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**Cultural connotations and linguistic creativity in Malaysian English**  
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**Introduction**

In this paper we will discuss the two faces of Malaysian English (ME) which is used in 'glocal' and 'global' discourses. Often times, these two interweave to form a common community identity. We do not use the term 'cultural identity' as is used by Ho (2006) as ME users are not wrestling to find an ethnic identity but rather creating a sub variety of a language as a common denominator in actively participating in a group. They dynamically utilize the linguistic resources at their disposal to shape and reshape thoughts, concepts, views and opinions between ethnic groups.

Unlike its nearest neighbor Singapore, Malaysia has the same language, Malay, as both its national language and the official language. Singapore, with similar ethnic group makeup as Malaysia i.e. a multiracial population of Malay, Chinese and Indian, has chosen Malay to be its national language while the others, Mandarin, Tamil, Malay and English are designated as official languages. Malay is the language of instruction in Malaysian public schools hence as a national language, it is the lingua franca for all Malaysians.

The situation in Singapore leads Ho (2006) to look at the quandary of Singaporeans who use the basilect variety Singlish that is a "... variety, with its odd mix of English and local ethnic languages, mirrors a people who find themselves struggling with a myriad conflicting and contrasting cultures, a people in cultural and linguistic flux, who are still searching – desperately – for an identity, and a language they can call their own." (pp. 17). Ho postulates that Singlish is a medium which acts as a thread that binds multiethnic Singapore who do not want to identify with the west and cannot associate with their native languages<sup>1</sup>. English used in Malaysia does not undergo the same problem of identity forming as there is already an identified constitutionally endorsed language, i.e. Malay, that is meant to bind the ethnic groups. The dire tug-of-war feeling stated by Ho, which is present in Singapore does not exist in the same manner in Malaysia. So what kind of situation does one see in the use of English in Malaysia?

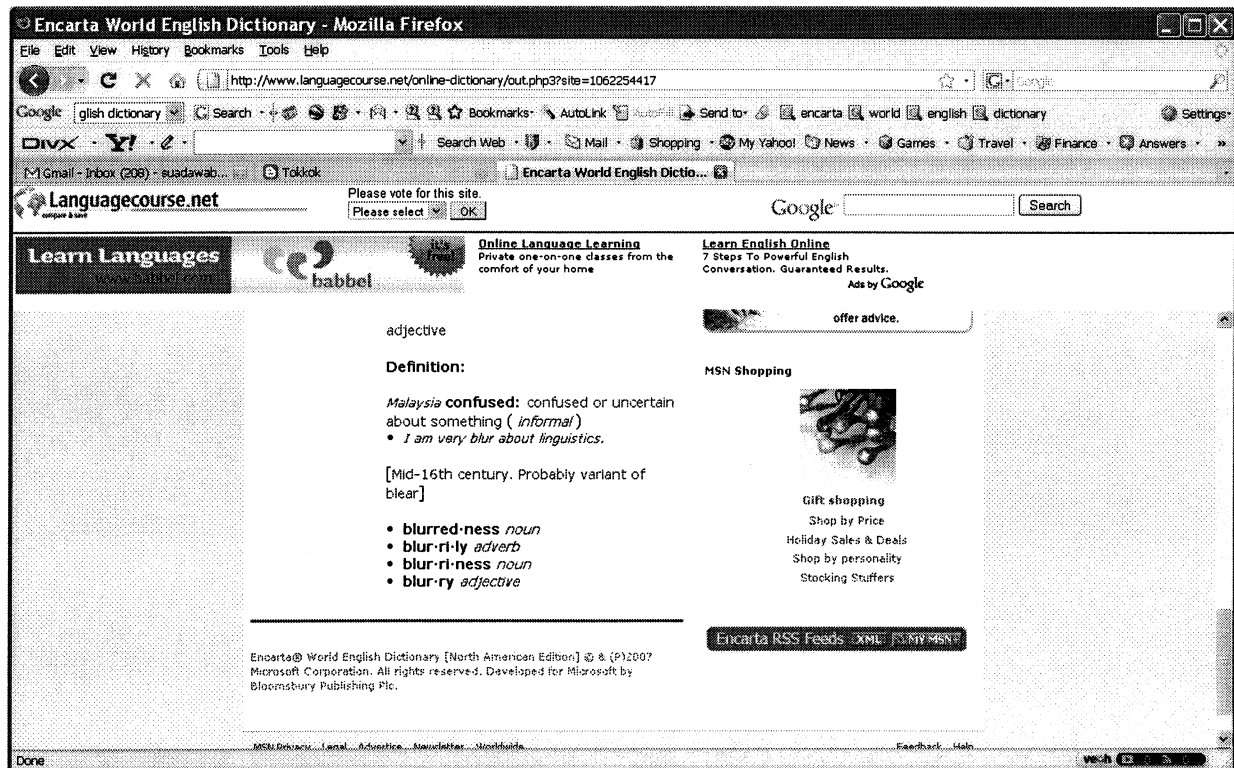
Past studies on Malaysian English (ME) have looked at the use of borrowed native language lexis in ME (e.g. Hajar & Harshita 2003, Tan 1998, Pennycook 1994) while Baskaran (2005) provides a good analytical description of the syntactic features of ME. The most common complaint regarding English used in Malaysia is its 'degrading' standard from its standard form

