Lexical Features of Malaysian English in a Local English-Language Movie, *Ah Lok Café*

Zaamah Mohd Nor a, Norazrin Zamri b, Su’ad Awab c

aUniversiti Teknologi Mara, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
bUniversiti Teknologi Mara, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
cUniversity of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract

English, like other languages, is subject to change and diversity. The myriad of ethnicities in Malaysia contribute to the unique characteristics of English spoken by Malaysians, known as Malaysian English (ME, henceforth). The unique features of ME can be seen in various levels of linguistic analysis such as phonology, lexis, syntax, and semantics. Previous research on ME mainly has included sources from classrooms, media advertisements, cartoon strips, TV talk shows and internet chat-rooms. Not much research, however, has been done on Malaysian films. This apparent absence makes this area a fruitful avenue for study. Thus, this study attempts to look at locally produced English-language movies as another source of ME, with a particular focus on its lexical features, aiming to establish the extent to which the data contributes to the defining characteristics of ME. This study employs a qualitative approach in data analysis, based on the transcribed dialogues and lexical features of ME established in previous studies; comparison with standard British English (SBE) is also made accordingly. The comparison is not intended to prove that ME is a sub- or non-standard language, but rather to establish its uniqueness as a variety of English that warrants linguistic explanation. It is hoped that English-language films produced in Malaysia will continue to be a useful source in the study of ME as an established variety of English.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd.
Peer-review under responsibility of The English Language Studies Section School of Humanities Universiti Sains Malaysia

Keywords: Varieties of English; Malaysian English; Lexis; Discourse/Genre analysis

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: za1377@yahoo.com
1. Introduction

ME is one of the ‘mushrooming’ varieties of English resulting from various non-linguistic and linguistic factors. It should not be viewed as an inaccurate language that needs to be corrected and labeled as standard or non-standard as compared to the standard varieties such as SBE (standard British English). Gonzalez (1997, p. 1) points out that “in many post-colonial societies previously under the dominance of English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, a local variety of English continues to be used and represents a language in the process of evolution”. This includes English in Malaysia which, some 30 years ago, might simply be known as ‘English’, instead of Malaysian English.

As one of the varieties of English that is acknowledged within the notion of World Englishes, ME warrants some in-depth linguistic investigation in order to distinguish the elements that constitute its identity. According to Baskaran (2005), “after almost two centuries of nurturing and over four decades of nursing, the English language in Malaysia has developed to become a typical progeny of New Englishes: a distinct variety in its own right” (p.18).

A comparison with SBE, a standard form of English, is imperative in an attempt to explain both the structure as well as the meaning of the identified ME utterances in order to distinguish their unique characteristics. SBE is used as a point of reference as it is still the structure of this Standard English that is aimed at the official level of various domains in which English is spoken worldwide, due to its universal intelligibility. This comparison is not done to question the varieties’ accuracy but is necessary to distinguish the elements that make ME unique.

A Malaysian-produced English-language movie entitled *Ah Lok Café* has been selected for the study. An eponymous live-action movie based on a Reggie Lee’s cartoon. This film illustrates ample utterances of ME, the variety of language that is realistic for the setting and characters it portrays. The characters use some features of ME which significantly fall into various positions along the line of the lectal continuum, based on the background of the speakers as well as the formality of context. The findings and source of data (the movie) would be useful for anyone involved in the study of World Englishes. In addition, ESL language teachers might find it beneficial in making students aware of the uniqueness of ME.

1.1. Objectives of the study

The following are the objectives that guide this study:

- To describe the lexical features of Malaysian English used in the data.
- To establish the extent to which the data contributes to the defining characteristics of Malaysian English.

In achieving these objectives, the study examines the identified linguistic features in accordance to the categorization of the sub-varieties of ME established in previous studies. The analysis of data is done qualitatively by a close reference to the established characteristics of ME, as well as comparison with SBE. The description of each item under its respective category serves to confirm its status as a feature of ME. This contributes to the reliability of the data, thus advancing towards the objectives of study.
2. Methods For Data Collection And Presentation

Upon reviewing a number of Malaysian films, it was found that only a few scenes contained ME utterances that met all the sub-varieties of the lectal continuum, reducing their reliability as data in achieving the purpose of this study. Ample utterances of ME in *Ah Lok Café* in the lectal continuum justify the selection of this movie as the main source of data.

The data gathered from dialogues in the movie were transcribed and are presented scene by scene. The dialogues were transcribed by listening through a multimedia headset, typing and saving the scripts using Microsoft Word. A number of pauses and repetitions were required to ensure clarity of utterances, hence accuracy of transcription (the accuracy of this transcription was later verified by the co-authors). Each utterance is labeled in the transcription according to the scene (S) and line (L) for easy reference of the analysis. Within the transcribed dialogues, based on the established characteristics and framework, ME lexical features were identified and labeled using specific fonts and colors.

The transcription was done orthographically. The transcript notational conventions representing the prosodic elements of the natural speech were not applied as they are not necessary for the purpose of the study, to examine the lexical elements of the utterances.

3. Analysis of findings

The analysis of ME lexical features identified in the data was done based on the categorizations and characteristics established in previous works. The description of each item under its respective category serves to confirm its status as a lexical feature of ME, and thus contributes to the reliability of the data as a source for understanding the nature of ME.

3.1 Lexical features

The analysis of ME lexical features identified in the data is done based on the categorizations and characteristics established in previous studies. The description of each item under its respective category serves to confirm its status as a lexical feature of ME, and thus contributes to the reliability of the data as a source for understanding the nature of ME.

