LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE CIVILISING PROCESS

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Introduction

The civilising process is simply one that makes life and behaviour more refined than its erstwhile state. This process pervades both the material and non-material culture. Throughout the history of mankind, it is this process that has transformed Man from cave dwellers to what they are today.

Civilisation in itself may have a personal or a local interpretation. A person may consider someone else uncivilised, if this someone behaves in such a way that is unacceptable to her. Similarly, a particular community may have its own standards of refined behaviour which may not be similar to the ones accepted in another community.

Language and culture together form an index to civilisation. In this role the two have to be taken together, not separately. This is because in the civilising process we are looking at language as a facet of human behaviour, and behaviour is projected within the context of culture. In this paper, I have tried to show the interdependence of language and culture in the interpretation of behaviour, and to assess the refinement or otherwise in behaviour in the context of other types of development going on in the Malay speech community. The realisation of this type of interdependence between language and culture grows in me as I learn a new language either through the normal process of teacher-student interaction or through fieldwork.

Knowledge of Language and of Social and Cultural Rules

Fieldwork on hitherto unknown or little known languages of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia has always been an exhilarating experience for me. Every time I

embark on a new language, it is like a journey into the unknown whose path I have to pave for myself. The journey always spells a hope for me, a hope that at the end of the day the unknown will become known, and I am the richer in having gained for myself an experience into another language, another culture, and another world.

My expectations have most of the time been true to my planning, because after some time in the field I am able to identify elements of the language as well as the main systems and structures to which these elements belong, from the phoneme to the sentence. In other words, at the end of a single stretch of time in the field, I am able to give the language concerned a phonological as well as a grammatical description. The extent of the description depends on the length of time spent with the native speakers of the language. A longer period, although with intervals in between, means a more detailed description for the language.

Of the various Sabah and Sarawak languages I have worked on, the one that has been given a relatively comprehensive description is the Iban language of Sarawak (Asmah Haji Omar 1981), compared to the other languages (Asmah Haji Omar 1983). My description of Iban has been the first ever done for the language. Being referred to as an expert on this language makes me most uncomfortable for the simple reason that I do not feel confident speaking in the language, albeit I am able to explain how the systems and structures of the language work.

Socio-Cultural Rules in Interaction

In this section, I shall only discuss the socio-cultural rules in starting and ending a social interaction, as each culture has its own set of rules developed over generations of speakers. The examples are all taken from my own experience in everyday interaction as well as in field trips. One can see that in understanding such rules, language in-use should not be taken in its literal meaning. It should be seen in the context in which it is used, where there may be more than a single meaning to any stretch of speech. Contexts exist within the culture of the speech community, and an interpretion of meaning in a social interaction stipulates an understanding of the community's culture.

Starting a Social Interaction

Even before I began fieldwork on Iban in 1964, folktales of the Iban people had been collected and published by the Borneo Literature Bureau, using the Roman alphabet. I had read almost all of them and had used them in teaching the language to linguistics students of Malay Studies at the University of Malaya. Despite all this, I still feel timorous about using the language. I do not have a mastery of the language which takes into account the socio-cultural rules of the Iban-speaking community. My knowledge of the language is mostly that of a technical nature, a knowledge of the linguistic rules , but very little do I know of the cultural norms of the community which determine the social rules in interaction.

In order not to make a mistake when opening a conversation with an Iban I have to be sure of the surroundings I am in. To enter an Iban house or even to pass in front of it, I have to ask in their language whether it is under a taboo (*pemali*), and can I just move on (*lalu*). When an Iban in an Iban world setting greets me with "*Enda bemalam*?" ("Aren't you going to stay for the night?"), or just "*Bemalam*?" ("Staying for the night?") I have to remind myself that this can either be an invitation to stay in the longhouse, or a form of phatic communion, i.e. a way of starting an interaction. I have to assess the situation to be able to answer correctly in Iban. If I speak in Malay, I can be forgiven for the socio-cultural mistakes I may make, but not when I speak in Iban.