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<sup>1</sup> Begun in 1979, the Speak Mandarin campaign was aimed at using Mandarin as the standard language for all Chinese in Singapore. While it is deemed as successful, it marks the slow death of the many Chinese dialects.

and the fact that it is used liberally in Malay language, much to the dismay of the Malay language purists and linguists. English is easily code-switched and code-mixed in Malay as well as among speakers of Chinese dialects and Tamil.

Words occur in lexical or syntactic combinations. English words or phrases in ME 'co-habits' with their neighbors to form interesting and indigenized connotation. Take the word 'blur'. As part of speech, it is categorized as a verb or a noun. In ME, it has taken a newer life as an adjective. There is even an entry in the 2007 Encarta World English Dictionary [North American Edition] for the new identity of blur:



While there remains an ongoing linguistic creativity that is clearly identifiable as native-like, the convergence towards current mainstream language with global political and cultural events is becoming more apparent.

Since the era of global connectivity via the ubiquitous Internet, a wider net is cast with regard to creation of structure and lexis in ME. Media and pop culture infiltration are no longer Western but coming from countries closer to home such as South Korea and Japan as well as the Philippines. Blogs appear in abundance around topics related to these cultures such as K-popped, J-popped and Canto-popped. With this type of non-western themes, the kind of discourse using English resulted in speakers creatively discussing global topics in local discourse.

In engaging in this discourse, English is used among the participants who are multi-ethnic, as evident in the following excerpt:

ssangyong~ said...

erm i'm sorry if i'm a bit interrupting here...well liz,orhid,n rooster..to let u know,i'm a malay...

i would like to try the korean foods too as sometimes watching them eating on the screen mcm lazat (note: *delicious*) gile2 (*very*) je...huhu...but,as i'm a malay,u know lah kn non halal food is a strictly no-no to us (i'm so sori here)...since u guys knew a lot of things related to korean, could u guys suggest me any korean restaurant that offered us halal food??if there's any...tq...;)

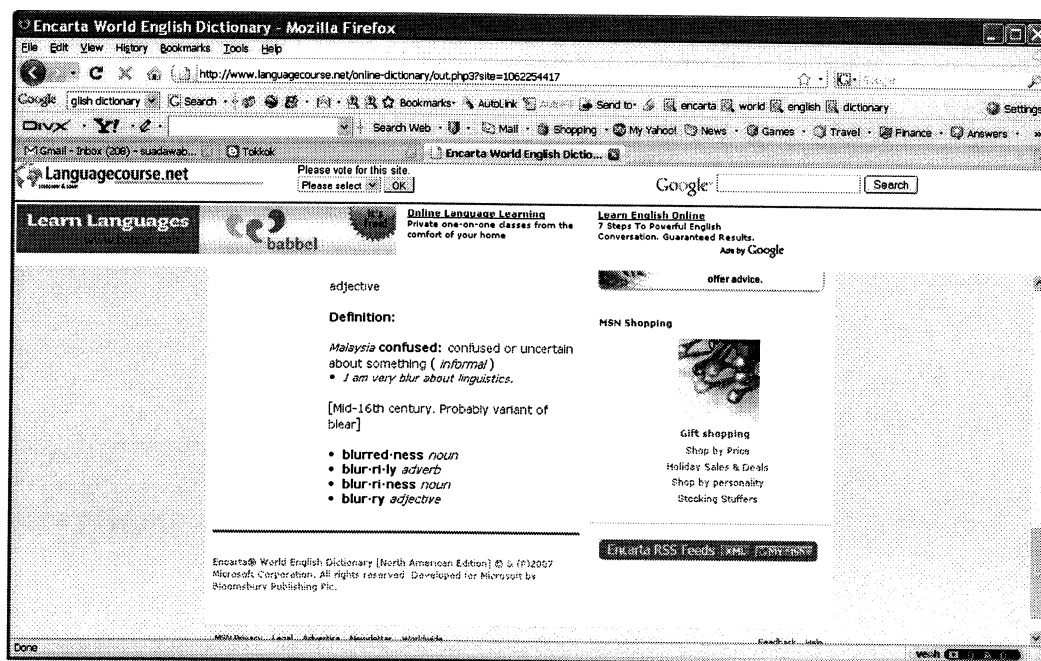
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(<https://www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=9032501670292723848&postID=8427078554093491158&isPopup=true>)