3.1.1 Local language referents (Use of local lexicon in ME speech)

These are local terms that have been assimilated into the spoken (as well as written) English in the country. As stated by Baskaran (2005, p. 37), “with almost two decades of ESL status in the country, the lexicon of ME has a profusion of local terms with characteristics that warrant their presence in the system”. In this case, English translational equivalents could hardly suffice and this applies to terms like *kampung, balik kampung, gotong royong,* and *pasar malam.*

She adds that “although on the whole there is sameness of reference (in this case ‘hometown/village’, ‘going back to hometown’, ‘cleaning up’, and ‘night market’ respectively), the degree and nature of the sameness of meaning (between the local lexeme and its English equivalent) is variable – thus the need to maintain the local term”. In the following discussion, some examples of such items gathered from the data are described under two categories based on Baskaran’s (2005) characteristics.

3.1.1.1 Cultural/culinary terms

These, as defined by Baskaran (2005, p. 41), are “native (local) culinary and domestic referents specifically akin to a characteristic of local origin and ecology”. The words *ta pao* (S4:L10) meaning ‘take-away’, *ong* (S4:L1 and S6:L20) meaning ‘good luck’, *char kway teow* (S4:L1 and S4:L4), and *teh tarik tongkat ali* (S6:L26, S11:L1, S11:L2, S13:L1, and S27:L1) can be categorized as cultural/culinary terms based on their cultural-bound effects and
association with local delicacies.

3.1.1.2 Emotional/cultural loading

Referring to some prominent local characters, Datukship (S9:L13 and S9:L18), and Tauke (S3: L10, S4:L3, and S4:L4) could hardly be translatable into English due to their culture-bound association. Hence they can be labeled as emotional/cultural loading. Kao tim (S5:L4, S10:L11, and S17:L18) which in Hokkien means ‘to get something done or settled’ can also be included in the same category as it is indeed Malaysianised (understood by Malaysians of various races, yet such referents with identical meaning are not present in SBE).

Interestingly, kiasu (S15, L38) is also used in the data. This word is a borrowing from Hokkien ‘kia’ (afraid) and ‘su’ (to lose), compounded as ‘kiasu’. According to Ooi (2001, p. 177), “kiasu is used nowadays in increasing frequency to characterize the negative Singaporean trait of being overly competitive or being afraid of losing out”. As a result of its growing popularity, the derivational kiasu + ism = kiasuism is also being used. McDonalds, as stated by Ooi (2001), had even offered a Kiasu Burger in Singapore. Although the use of kiasu is more widespread in Singapore, the fact that the item is labeled as SME lexical item in Ooi’s concentric circles suggests that it is shared with ME speakers as well. This is understandable as this item originates from Hokkien, one of the salient dialects amongst the Chinese community in both Malaysia and Singapore.

Another characteristic that marks the vocabulary as Official ME lexis, based on Baskaran’s (2005) subdivision, is that the words are not substitutable in an international context, giving them a localized context. The fact that Datukship, char kuay teow and teh tarik tongkat ali are proper nouns that are specific and hardly translatable allows them to be used by speakers of ME of any sub-varieties, in both formal and informal contexts. In the movie, the items are used both by Ah Lok as well as Dr Singh (the former a prominently basilectal/mesolectal speaker, and the latter acrolectal, based on educational background and other evidence portrayed in the movie). Considering these, the items can therefore be categorized as Acrolect (Standard ME)/ Official ME. On the other hand, tapao, kao tim, and ong can be considered as Mesolect (Colloquial)/ Unofficial ME, as they are localized lexical items (Hokkien origin) not commonly used in more formal context. Similarly, kiasu, that is placed in Group E in Ooi’s (2001) concentric circles, is described as being used commonly in informal contexts, thus can be considered as a mesolectal feature.

3.1.2 Standard English lexicalization (English lexemes with local usage)

These are originally English words that somehow carry a different meaning (as compared to SBE meaning) when used by ME speakers. These words that can be described by certain characteristics, as illustrated in the following sections.

3.1.2.1 Polysemic variation

Polysemic variation, according to Baskaran (2005), includes standard English lexemes that have the original meaning as well as an extended semantic range of meanings not originally in standard English. One such example is the verb ‘cut’, which, besides carrying the original meaning of ‘slicing’, also carries the meanings of ‘overtake’ and ‘reduce’ in ME. Another instance gathered in the data is the word ‘uncle’. Ai Ling refers to Michael Soo as ‘uncle’ (S9:L9 and S9:L10). The auntly/uncle reference towards the elderly of no blood-relationship or an older person of long-standing acquaintance is used commonly by young Malaysians as a term of respect. These words do not necessarily refer to their parents’ siblings as in the SBE usage, thus indicating a semantic extension of this particular item in ME.

3.1.2.2 Informalization

As stated by Baskaran (2005, p. 46), “many of the lexemes used by the ME speaker tend to be informal
(colloquial) substitutions of standard English words and it is common to find a profusion of lexemes indicating a more informal style and register in ME”. Words like ‘kids’ (for children) or ‘hubby’ (for husband), ‘fellow’ (for person), ‘partner’ (for spouse), ‘sleep’ (for ‘go to bed’), ‘follow’ (for ‘accompany’), and ‘spend’ (for ‘giving someone a treat for something’) are some examples that can be put in this category. Some words in the data that can be categorized as Informalization are discussed next.