The phatic communion can be a hazard when one goes into a new community and a new culture. It is also hazardous in a multicultural setting. For example, in Malaysia the Chinese, even when they speak Malay, would ask anyone they encounter at any time of the day or night with "*Sudah makan*?" ("Have you eaten?"). To the uninitiated, the person is extending an invitation to a meal, but this may not be the case. It is just a way of warming up and starting a conversation. The Chinese type of phatic communion may have its history in the culture of the people themselves, who give primacy to food in their daily life, because food gives them the strength to work. A Chinese child is taught from early on in life that he or she has to work hard; otherwise, food will not come by. The common utterance one hears from a Chinese is "*Tak kerja, macam mana nak makan*?" ("If I don't work, how can I get food?").

The Malays and the Indians seem to have the same type of phatic communion, i.e. one that seemingly asks for some personal information. If the meeting takes place when one or both parties are moving along a road or a pathway, the question is "Where are you going?". However, in a situation which is static, at least where one party is pre-occupied with a certain chore, the question is "What are you doing?" These questions are just starters to a social interaction. Getting the exact information is not the aim, as the other party can choose whether or not to respond to the question. People who are not familiar with this phatic communion are bound to give their own interpretations to the culture of the people who utter such questions on meeting one another. I remember as a young girl, raised in a boarding school for Malay girls but run by the British, a situation when the principal of the school made the following remark, "You Malays are busy bodies!" This was when she heard us asking one another "*What are you doing*?" So what is considered to be civilised to the Malays is less civilised to the English. I have not been able to explain why the Malays and the Indians have this type of phatic communion. It does not seem to have to do with an ethos as the case is with the Chinese.

The English use the weather to start off a social interaction. And this is a projection of the climatic condition they are in, where it can be a beautiful morning with sunshine for half an hour to be followed by a never-ending drizzle for the whole day. It is all very civilised. This all means that learning to communicate well in English means also learning to make comments about the weather, just as learning to communicate well in Malay may mean "learning to be a busy body". The Malaysian schools teaching English, even from my days in the boarding school, do not teach us this aspect of interaction, and the same can be said for the teaching of Malay.

Coming back to the Iban, their type of phatic communion as quoted above arose out of their geographical surroundings, specifically where the longhouses were, i.e. in places which were not easily accessible except by a journey along the river, which may be continued by a long walk across the hills following a footpath known as *jalai dayak* in Iban or *jalan dayak* in Malay. This being the case, a visitor from outside the area was not expected to go there on a day trip. He had to stay the

night. And the hosts in the longhouse had to prepare some food for him and a corner in the longhouse for him to sleep.

The Iban form of phatic communion can be interpreted as an invitation, specifically when the context of situation is in the longhouse, far away from hotels and lodging houses. However, one may not interpret it as such if it is uttered in downtown Kuching where hotels of all stars are available. Be it a real invitation or a pseudo one, it is uttered with the consciousness that one is being civilised.

Among the Malays, pseudo-invitation is also a form of phatic communion, specifically in an interaction when one party is in the midst of eating or having a refreshment in a restaurant or some other place, except in the house. In such an encounter, the party that is eating or drinking would start off by saying "*Makan*" ("*Eat*") or "*Minum*" ("*Drink*"), but he keeps on eating or drinking without showing any effort to serve any food or drink to the other party. But without a gesture to invite he is considered to be very rude. The "invitee" usually responds by giving a smile, saying "*Sila*", which can be freely translated as "Carry on".

Ending a Social Interaction

If people have a way of starting a social interaction, they also have a way of ending it, and then go about their own way. The Malays will use "*Nak minta diri dulu*" or something like that. Freely translated it means "I would like to be excused". Among the Iban and the Sarawak Malays, it is "*Mupok*", which means "I would like to make a move". No one belonging to these two groups of people would say "I want to go now", as this is considered crude, except when they are angry.

The Indonesians speaking in bahasa Indonesia would say "*Mari Pak*", or "*Mari Bu*" depending on whether the addressee is a man or a woman. The literal meaning of *mari* is "come". This phrase, when uttered in a Malaysian context, denotes an invitation to come along. There have been stories, hilarious ones at that, of the consequences of this utterance involving Indonesians and Malaysian Malays. According to one story, the Indonesian after saying "*Mari Pak*", moves on. But the Malay thinks he's being invited to go along, so he tags on. The Indonesian, eager to shake off the Malay, keeps uttering the end-of-interaction phrase, but the Malay thinks this is a way of emphasising the invitation, and how polite his

Indonesian friend is. So this goes on and on until the Indonesian has to voice his intention in literal terms.

