowledging linguistic similarities beyond these boundaries has a long history. Although Indonesian nationalists renamed Malay 'Bahasa Indonesia', the Dutch refused to use that name (persisting in calling it 'Malay', *de Maleise taal*). The Japanese during the 1942-1945 occupation were also reluctant to use the name 'Bahasa Indonesia' because it smacked of nationalism, and so they called it *Mariego*, the Malay language.

Even after Indonesia's independence, there were times when the name of the language was problematic, particularly when dealing with Malaya/Malaysia. From the late 1950s, efforts began to develop a common spelling system for the Malay of Malaya and Indonesia's Indonesian. Spelling had developed slightly differently in the two nations, under the influence of the colonial languages, namely Dutch and English. When discussions began in 1957 about developing a common spelling system, this system was called Melindo.

Melindo. Now imagine if the language had been called 'Melindo'. A name not tied to ethnicity or nation. A new name that linked rather than divided. An overarching name that still allowed for huge variation between nations, ethnicities and places. How differently we might think of the language now. It could not have happened in an age of nationalism, of course. But I think it is an unspoken longing for some kind of acknowledgement of this broad sameness that now leads many people to call Indonesian 'bahasa'. There is no other word for them to use.

In September 2012, there was an announcement in the *International Herald Tribune*. Indonesia's budget airline, Lion Air, was planning to set up a budget airline in Malaysia. Lion Air was to own 49 percent of the airline. And its name?

Malindo Airways.

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