- **Spend**

  (S14, L7) Louis: *Aiyah* that one no problem. I **spend** you this time.

  Next time Ah Lok Café you **spend** me lor..ok?

  In this example, the word ‘spend’ is used to mean “give someone a treat for something” or code-switched later by Louis as *belanja* in “next time I *belanja* you”, ‘Spend’ as used here functions as a transitive verb that takes the objects ‘you’ and ‘me’. This kind of structure is not common in SBE. With reference to *Encarta World English Dictionary* (UK Edition), although ‘spend’ is described as a verb that carries the meaning of “paying out money in exchange for goods or services”, there are four other meanings of the transitive verb, none of which takes ‘you’ or ‘me’ as the object as used in ME. This is further exemplified in the extract of *Collins Cobuild Concordance* in Figure 3.1 where none of the instances of ‘spend’ takes ‘me’ or ‘you’ as objects.

![Fig.1. Edited concordance listing for ‘spend’ (from Collins Cobuild database)](image1)

- **Blur**

  Another word in the data that can be put in the same category is ‘blur’. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2005), ‘blur’ is defined as ‘smear’, ‘dimness’, or ‘confused effect’. Some examples of usage that carries these meanings are shown in the *Collins Cobuild Concordance* extract in Figure 3.2.

![Fig. 2. Edited concordance listing for ‘blur’ (from Collins Cobuild database)](image2)

As shown in the above extract, ‘blur’ is used as an abstract noun (Extracts no.1 & 2), i.e. a state of dimness; a collective noun (Extracts 3) to determine a particular state of dimness; and a verb (Extracts no 4, 5, 7 & 8), i.e. the act of smearing or dimming something. Using the word as an adjective to label a person as in “You are blur” is not common in SBE but evident in the data as follows:
Interestingly, the hawker, in self-defense, says that instead of being ‘blur’, he is actually meticulous or very particular about details. Thus, unlike its meaning in SBE, ‘blur’ as used in the data acts as an adjective to describe someone’s state of carelessness or inefficiency, thus carrying a negative connotation.

In addition, as described by Su’ad & Hajar (2008), ‘blur’ could also be seen as carrying “cultural identity and cultural connotation”. Words occur in lexical or syntactic combinations. English words or phrases in ME ‘co-habit’ with their neighbors to form interesting and indigenized connotation. As part of speech, ‘blur’ is categorized as a verb or a noun. In ME, it has taken a new life as an adjective. There is even an entry in the Encarta World English Dictionary [UK Edition] for the new identity of ‘blur’, thus acknowledging the ME usage.

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 is the cultural connotation of this word.

- Follow

(S25, L5) Ah Lok: Yeah because I’m a good singer. I’m a good singer and then I also can dance. You know, nowadays ah all these people, they like to learn singing you know. Then you follow me lah…you follow me…you teach the auntie..actually talk about this place ah I feel so sad lah..I feel the sad song coming….(singing)

In the above instance (S25, L5), “follow me” suggests the directive “repeat after me”. In contrast, as evident in Figure 8, none of the instances from the extracts of Collins Cobuild Concordance shows the same structure of ‘follow’ + ‘me’ as the object. Instead, ‘follow’ functions as a transitive verb that takes the objects ‘signs’, ‘their conscience’, ‘the instructions’, ‘procedures’, ‘Afrikaans’, ‘the continental pattern’ and ‘the balanced diet’ in Extracts 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10 respectively. In these cases, ‘follow’ could generally mean “acting the same or as directed/shown by something or in accordance to something”. As for Extract 5, ‘follow’ is used as an intransitive word meaning ‘to refer’, whilst for Extract 6 ‘to take place’.

Encarta World English Dictionary (2009) lists 19 definitions of ‘follow’, 18 of which are closely associated with the usage in the corpus extracts. Interestingly, though, one of the definitions has acknowledged the Malaysian way of using ‘follow’ to mean “to accompany” somebody. As the word ‘blur’, this seemingly shows ‘follow’ as defined by Malaysians is so widely used that it has become a recognized variety of SBE.
3.1.3 Particles

Studies on particles have looked at the syntactical positions of the particles (e.g. whether after a noun or a verb) that could account for their existence and their pragmatic or discourse functions. In recognition of the significant discourse functions they serve, they have been referred to as discourse particles or pragmatic particles by Platt & Ho (1989) and Gupta (1992). Pragmatic particles, according to Gupta (1992), are a small set of words, mostly loans from Southern varieties of Chinese, which are used to indicate the attitude of speakers to what they are saying. In particular, they contradict what an interlocutor has said, make an assertion, or add a sense of tentativeness. They are often the final utterance. The most common are ‘ah’ (tentative), ‘lah’ (assertive) and ‘what’ (contradictory). ‘Lah’, as stated by Gupta (1992), is the most stereotypical feature of the English of Singapore and Malaysia. Baskaran (2005) refers to ‘one’, ‘what’ and ‘lah’ as grammatical particles as they are characteristically Malaysian and stand for a range of functions. The ME particles that are commonly evident in the data include ‘ah’, ‘lah/la’, ‘one’, ‘what’, ‘mah’, ‘meh’, ‘hor’, and ‘lor’, all of which are described in the following sections.