When I was teaching in the Northern Illinois University, USA, in the South-East Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI) Program in 1987, my American students asked me whether Malaysians mean it when they invite people to their home. My answer was that an invitation is an invitation, and Malaysians would normally supply a road map to their home if the invitee is not familiar with the surrounding. Apparently, the students had been taught by their American teacher of bahasa Indonesia that an utterance such as "*Datang rumah, ya*", is just way of ending an interaction. No real invitation is intended. Obviously the teacher must have had some untoward experience arising from his misunderstanding of this particular social rule when he was in Indonesia.

In this connection, I found myself in an event consisting of this type of misunderstanding when I was travelling with some colleagues in Bandung in 2000. While in Jakarta, one of us telephoned a longtime friend of his in Bandung informing her that we would be arriving in that city at midday the next day. After the telephone conversation, he told us that the friend had invited us to her house, and we should go there as soon as we arrived. According to the Malaysian custom, an invitation within the time frame when people take their meal means an invitation to the meal as well. And that was the expectation of the group.

We had a difficult time looking for the house, and when we reached it we found that the gate was locked, and the whole place was quiet. I whispered to our friend that people expecting guests would not keep their gate locked and there would be some sign of activity inside, but this friend of ours insisted that there was an invitation. At my insistence, he re-produced to me what the friend had said, and that was, "*Nanti datang rumah, ya*", meaning "When you arrive, come to the house". At that point of time, it was no use telling him that it was just a way of speaking, because he had already gone to the gate to press the bell. The friend came out with her husband, and you could see the surprise in their facial expressions. They were not prepared at all for our visit, but being the polite people that they were, they took us to a lovely restaurant.

Transfer of Culture Through Language

Because of the close relationship between language and culture, a person learning another language may experience a transfer of the culture underlying this language into his life. And this phenomenon can be illustrated from my own experience, as given below. The lack of confidence in using another language in social interaction was felt in my handling of Javanese while I was studying in Jakarta for my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Indonesian language and literature. The Javanese language course was compulsory for both the degrees. I found that it was not difficult to analyse the language, given the training in linguistics that I had gone through. But speaking the language was another kettle of fish. And Javanese with its complexity of socio-linguistic levels made me more fearful of using it in social interactions. Like the Iban, the Javanese will forgive a Malay-speaking person committing unintentional mistakes, but not if he or she speaks in Javanese. My lack of experience in speaking in these two languages made me unsure of using them, and more so in transferring the socio-cultural rules of the communities concerned.

With a background education in the English school during the British colonial period, I did not have much problem surviving in London when I first went there for my studies, and I did not have difficulty participating in linguistics seminars in the university. But what surprised me was that the type of language I was taught in the school at home, with its correct grammar, did not all the time fit in with the type used by native speakers.

For example, here in the school we were taught to ask for the time as "What is the time, please?". In London what I heard was "Do you have the time?", which sounded better to my ears.

When buying a ticket for the underground train, I would use a full request sentence, the one I was taught to say when I learned English in the school, such as this one: "Can you give me one ticket to and fro, Tottenham Court Road - Golders Green, please?", whereas the other people in the queue were saying "One return to Golders Green."

Again, at the refectory (not the tuck shop, or the canteen, or the cafeteria) at the university, I asked for "rice and egg curry", whereas this special dish was known as "curried eggs and rice". And true to the lexical ordering in the name of

the dish, the curried egg was placed on the plate before the rice. In making the order the way I did, that is, "rice and egg curry", I was transferring my own culture, where rice is central, and all other dishes eaten with it are just accompaniments. In my culture it is not proper to place the accompanying dish on the plate before the rice. There is an order of precedence there; the rice with its overall importance cannot be preceded by any other dish.

The above are anecdotes of some of my experiences in handling language and culture outside my own native surroundings. But such lack of confidence in speaking is not confined to using a language other than one's own in the culture where this language is spoken. Native speakers are also known to have the same type of diffidence in handling socio-cultural situations in their own language. They become tongue-tied; they don't know what to say. I have often witnessed Malay men and women who withdraw into the background when invited to talk to a visitor or a newcomer. The reason given is that they don't know how to talk (*tak tahu nak cakap*), or that they don't know what to say (*tak tahu apa nak kata*), and at the same time they are overcome with shyness (*malu*).

