

## Indonesian English: what's *det tuh*?

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**Abstract:** In a seminar on ESP held in Bandung, Andy Kirkpatrick of Curtin University of Technology, Australia, in relation to the anticipation of the potential emergence of a new variety of English in the Southeast Asian region and in Indonesia in particular, invited the audience, who were mostly university teachers, to start thinking about developing a teaching program based more on Indonesian culture than on Anglo or American culture. This idea is based on the fact that "the vast majority of people in the region who are learning English are doing so with the expressed purpose of being able to use it as a *lingua franca*. They are not learning English to communicate with native speakers of English, but rather with other non-native speakers" (Kirkpatrick 2001). While the idea is "stimulating and challenging" (Dardjowidjojo, 2001), care needs to be taken before we finally embark further to talk about it. This is particularly important because what we will need at the outset is the down-to-earth explorations discussing the issues related particularly with the unique features that will characterise the new variety of English (if at all any). In this paper, I explore some of the potential features and argue that the most prominent of all are the differences in the realisation in the acts of speech (and writing).

**Key words:** non-native varieties, culture, bilingualism, discourse strategy

### THE EMERGENCE OF NEW ENGLISHES

Early development and spread of the English language beyond Eng-

land was obviously the result of the colonial practices by the British and the subsequent growth of the first and second British Empires and its aftermath. In the case that the English did not speak the language of local people, they were forced to adapt their language to the local situation, which was greatly influenced by the willingness as well as the ability of the people to absorb and use the language. However, in most cases, the language of new comers was always in a stronger position as well as regarded as more prestigious than the local. Such a situation led to the creation of a pidgin, which would later, though not necessarily, develop to become, for example, an English-based Creole. When this newly created language becomes more and more established, it is as likely that the language will result in a new variety of English (cf. situations in the US, Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Kenya, etc.)

While such colonialisation practices are now no longer in existence, new forms and methods of the spread of the English language take place, that is through direct and indirect international contacts either through seminars, trade, or education. People willing to get involved in such contacts will inevitably be in need of mastering English. In other words, they have to be competent speakers in at least two languages, i.e. to become bilingual. Nevertheless, such a bilingual situation will always suggest incomplete mastery of the language as, it is widely believed, any non-native speakers will develop a variety of language called 'interlanguage' (Selinker, 1972).

When the number of such non-native speakers of English is great, and the variety is widely used in communication among people, it is just likely that the variety will become more established and develop to find itself as a new variety of English language (cf. situations in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong).

The claims of the existence of these Englishes are always associated with the relative differences found in the varieties. Two types of differences are commonly identifiable: 1) differences in the grammar, which includes phonology and syntax; and 2) differences in the lexical, which obviously suggests meaning. For example, when a person pronounces words such as *grass*, *class*, and *advanced* as /grɛs/, /klɛs/, and /ədʌvənst/ respectively, he/she will be more likely to be associated with American English, as compared with such pronunciation as /gra:s/, /kla:s/, and /ədva:nst/



which would be regarded as more British-like. A sentence construction like *The committee is having a meeting again* sounds more American than that its counterpart *The committee are having a meeting again* which is used more frequently in British English. Likewise, it sounds more American to refer to parts of a car as *hood* and *trunk*, because the British would speak of *bonnet* and *boot*. To this list, we can add more and more examples of differences in the use of English, into which we at the same time can also include examples of the use of, for instance, particle *lah* by Singaporeans and Malaysians when conversing in English. Nevertheless, the fact is obvious that among varieties of English are found *more similarities than differences*. Kachru and Nelson notice that "it is still apparent that American and British speakers watch each others' movies and news broadcasts and read each others' newspapers and novels without any serious impediments ... although close reading may reveal some unfamiliar features, depending upon the reader's origin" (1996: 75).

#### HOW INDONESIAN ENGLISH IS LIKE: WHAT CHARACTERISES IT?

If the above mentioned is the very fact, how is Indonesian English possible? What will become the common characteristics of it? Pronunciation, syntax, lexical, or else? Or, will it be characterised by the omission of *tenses* in sentences just because Indonesian language does not have such a property? (A number of studies reported so far have investigated that *tenses* is one of the most difficult areas to be learned by Indonesians learning English as a foreign language). Answers to such questions are not always easy to find because they will mainly depend on the following three main factors, which are closely interrelated.