3.1.3.1 Ah

‘Ah’ is the most frequently used particle throughout the movie with a total of 221 utterances. It carries either pragmatic or syntactic role. The pragmatic versus syntactic role of particles may be similar to the emotive and non-emotive sentence-final particles in Mandarin described by Kwan-Terry (1978) in Low & Deterding (2003): “emotive particles serve to express the attitude of the speaker and thus play a pragmatic role, while non-emotive particles serve purely syntactic roles such as to indicate the end of a clause”. The following discussion of the syntactic and pragmatic functions of ‘ah’ is made based on this recognition of emotive-non emotive roles as well as the author’s own understanding and judgment of the contexts involved.

- The syntactic functions of ‘ah’

The particle ‘ah’ can carry a syntactical role that is equivalent to a tag or a hedge (‘isn’t it’, ‘is it’, ‘you know’). According to Baskaran (2005), in basilectal ME, there is an enclitic ‘ah?’ with falling intonation, at sentence-final position. For example:

- Was Patrick late? (SBE)
- Patrick was late or not? (Mesolectal ME)
- Patrick (was) late, ah? (Basilectal ME)

Enclitic ‘ah’ is commonly used as a substitute for interrogative tags in the basilectal ME. For this function, the particle is placed in the sentence’s final position to replace the equivalents of isn’t it, is it, or other tags, followed usually with a question mark. These uses are demonstrated in the data (equivalent SBE structures are suggested in brackets):

- (S9, L4) Ah Lok: Through appointment, ah?
  (Through appointment, is it?)

- (S15, L6) Hawker: Hey, you from Penang ah?
  (Hey, you’re from Penang, aren’t you?)

- (S15, L11) Michael Soo: This insurance covers cosmetics ah?
(This insurance covers cosmetics, doesn’t it?)

With a total of 26 utterances, this particular function of ‘ah’ in substituting the interrogative tags is a prominent in the data. Based on Baskaran’s (2005) description and due to the fact that it is mostly uttered by Ah Lok, Ai Swee and Louis, ‘ah’ in this function can be thus labeled as a basilectal variety of ME.

‘Ah’ can also be used like an audible comma functioning as a pause. With 23 lines of instances found in the data (some of which are listed below), it is evident that ‘ah’ is most commonly used to mark a mere pause (an audible comma) in the natural conversation, without necessarily carrying any pragmatic value:

(S5, L39) Ah Lok: Salesmen…sometimes they we wake up ah don’t know got sun, or got no sun…

(S9, L14) Ah Swee: Pa, why that Su ah so like that one..

- The Pragmatic functions of ‘ah’

Besides having syntactic functions as described above, ‘ah’ can also carry pragmatic functions, as demonstrated in the data.

i. Keeping two interlocutors in contact

‘Ah’, as stated by Low & Brown (2005), is widely used in ME to keep two or more speakers in contact, indicating that more is to follow in the conversation:

(S1, L16): Louisa keeping in contact with Ah Seng on the phone.
Louisa : Hello Ah Seng ah...ok you talk first you talk first. What? Where can?
   Eh, how can Manchester ah...give Chelsea two goals. You crazy or what. Eh, half a goal ah also matters la I tell you...haiya like that ah...

(S14, L6): Ah Lok enjoying the spa treatment with best friend, Louis.
Ah Lok: Enjoy... you see ah...you see the pillow also my saliva all come out...Louis ah...I really enjoy enjoy enjoy...

(S15, L35): Ah Lok excitedly recounts his experience to his friends.
Ah Lok: I tell you, I tell you, I tell you all ah... I just took datuk ah for a very exotic herbal plate. After taking it ah...he says he feels like a bull like that you know. I think he wants to go home and experiment ah...

In the above instances, the particle ‘ah’ is used to indicate that more is to follow in the conversation, thus keeping the two or more interlocutors in contact, either by being actively involved in the conversation or being an attentive listener.

ii. Consolation

Another function of ‘ah’, uttered in a falling soft tone, is to convey consolation, indicating that it is ‘okay’ to do something, or not to worry about things:

(S3, L14)
Ah Lok (to Mr Lee): Come la, I belanja you don’t worry ah...so ah, make sure you come back.
iii. Persuasion

‘Ah’ is also used when the speaker is trying to persuade his respondent into doing something or when he is expecting a positive response towards his request:

(S13, L20): Ah Lok warmly welcoming the car sales manager to his café.

Ah Lok: (Introducing himself) Tan Ah Lok, owner of Ah Lok Café: Everything Also Got. You come by ah.

(S13, L26): Louis asking for a favor from Ah Lok not to reveal his unruly acts.

Louis: I also forget la. I think I got about 12 you know...only 5 got road tax. Don’t tell anybody ah.

iv. Indicating annoyance

The following instances gathered from the data demonstrate the hawker’s spontaneous reaction, being irritated by Michael Soo’s request for a discount on a plate of char kuay teow.

(S15, L6)

Hawker: Hey you from Penang ah?..and your mother ah go to hair salon ah..bring own shampoo ah, some more wanna ask to give cheaper...

(S15, L8)

Hawker: I have to pluck the taugeh one by one for you ah..some more wanna ask for discount ah? You’re lucky I’m not charging you by the hour.

v. Indicating sadness, an attempt to hold back the tears

There are a few instances where ‘ah’ appears as an important element in speech for the speaker who is emotionally saddened. In an attempt to avoid from bursting into tears, ‘ah’ acts as a pause, allowing the speaker to ‘keep the strength’ to proceed with what he wishes to say. This is evident in Ah Lok’s dialogues after discovering his daughter’s ailment:

(S18, L4)

Ah Lok: Doctor say ah my daughter Ling Ling, the heart got problem you know, and only the surgery will help to stop, solve this problem ah...doctor also say don’t worry he say don’t worry the insurance will pay for the operation because very expensive that’s why I think ah...insurance only insurance I got is only for my car.