Looking deeper into the situation, one finds that it is not the language but the socio-cultural rules that go with the language that bug people in an interaction. When these people are face to face with the newcomers, it is the difference, rather than the similarity, in culture that is uppermost in their mind. Are they allowed to apply the socio-cultural rules they are familiar with? How are they to fathom the norms that govern the other party's behaviour?

Culture as Meaningful Behaviour

There are many definitions given to *culture* based on the different orientations of specialists studying this phenomenon. But for the purpose of this paper, I would like to employ the definition which says that culture is a system of potential meaning (Gregory and Carroll 1978: 76). And language is one type of meaningful behaviour. According to Gregory and Carroll,

> When we say that language is choice we suggest that language-in-use implies the selection of all possible meanings inherent in this extensive meaning system called culture. Only certain ranges of meaning will be relevant to given situation and these meanings will be encoded in grammatical and lexical options. (*Ibid.*)

Aspects of the culture of a community speaking a particular language or variety of language is realised in contexts of situation. And it is in the context of situation that language events take place. It is in such situations as well that languages users with all the linguistic options in their repertoire of skills exercise their choice to convey the intended meaning through their linguistic behaviour.

At the same time culture determines the role systems that interlocutors have to be guided by, the type of language used in specific types of interaction, and even the amount of language necessary for particular interactions. In this case, culture determines the role of language-in-use in particular situations.

Culture in Language (CiL)

Language gives an image of the culture of the speakers. Using Edward Hall's terms, this image may be seen at three levels: the sets, the isolates, and the patterns. (Edward T. Hall 1961: Chapters 5 – 8). In describing culture, Hall says that the sets are those which are most easily perceived, such as the tea set, the sitting room set etc., while the isolates are those items which make up the set. The patterns are the rules by which the sets are arranged. Hall goes on to give an analogy in language, i.e. the sets are the words, built up of phonemes which are the isolates, while the patterns are the sentences.

These three levels of isolate-set-pattern may be used as a basis for an analysis of the cultural content of language. The words (inclusive of the metaphors and other figures of speech) provide an image of the community speaking the language in terms of its geographical environment, social organisation, systems of values and beliefs, technology, the arts etc.

One does not have to speak a language well to be able to have a picture of certain aspects of the culture of its speakers. A technical knowledge of the language and an ability to analyse the meaning of the words would be sufficient for the purpose.

For example, a language with a large vocabulary in padi farming, which includes not just the technique of padi planting and harvesting but also that of the rearing of buffaloes, indicates that the speakers have throughout their history been pre-occupied with the planting of padi. The Kedah dialect, for example, can claim

to have a very large vocabulary in padi farming, not just in the botanical and technical aspects of it, but also in the types of soil, wind, rain, clouds, season, etc. not to mention the human activities that go with this agricultural practice. The way the Kedah people divide their daylight hours and perceive the cyclicity of time (in their concept of *temekuap*) is an indication of the type of life they lead as padi farmers (Asmah Haji Omar 2000). On the other hand, the Kelantan and the Terengganu dialects are richer than the Kedah dialect in the vocabulary of weaving and batik craft, as their speakers have been more pre-occupied in these two vocations than the Kedah people.

Some years ago, working on words denoting conflict in Malay, I found that the language had more words denoting verbal conflict compared to those denoting armed conflict. My colleague who was working on the same concept in Swedish, Professor Jens Allwood of Goteborg University, found that it was the obverse in Swedish – more words for armed conflict than words for verbal conflict. How did we interpret our findings? We had to go to history. One explanation for the Swedish phenomenon is found in the Viking culture. With Malays of the past, it is not that they never waged war, but that they did not seem to have as many wars or types of war as the Viking. From Malay history, we get a picture that the fall of a number of kingdoms and empires resulted from slander. This explains the reification of the large number of words denoting verbal conflict in the Malay language.

At the same time, the Malays are famous for going into an *amok* (amuck) even to this day, and this happens when the target of the conflict is unreachable to the *amok* person. From this, one can see that an *amok* is a type of physical conflict which arises from a need to resolve another conflict. And the Swedes seem to have a similar type of conflict handling in the past when people would go berserk, although I would assume that the modern Swedes do not go berserk as often as they did in the past. Incidentally, the English word *berserk* has a Swedish origin.