#### The Level of Indonesians' Bilingualism in English

It is strongly believed that bilingualism, say in Indonesian and English, will encourage the development of English in Indonesia. While most Indonesians are already bilingual, i.e. speakers of own first language and Indonesian, only a small number of them are bilingual in foreign languages. In Gunarwan's (2000) terms, the vast majority of Indonesians who are bilingual in English would belong to the 'minimalist' group, and those belonging to the 'maximalist' group are only minority. This fact

suggests that the level of bilingualism of Indonesians in the English language is still low, and it follows that the development of IndoEnglish will likely be confronted with such difficulties. The higher the level of bilingualism of Indonesians in English, the bigger the likelihood of the emergence of IndoEnglish.

#### The Extent of English Usage in Indonesia

Parallel with the current status of English in Indonesia (see below), i.e. as the first foreign language to be studied formally at schools, not so many people use it in their day-to-day communication. Nevertheless, the increase in the requirements of mastering English for global communication, trades, and other types of transactions has put the language in a far better position. Use of English among teenagers, in seminars, in the workplaces, by radio announcers, television presenters, in printed media, graffiti, etc is easily found. This increasing use of English will certainly encourage the creation of a new variety of English in this country.

#### The Language Policy Regarding English Imposed by the Government

Up to now, the status of English in Indonesia has not changed – it is the first foreign language officially taught at schools, although the general policy in relation to its implementation by schools has changed a bit. English is now allowed to be taught in as early as year four, although some schools offer the subject in earlier levels. This very fact is undoubtedly supportive of the two factors previously mentioned.

Now, I will turn to discuss the main features of IndoEnglish for consideration. Three points will strike us in this respect: the grammar, the lexical, and the discourse strategies. However, it should be noted that the explication of these features, especially the first two, is not meant to Indonesianise English, which is unlikely. Rather, the features will 'just' distinguish the emerging IndoEnglish from the more already standardised varieties such as British English and American English. The acceptability of the emerging variety will largely depend on its speakers themselves.



### The Grammar

One potentially notable feature of IndoEnglish can be found in the 'simplification' of *tense* usage. As has been mentioned above, *tense* is one of the areas that is difficult for Indonesians learning English as a foreign language. However, because the demand to be proficient when conversing in the language is more prominent than the need to be accurate grammatically, the complexities of tense usage in English will receive less attention from Indonesians. Therefore, rather than focusing on forms of verbs such as the inflections, speakers of IndoEnglish, I believe, will find their own ways of going about expressing similar meanings. Expressions like

- a) *I go to Bali last month.*
- b) *We study English since we are Junior High School students.*
- c) *Linda visit her grandparents every month.*

will appear to become completely understandable sentences to IndoEnglish speakers and they turn out to be easier to produce. 'Simplifications' are found here in the use of *go* for *went* in sentence (a) (cf. *I went to Bali last month*), *study* and *are* for *have studied/have been studying* and *were* in sentence; (b) (cf. *We have studied/have been studying English since we were Junior High School students*), and *visit* for *visits* in sentence; c) (*Linda visits her grandparents every month*). Although research on second language acquisition will suggest that this phenomenon is 'only' found in the early stage of acquisition, a closer look at the real use of English language by even fluent speakers will provide sufficient data that the speakers of English with Indonesian background frequently use the forms. From this fact alone, we can conclude that the 'grammar of tenses' attracts less attention from the speakers as the main focus is on the communicativeness of a message.

The use of modal auxiliaries will become another area where a feature of IndoEnglish can be found. While the use of some modals is also related to *tense* e.g. the present *can* vs the past *could*, the use of the comparable 'present' tense modals such as *can*, *may*, and *must* by IndoEnglish speakers will potentially be different from those of in British or American English. To mean that 'someone is not allowed to smoke in the designated room', expressions like *You can't smoke in this room* instead of *You may*

*not smoke in this room* will often be uttered by IndoEnglish speakers, and vice versa. Apart from the matter of the understanding of the semantics of these modal auxiliaries, this also has to do with the great influence of Indonesian on the expressions.

The other area under this category that might characterise IndoEnglish is the use of prepositions whose usage will reflect their use in Indonesian. While English requires *same* and *different* to be followed by *as* and *from* respectively, IndoEnglish will supposedly take *with* for both cases so that *same with*, *different with* (compare with the increasing use of *different to* in Australian English). On the other hand, while English requires no preposition after the verb *discuss*, IndoEnglish speakers will add *about* after it. It seems that this fact will become one among the many first features finding its standardisation in IndoEnglish.