(S21, L7)

Ah Lok: Ha, you don’t start ah…I get emotion that time ah..I get emotion that time ah..I very hard to stop one…I tell you…now I feel like sad song coming already..

To conclude, the particle ‘ah’ is used in the data to carry both syntactic as well as various pragmatic functions. In carrying out its various functions and meanings, it is vital to acknowledge the paralinguistic factors surrounding the particle such as stress and intonation patterns. As illustrated, ‘ah’ is uttered in a falling soft tone when used to convey consolation and in a rising tone when used to indicate annoyance. It is also found that ‘ah’ is widely used by
only a few characters, especially Ah Lok. Others include his daughter Ai Swee, Louis and the hawkers. Taking into account the characters’ educational and social background as presented in Appendix 2, it can be implied that ‘ah’ is a feature of basilectal or colloquial ME that is not used commonly by speakers at the acrolectal level or in a more formal context.

3.1.3.2 Lah/la

Platt & Ho (1989) confirm the different pragmatic functions of particles: to indicate obviousness, disapproval or intimacy and to highlight a particular lexical item. Instances of ‘lah’ carrying various pragmatic functions gathered from the data are as follows.

- To point out the obvious
  (S11, L7) Dr. Singh: Vitara is a car lah.

- To show/express disagreement/disapproval/contradiction
  (S15, L12) Lucy: No lah, you such a joker la you...
  (S13, L15) Louis: You talk nonsense la you...

- To persuade
  (S13, L28) Louis: Oh that way at the back...that one I like...come lah
  (S15, L5) Michael Soo: Since everything and my own water, cheaper lah?

- To express annoyance
  (S5, L28) Hawker’s wife: Aiyah, then next time don’t say la

- To suggest/approve
  (S15, L34) Datuk: You see him another day lah.
  (S16, L5) Ai Swee: You and Michael make a good pair lah because he’s rich.

It is important to note that the intonation patterns surrounding ‘lah’ are also vital in conveying the different communicative intents. Interestingly, its use as indicated in the data, is not as widespread as ‘ah’. This is not to say that ‘lah’ is not commonly used in ME as a whole because it could be used more widely by speakers of acrolectal level as well. Low and Deterding (2003) for example, have gathered the data from some formal conversations/interviews between trainees and an expatriate British university lecturer and have collected instances of ‘lah’ used by both parties.

3.1.3.3 One

The use of ‘one’ in ME is not always to indicate the numerical one (1) as it is used in SBE. It is also used as an intensifier that may be related or translated from the use of ‘punya’ in the colloquial Malay as in “dia mesti datang punya” (he must be coming one). Here the particle ‘one’ is used as a tool to place an emphasis on something, an intensifier. This feature is particularly common in the basilectal and mesolectal varieties of ME taken from the data and could be described into two categories:

- ‘one’ as a restrictive relative pronoun (i.e. ‘one’ is used instead of ‘who’, ‘which’ or ‘that’ as used in the SBE construction of relative clauses):
  (S16, L8) Ai Swee: You can copy from professional like me, very easy one.
  (You can copy from a professional like me, which is a very easy thing to do)

- ‘one’ as a marker for definitive (i.e. the speaker is very definite or sure about something):
3.1.3.4 What

Like the other particles discussed, ‘what’ too has certain pragmatic functions. The two main functions gathered from the data are:

- **To seek for an approval/agreement.**

  ‘What’ used for this function has a falling tone, marking the speaker’s expectation for a positive response towards his/her statement:

  (S1, L8)  Jucy: Eh, use my phone la
  Louisa: Never mind same what, this one ah latest model.
  [It doesn’t matter, they’re just the same after all, (don’t you think?)]

- **To express contradiction: disbelief, disagreement, annoyance**

  Unlike the first function, ‘what’ used for this function is uttered in an interrogative tone (usually followed by a question mark), stressing the speaker’s disagreement, contradiction or annoyance towards another speaker:

  (S1, L16)  Louisa: Eh how can Manchester ah..give Chelsea two goals?
  You crazy or what?
  [Are you crazy (or something)?)]

  (S24, L4)  Vincent: Why don’t you just use the calculator instead?
  Ai Swee: You think I’m stupid or what?
  (You think I’m that stupid?)

3.1.3.5 Hor

This particle, as stated by Low & Adam (2005), is used to elicit some form of agreement from the interlocutor. There are five instances of ‘hor’ gathered in the data. This particle is said on a rising tone, as in:

(S9, L21)  Ah Swee: I love shoes. That day I went to Petaling Street hor..then..

(S15, L29)  Lucy: But one can never be too sure of what will happen hor...

(S16, L1)  Ai Ling: Jie Jie, I think Vincent has a heart for you, hor...