This is taken from a community blog called K-popped. Its tagline is: passionate about Korean pop culture. This comment above is one of the few in which the identity of the commenter's ethnic group is known. In this thread of discussion concerning Korean eateries in Kuala Lumpur, it is clear that most of the commentators are non-Muslims i.e. Chinese or Indians. What is interesting is English is now used to talk about non-western topics. As many of these blog participants do not speak Korean, Cantonese, Mandarin or Japanese, they choose a language which is already accessible to people in their 'community'.

### **Cultural identity & cultural connotation**

Words occur in lexical or syntactic combinations. English words or phrases in ME 'co-habit' with their neighbours to form interesting and indigenized connotation. Take the word 'blur'. As part of speech, it is categorized as a verb or a noun. In ME, it has taken a newer life as an adjective. There is even an entry in the 2007 Encarta World English Dictionary [North American Edition] for the new identity of *blur*:



It is interesting to note that even speakers who are proficient in standard English in Malaysia would be able to decipher this new meaning of *blur*, so widely acceptable the cultural connotation this word has taken.

Cultural connotation of words change frequently; it is in a constant state of flux. As new or rediscovered topics and themes appear, speakers will find ways to create or adapt the repertoire of language at their disposal to successfully participate in the discourse.

When we look at the many studies on the relationship between lexis and culture, we can generally agree that cultural views are encoded into lexis but are not encoded by lexis. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of language determinism does not apply in varieties of Englishes. Speakers are much freer to create new forms of lexical words and expressions as and when the need arises. For example, there is *fangirl*, whose meaning can be deciphered easily. If we have *boy band* as a useable expression, then *fangirl* does not seem that strange after all.

This position is what Hadley (1997) refers to as 'cultural prototype' i.e. words and lexical items which are influenced by the dominant culture rather than the other way around. As prototypes, these words make sense in that particular culture, taking in new identities, wearing new outfits. This is especially true in routines, idioms and metaphors. In *Sorry, I'm late. Because why...I went to do my hair and I don't want to go. Last time, I went, she scolded me*, the two expressions *because why* and *last time* are influenced by its Malay equivalents. *Gone case* (a goner), *lost case* (beyond redemption), *lamp post* (a third party in a threesome) further illustrates the strong influence cultural has on lexis.

## **Lexis**

### **1. Semantic shift – due to use/ meanings of equivalent local word**

*Terror* (great)

*Blur* (confused)

*somemore* (on top of that) I already put in on

I haven't *test drive* (tried) (the lipstick) yet so I have no comments

I *feel great* (am happy) for somebody

*Slowtalk* – (persuade)

### **2. Use of local words**

*kan cheong* (suspense)

*syok*

## **Structure**

### **1. Linguistic structures**

After I *wait-wait* (waited for some time)

could u guys *suggest me* (give me some ideas)

*chicken-and-duck talk* (translation of a local idiomatic phrase)

i'm sorry if i'm *a bit interrupting* here

finally *settle yourself* in Kelantan (settle down)

*I tell you* (let me tell you)

*See la how* (we'll see how things go)

## **New forms**

### **Example 1**

*control macho* (putting up a front)

### **Example 2**

*So the handsome one, she's so the clever; Henny is the hottness* (handsome)

Example 3

You want to go for *mamak*?, Lets go *mamaking* (similar to structures like 'clubbing')

Example 4

*chicken-and-duck talk*

Example 5

O ya, that's *kewl*

The new forms exhibit a much more robust form of creativity.

Example 1

The compound 'control macho' is a combination of a verb and an adjective. It is often used in a tongue-in-cheek fashion to refer to someone (usually a male) who tries to look good and in control.

Example 2

The structure *so the* + adjective is used to emphasize the meaning of the adjective.

Example 3

The word 'mamak' originates from the Tamil word 'mama' which means "uncle". The form *mamak* is used by Malaysian speakers in general to refer to Indian Muslims (male) who are known in Malaysia especially for their food. So the *mamak* stalls, restaurants and eating places are very popular among Malaysians. The way in which the word *mamak* (go for *mamak*, *mamaking*) is used shows a new level of sophistication in the lexical innovation of Malaysian English.