### The Lexical

Except for the words borrowed from the local and Indonesian languages such as *batik*, *bamboo*, *orangutan*, *becak*, *dangdut*, *gudeg*, etc, it seems that the differences in the use of English lexical items will become the least prominent features of IndoEnglish variety. For the former case, the use of those Indonesian words in English discourse is simply because the concepts brought by the words are not available in the English language, and a direct transfer will be regarded as the most efficient way of expressing the concepts. As for the latter case, some English lexical items have undergone 'Indonesianisation' in terms of their meanings and forms. The word *reformation*, for example, has gained its own meaning among Indonesians, although for native speakers of English, the more 'correct' form would be *reform*.

### The Discourse Strategies

Involved in the acts of communication are participants' cultural backgrounds, which in many cases have become the essence that greatly influences the conduct of communication. Put in another way, the way people communicate reflects the uniqueness of language use. While other features described above can be regarded as being more peripheral in nature – and many people are in fact in doubt whether they will accept and



allow such usage (Dardjowidjojo, 2001) – discourse strategies will occupy the most central position among all features. Acts of speech (and writing) reflect the most basic philosophical insight of language users about their language. Some expressions frequently found to be used by Indonesian people when conversing in English like *as we know* and *maybe* seem to find their place in the cultural norm of Indonesians.

Indonesian people hold communal principles when membership to a society matters, and expressing *as we know* when opening a speech, for example, can be regarded as their sincere acknowledgment of the existence of others within their sphere. In addition, the use of *as we know* in a discourse also strongly suggests the speaker's recognition that other people are also likely to have known about the issue to be said).

The use of *maybe* in a sentence like *Maybe, I can come to your house tomorrow* can be seen as an indication of the speaker to be indirect to his/her interlocutor when refusing an invitation, for instance (Aziz, 2000). The use of *maybe* in other types of discourses also suggests Indonesians' reluctance of claiming things to happen for sure, even if in situations where they are in full confidence. All in all, Indonesians are inclined to be indirect in their acts of speech (and writing), especially in face-threatening situations.

Recent studies on the realisations of speech act of requesting (Aziz, 2001) and apologising (Novianti, 2002) by Indonesians learning English as a foreign language found that there are a number of strategies 'uniquely' used by the respondents, which are different and not found in native speakers' realisations. The use of multiple apologising expressions, *Sorry*, both before and after an IFID when requesting is one example where the specific strategy is evident. Such a strategy is used because a speaker feels that by making a request, his/her interlocutor's face is under threat, and expressing deeply *sorry* is expected to be able to rectify the affront. Another strategy used by Indonesians learning English as a foreign language when making an apology is by using some *preparatory expressions*, which are uttered before the IFID of apologies. This type of strategy seems to be intended to lead an interlocutor to an issue about which a speaker is willing to request an apology. In a situation where a speaker had to apologise for losing a novel, for example, the speaker asked his interlocutor whether he remembered the novel the speaker had borrowed.

The speaker went on saying that the novel was very good indeed, but unfortunately, he had to say a bad thing about the novel: he lost it, and he then requested an apology, while saying that he was prepared to find a substitute.

Another area of interest in the differences in discourse strategies commonly used by IndoEnglish speakers is in the *phatic* used to establish relationships. In English speaking societies, asking someone (a) whether he/she has got married/children already; (b) where he/she is going, will potentially be regarded as an act of impoliteness, because that suggests intrusion and intervention on one's personal businesses. By, and for, Indonesians, such an act is always meant to show their good willingness to establish cooperation by attending to their interlocutor's positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), because asking about marriage, children and going-whereabouts is a form of care and appreciation of the speaker on the addressee's social achievements. This act of asking *can*, to a large extent, be equated with the native speakers of English talking about weather when opening a conversation. This type of *phatic* is not only found in oral communication, because in written communication similar phenomena can be found, although in different realisations. In a written discourse such as when writing a letter (even in an application letter), asking an addressee's health while praying that he/she, i.e. the addressee is always in good health and condition, is commonly practiced. This is obviously different from the common practise by the native speakers of English, which is almost always straight to the points. Again, this act is indicative of care of the IndoEnglish writer toward his/her addressee.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Time will prove whether IndoEnglish will really be in existence in the future. This will largely be determined by a number of factors including the level of bilingualism of Indonesians in the English language, the extent of the use of English in Indonesian society, and the policy endorsed by the government regarding English. Speaking of a new variety of language such as IndoEnglish does not merely talk about its differences from others in terms of, for example, the grammar, lexical, and pronunciation; they all represent peripheral features of the variety. Although extensive and comprehensive research on the features that characterise IndoEnglish



is absolutely required to clarify the features, it seems that the one that must be nominated as the 'benchmark' (or even the 'trade mark') of Indo-English is its differences in the way people, i.e. Indonesians realise their acts of speech (and writing).

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