3.1.3.6 Lor

According to Low & Adam (2005), this particle is usually uttered in a high tone, and it is used to express resignation about someone else’s action or belief. There are three instances of ‘lor’ found in the data:

(S10, L11)  Hawker’s wife: Why my numbers all never strike, or else kao tim lor...
3.1.3.7 Mah/ma

Most researchers agree that ‘ma’ (usually uttered on a mid-level tone) is a borrowing from Chinese although they disagree as to exactly which dialect it came from. Wong (1994) links it to Chinese, while Smith (1985) relates it to Hokkien. This particle is used for two reasons:

- to justify one’s belief or assertion
- to state the obvious

There are 9 instances of ‘mah/ma’ gathered from the data, each carrying certain functions, such as:

- Ai Ling: This one no need battery, ma. (To state the obvious)
- Father: You know la this thing means a lot to him mah...(Assertion)
- Louis: Only men can be hard mah... (To justify one’s belief or assertion)

3.1.3.8 Meh

Wong (1994) suggests that the use of ‘meh’ is restricted to ethnically Chinese speakers. It is an optional suffix usually used to donate a question mark to, for example, ‘yes’, as in “yeah, meh?” commonly used amongst those of Chinese descent. It is usually pronounced with a high level tone with two functions: a) to express surprise and/or b) to express indignation. Three examples taken from the data are:

- Ah Lok: My car insurance can pay meh for this operation? (Can my insurance pay for this operation?)
- Louis: Can forget, meh? (Can it be forgotten?)

3.1.4 Word Formation Processes in Malaysian English

ME lexical features can also be morphologically described based on the types of word formation involved. A few lexical items in the data are interestingly produced through certain types of word formation, presented in the following sections.

3.1.4.1 Affixation

This is a process that involves the combination of an affix (either a prefix or a suffix) with another word (either a noun or an adjective) to form a new word that may result in a change in the word class. For example, ‘care’ (noun/verb) + ‘less’ (suffix) = ‘careless’ (adjective). An example taken from the data, datukship (S9:L13 and S9:L18) marks an interestingly productive process of suffixation in ME:

Noun ‘datuk’ + Suffix ‘ship’ = datukship, as in lordship.

Other ME examples of affixation (prefixation) as cited by Baskaran (2005) are ulufied and anti-dadah.

3.1.4.2 Compounding

Compounding is the process of taking two or more existing words and combining them to form a new lexical item that could carry a totally different meaning from the original words. Some compounded items are spelt as one
word as in ‘homework’, hyphenated as in ‘son-in-law’ or two words as in ‘couch potato’. In ME, there are instances where two English words are combined to produce an item that is not commonly used in SBE, as exemplified below from the data:

- **Handphone**

  (S4, L7–L9) Wife: ….eh, lou gong ah, lend me your handphone.

  Hawker: Eh, what for?

  Wife: I want to do some purchase la...lend me your handphone la..

  ‘Hand’ (noun) is compounded with ‘phone’ (noun/verb) to produce ‘handphone’ (noun). Its British equivalent is ‘mobile phone’ and American ‘cell phone’. A search through Collins Cobuild Concordance for ‘handphone’ with the sub-corpora of British/American books, ephemera, radio, newspapers, magazines, and British transcribed speech results in ‘0’ entry. This shows that it is not a feature of SBE. ‘Handphone’ might have been regarded ‘colloquial’ but has more recently been perceived as an acrolectal ME, if not standard ME, due to its wider acceptance of use in the country, both in formal and informal contexts. It is now even listed by the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2005). Interestingly, it is also recognized by Encarta World English Dictionary. This fact suggests that ‘handphone’ belongs ‘exclusively’ to ME, not only because of its widespread use in the country, but also due to its appearance in the afore mentioned dictionaries, thus cementing its place as a variety of English.

- **Because why**

  (S1, L1) Louisa: Sorry I’m late, because why..I went to do my hair.

  ‘Because’ is a connector on its own, while ‘why’ can either be an adverb or conjunction, depending on its usage. Thus the compounded ‘because why’ can function as a connector/conjunction. A speaker of SBE uses only ‘because’ or ‘the reason why’ or ‘you know why’ in the same context. Thus ‘because why’ is indeed a Malaysian fusion of the two expressions that could be a translation of an informal Malay usage of sebab kenapa. Asmah in Morais (1997) has offered an interesting and plausible explanation for the use of ‘because why’: the Malay equivalent is sebab mengapa. In Malay, sebab can also mean ‘reason’. Therefore sebab mengapa may be translated into English as ‘the reason why’. So in using ‘because why’ in the example above, the speaker displays considerable linguistic inventiveness. Morphologically, the production of this term can thus be described as a result of a process of word formation, i.e. compounding.

- **Last time**

  The words ‘last’ (adjective) and ‘time’ (noun) are compounded to form ‘last time’ in ME that functions independently as an adverbial of time referring to the past. The SBE equivalent would be ‘in the past’ or ‘previously’. The use of ‘last time’, in this sense, is not so much a lack of precision but rather a Malaysian or Malay way of thinking conveyed by the Malay word for ‘past’ (dahulu, dulu, or dulu-dulu). To illustrate with an example from the data: (S13, L12) Ah Lok: “Last time I got Honda you know”. The SBE equivalent would be “I used to own (or I previously owned) a Honda you know”. On the other hand, though it may be used in SBE, ‘last time’ does not carry the same meaning as used in ME, as it does not stand as an independent compounded lexical item. In other words, it does not function individually as an adverbial phrase of time in SBE. Thus, we may come across an SBE speaker uttering “The last time I saw her was yesterday” or “That was the last time I saw her”, in which the word ‘last’ is usually preceded by the definite article (determiner) ‘the’ and functions as an adjective to describe the noun ‘time’, a different structure than in ME.