Example 4

The speaker who used the phrase *chicken-and-duck talk* literally translated a Malay idiom which means talk between two people that does not make sense. This example is an indication of speakers' willingness to break the cultural boundaries of non-literal expressions.

## Conclusion

Global cultural influences are strongly felt in Malaysia, in many spheres of the society. This is especially true among the younger groups who connect readily and rapidly with the help of the Internet. While some examples in our data illustrate the already-present creativity in ME lexis, there is an abundance of newly formed nativized English lexis. English is appropriated for local meanings and uses. Put in another word, the local has gone global and U-turned to glocal. The glocalization of global ideas and best practices leads to a culture open to taking the best and leaving the rest behind. Perhaps this is the answer to the complaint of language prescriptivists about the degrading state of English in Malaysia.

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**CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS  
AND LINGUISTIC CREATIVITY  
IN MALAYSIAN ENGLISH**

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*Hajar Abdul Rahim*

*Su'ad Awab*



# THE GLOBAL AND GLOCAL

## DISCOURSES OF CREATIVITY

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- Cultural connotations

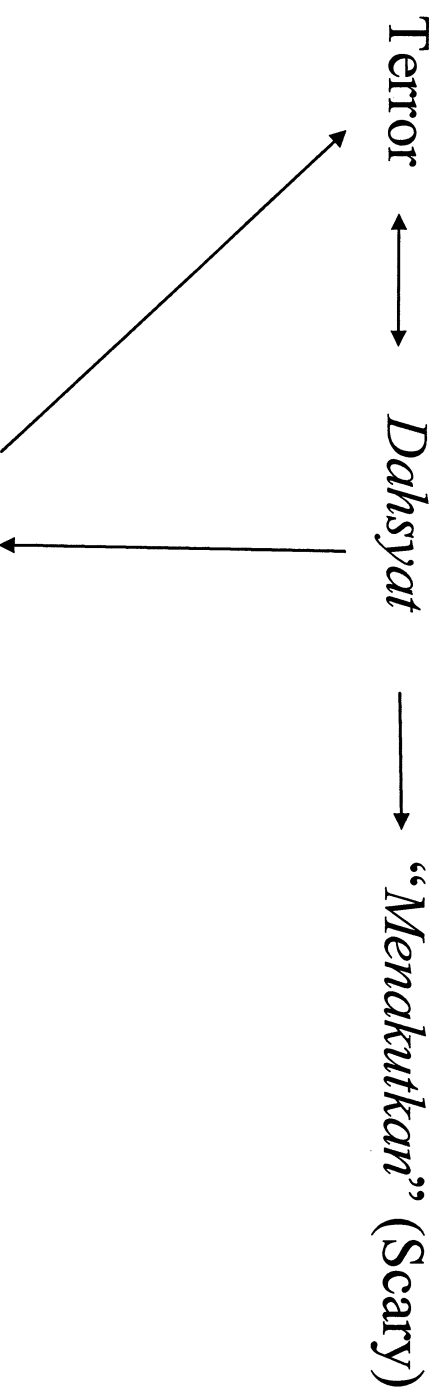
*Meanings that words inherit due to recurrent occurrence are cultural connotations that can reflect the social reality of the community.*

- A new level of creativity in ME
- Converges towards current mainstream language due global connectivity

# LINGUISTIC CREATIVITY

SEMANTIC SHIFT – DUE TO USE/ MEANINGS OF  
EQUIVALENT LOCAL WORD

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“*Hebat/Mengagumkan*” (Great)

# EXAMPLES

*Terror* (great)

*Blur* (confused)

*somemore* (on top of that) I already put  
in on

*Sloutalk* – (persuade)

*Spend* you (treat you)

*Tackle* (woo)

# USE OF LOCAL WORDS

*Geram* (angry)

*Syok* (enjoy)

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*Malu* (shy, embarrassed, ashamed)

# STRUCTURE

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After I *wait-wait* (waited for some time)

could u guys *suggest me* (give me some ideas)

*chicken-and-duck talk* (translation of a local  
idiomatic phrase)

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# NEW FORMS

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## ME compounds

*control macho* (keep cool)

(verb+ adj)

*Fangirls* (fans who girls)

(Noun+noun)

## Structure

*So the handsome one, she's so the clever; Henny is the hottness* (handsome)

## Lexis & structure

You want to go for *mamak*?, Lets go *mamaking* (similar to structures like 'clubbing')

## Collocation shift

I haven't *test drive* (tried/ try it out) the lipstick yet so I have no comments