3.1.4.3 Reduplication
Reduplication is a word formation process whereby words (or parts of words) are repeated, often with slight variations, in order to add some extra meaning to the basic words. Quirk et al (1985, pp. 1579-80) note four main uses of reduplication in SBE:

- to imitate sounds, e.g. tick tock of a clock
- to suggest alternating movements, e.g. ping pong
- to disparage by suggesting instability, nonsense, insincerity, vacillation, e.g. higgledy-piggledy, hocus-pocus, wishy-washy, goody-goody, dilly-dally
- to intensify, e.g. tip-top

Relatively, the reduplication in L1, particularly the Malay language, is indeed a productive process. As stated by Heah (1989:326), reduplication in Malay morphology is used to express four main functions:

- Indefinite plurality (with variety applied) – this is its most common semantic function, e.g. *kuh muih* ‘all kinds of cakes’.
- Intensify, e.g. *jauh jauh* ‘far far away’
- Repetition, frequency, and continuity in action, e.g. *melompat lompat* ‘to keep on leaping’, and
- Resemblance to object denoted by the rootword, e.g. *layang* ‘fly’ *layang-layang* ‘kite’.

In comparison with Malay, reduplication in SBE is not a very productive process. Most of these expressions seem like fossilized phrases – it is difficult to think of examples produced along similar lines to those items quoted above. We cannot, for example, say “baddy-baddy” or “bittom-bottom”, in analogy with “goody-goody” and “tip-top”.

Due to the productive process of reduplication in L1, ME produces a lot of expressions that do not have the equivalence in English with the same word formation. For example in the ME utterance “Don’t eat sweet sweet things”, the reduplication ‘sweet sweet’ comes from the Malay reduplication *manis-manis* as in *Jangan makan benda manis-manis*, intensifying the sweetness of the food. There are five instances of reduplication in the data that carry the functions of reduplication in the Malay language (as directly translated in brackets):

(S9, L25) Ai Swee: I look nice leg leg all (Indefinite plurality: “Aku nampak cantik dengan kaki kaki sekali”)

(S9, L29) Ai Swee: I want this one (shoe) .. got shiny shiny ..
(Intensify: “Aku mahu kasut yang ini, ada kilat kilat..”)

3.1.4.4 Repetition

Repetition is slightly different from reduplication in that it is basically done as to urge a continuity of action, rather than producing a new morpheme with added meaning as in reduplication. To illustrate, ‘sweet’ is reduplicated to form *sweet sweet* which is an ME lexical item on its own, as compared to *come down, come down* that is simply repeated to urge for continuity of that particular action of coming down. There are nine examples of repetition in the data, as follows:

(S1, L12) Louisa: You go in first la, you go in first la...
(S1, L16) Louisa: You talk first, you talk first
(S8, L3) Ah Chai’s mother: Quick quick, go help your father...

If verbs are repeated three times, the meaning to indicate continuity or progressiveness of the action in that particular situation is further intensified:
3.1.4.5 Conversion: Verbalization of Noun

In the morphology of English, when a lexical item converts its word class to another, the process is commonly called ‘conversion’. According to Quirk, Randolph and Greenbaum (1987, p. 441), “conversion is the derivational process whereby an item changes its word-class without the addition of an affix”. In addition, Bauer (1983, p. 226) states that "conversion is a totally free process and any lexeme can undergo conversion into any of the open form classes as the need arises". This means that any word form can be shifted to any word class, especially to open classes—nouns, verbs, etc.—and that there are no morphological restrictions. This can be exemplified by the noun 'sign', converted into the verb 'to sign', changed by derivation (suffixation) into the noun 'signal' and converted into a new verb, 'to signal'. In this case there is no blocking because these words have slight semantic differences (Bauer, 1983, pp. 226-227).

Another related term that is used when a noun is converted into a verb is ‘verbalization of nouns’. According to Bhat (1994) nouns may be used in the categorial conditions of verbs (i) by themselves, (ii) by adding an auxiliary as a tense-carrier and a relation-indicator, or (iii) by adding verbalizing affixes or by making other types of changes in them. Languages may use one or more of these devices, attaching different degrees of importance to them. All the three devices involve characteristics of decategorization (as nouns) as well as those of recategorization (as verbs). This results in the process of Verbalization.

The process of verbalization of nouns can be seen in the following examples, in which the nouns are changed into verbs with the structure of ‘to-infinitive’ + ‘noun’ and ‘modal’ + ‘noun’.

(S9, L20) Ah Lok: ...I think you must ask Michael Soo ah, to recommendation to you ah, what actually you like...
(S6, L38) Ah Lok: ...Want any song, I can song for you.
(S20, L3) Ah Lok: ...And I’d like to thanks my brother, Louis Wong.

The infinitive ‘to’ and modal verb ‘can’ are placed before the nouns and used as verbs in the sentences. This is a rare structure that cannot be found in SBE. According to Aitchison (1989, p. 161), “the aim of conversion varies with the user: adults convey it to use fewer words, whereas children perform it in order to be understood, although they frequently produce ungrammatical utterances. Anyway, it always helps to make communication easier”. As shown in the data, “to recommendation”, “can song” and “to thanks” may be labeled as ungrammatical as such structure is not used in SBE, but they are likely used with a purpose. Uttered by the main character, Ah Lok who evidently displays basilectal features in most of his speech throughout the movie, such structure is most probably used for humorous purposes, making the listener laugh at how ridiculous or distorted it sounds (the genre of the movie is a comedy). It could also act as an indication of two extremes: the lack of proficiency, causing gross error at one extreme, and the unlimited creativity of an ME speaker in ‘playing’ around with the language, at another.

3.1.5 Exclamations

Being a spontaneous part of conversation, it is understandable that ME contains some unique exclamations. Many exclamations used in ME are borrowed from the local languages. Examples found in the data are:

3.1.5.1 Aiyah

According to Tsen (2004), ‘aiyah’ which originates from Mandarin 哎呀 āiyā is an exclamation used at the
beginning of a sentence to express consternation, despair, dismay, exasperation, etc. The SBE equivalent could be “come on”, “oh no!” or “oh dear!” used in expressing surprise, disagreement, or annoyance. Examples gathered from the data are as follows.

(S3, L13) Ah Lok: Aiyah Ling Ling ah, that’s what we call PR, PR!
(S13, L24) Louis: Aiyah one more limosine la...I have many also...
(S14, L7) Louis: Aiyah, that one no problem. I spend you this time.

3.1.5.2 Aiyoh

As stated by Tsen (2004), this exclamation is also derived from Mandarin 哎喲 āiyō, used to express concern, consternation, dismay, frustration, surprise, etc.

(S1, L2) Jucy: Aiyoh, what you want? (annoyance)
(S4, L5) Hawker’s Wife: Aiyoh, why you always like that one..
(regret/disagreement)
(S13, L4) Ah Lok: Aiyoh, this car ah, 500 000 ah? (surprise)

3.1.5.3 Wah

This exclamation originated from Malay, expressing admiration, or astonishment.

(S5, L5) Vincent: Wah, not bad ah for a small girl!
(S6, L8) Ah Lok : Wah, good entrance ah..
(S9, L35) Ah Lok: Wah..3000 ringgit ah?

4. Summary of findings

As gathered and analyzed in the previous sections, it is evident that ME lexical items do carry certain features that distinguish them from the standard variety. The differences can be seen not only in terms of meaning but also in terms of the word formation involved. Some cultural or culinary items are uniquely Malaysian, so they are hardly translatable into SBE, thus they can be regarded as acrolectal or Official ME. On the other hand, some items which are originally SBE English words are used to carry different meaning in ME (‘polysemic variation’ and ‘informalization’) due to the profusion of lexemes indicating a more informal style and register in ME, thus resulting in the semantic extension of these items as compared to their original meaning in SBE. These items can be placed along the basilectal-mesolectal continuum as they are not commonly used in a formal context and not used to carry the same meaning as they are in SBE. In addition, certain particles and exclamatory markers are also unique of ME, produced as a result of the influence of substrate languages, carrying pragmatic as well as grammatical functions. These items are indeed localized as they are not present in SBE and can be regarded as basilectal, as they are mostly used by prominently basilectal speakers in the data. On the whole, the fact that each lexical item making up the data of this study can be linguistically and systematically described under certain categories has contributed to the uniqueness of ME as a variety of English in expansion, as well as having a variety within itself.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Implications of Study
If not treated appropriately, inserting ME as an aid in the ESL classroom may cause confusion amongst the students and dilemma on the part of the teacher. The teacher, therefore, must first understand the broader conceptual issues of varieties of English and be able to distinguish the structural elements. The teacher has the responsibility to explain that such second language characteristics warrant a descriptive rather than a prescriptive approach.

The awareness of ME features in comparison to the standard English should be developed earlier in the lower secondary school level, regardless of the students' level of proficiency. Having provided the basis of ‘correct’ English in primary school, it is believed that students are generally more mature and open to ‘differences’ when they enter the secondary level. Sources of authentic spoken discourse and written discourses should be carefully selected and brought into the classroom for this purpose.

Catering to the different levels of students should be based on the teacher’s wisdom and ‘manipulation’. Students should be told when and where to use ME in their daily use of English. Students, thus, should be able to distinguish the differences in order to construct between themselves a sense of what is appropriate and intelligible based on different contexts. Highly-educated ME speakers are generally able to switch along the line of the continuum to suit the context and their respondents.

Teachers should empower students to make decisions about the forms they want to use to express themselves, fully understanding what their choices mean. One thing we should recognize is that our students are not automatons; they are human beings and they make choices -- about what language to learn, how well to learn it, and what varieties of that language to learn. Therefore, as stressed by Habibah Salleh (1997), it is more prudent for the classroom to explore ME intelligently and turn it to its advantage for an interesting learning experience: an awareness of ME as a variety of English.

5.2 Recommendations

As a popular form of entertainment, a movie appeals to learners of all ages, thus would be attractive as an instrument to study language. A number of factors, however, need to be taken into consideration if English-language movies are to be used as an educational aid, such as the duration of movie, time allocation, syllabus and technical requirements. Another related issue is the reliability of the movies themselves as data in representing the target language. The answer lies on the credibility of the scripts themselves in contributing to understanding the target language.

Since the use of movies in linguistics is relatively new, it is hoped that in the future more movies are used as an instrument to analyze the features of ME. Future studies could serve to analyze features of ME in other aspects of linguistics such as phonology and semantic. It would also be interesting to make a comparative study between English as used in a Malaysian-produced movie with Singaporean-produced movie. Since the limited number of locally produced English-language movies that meet the relevant criteria might hinder the growth of future studies, more movies with authentic language as spoken by ME speakers should be produced by our film makers. This will not only contribute towards the film industry but also the cultural identity of the nation and its linguistic diversity as a whole.

References