The word *amok* or its anglicised derivation *amuck* has a Malay origin, and as such people tend to attribute this type of behaviour to the Malays: the Malays have the word *amok*, so the word has to have an origin in the description of their own behaviour. Among the first questions a Swede would ask me when I was in

Sweden in the early 1990's was whether the Malays usually ran amuck. Well, one does not hear of incidents of *amok* that often among the Malays these days. But the educated ones have created their own type of *amok*, that of the *surat layang*, which can literally be translated as "flying letters", i.e. anonymous poisoned-pen letters which are floated around. Not being able to vent their anger physically in public, because this would identify them with the lower class, they do it through the *surat layang*. The pen has taken over the function of the sword and the kris in venting one's anger, especially against a target that is socially above oneself in rank. (I would like to thank Datuk Abang Yusuf Puteh for drawing my attention to this phenomenon.)

Metaphors of attitude and emotion in Malay and most of the languages related to it have their pivot in the liver (*hati*), not the heart (*jantung*). This can be traced to a pre-Islamic and animistic practice of interpreting events and predicting the future by "reading" the liver of slaughtered animals. This practice is still carried out by non-Muslim groups in Sabah and Sarawak. The Malay word *hati* is phonologically close to the English word *heart* such that bilinguals of Malay – English seem to forget that the two words refer to two different organs in the body. However, this oversight serves their purpose well when it comes to translating metaphors with the heart-pivot in English into Malay, and those with the liver-pivot in Malay into English. For example, the sentence "*Her heart was broken to smithereens*" has a possible translation in "*Hatinya hancur luluh seperti kaca terhempas ke batu*, which in literal translation is "*Her liver was broken to pieces just like the fragments of a piece of glass smashed onto a block of stone.*"

I don't think there is a physiological or medical reason as to why some cultures choose the heart metaphor and others the liver metaphor to explain certain conditions of the mind or certain traits in a person's behaviour. The metaphors must have arisen from certain cultural practices as illustrated above, and this is to tied some belief system. The practice of wearing the engagement ring and the wedding ring on the second finger of the left hand originates in the Western culture with the belief that there is a direct link between this finger and the liver, and in this belief the liver is the seat of emotion. However, there is no clear rule in the English

language which says that the heart metaphors are those which express rationality, as opposed to the liver metaphors which express emotion.

The Malay vocabulary is relatively rich in kinship terms, compared to Iban and some other languages of Sarawak, and there are more of such terms in Malay than there are in English or Arabic. An interpretation that one can make from these vocabulary items is that the Malay community pays close attention to the identification of closeness versus distance in blood relationship as well as that which evolves through marriage. And these kinship terms are also used as personal pronouns.

A language with a complex system of personal pronouns and personal references as well as a hierarchy of honorifics is testimony to the system of personal relationship of its members, which can be described as multi-layered. A good example of such a language is Malay. English may be easy on the personal pronouns side, but its system of honorifics is not as simple due to the existence of a social hierarchy which has the royals at the top followed by other aristocrats down the ladder.

Isolates, Sets and Patterns in Culture

Edward Hall likens the pattern in culture to the sentence in language. I would modify this notion somewhat by looking at the pattern in a holistic framework of the syntax, such that it is inclusive of the phrasal pattern as well. The smallest syntactic pattern is that of the phrase, and its variation would also give us an idea of certain aspects of the culture of the speakers.

In the Malay phrasal structure, the nucleus of the phrase always comes first, followed by the modifiers, as in *rumah besar* (house, big = big house), *negara aman* (country, peaceful = peaceful country), and never the other way round, as in English or Tamil. So in Malay what is central to the mind comes first. The case of *rice-and egg-curry*, and not *curried egg-and-rice* illustrates clearly not only the kind of food that is eaten but also the different degrees of importance the Malays give to the components of the meal. The Malay meal does not have a system of courses as do Western and Chinese meals, such that everything to be eaten is placed together but of course with the rice having a special place in the

way the table is set.

Another phrase which belongs to the *rice-and-egg curry* type is the *spoon-and-fork* (*sudu dan garpu*). The Malays eat with the hand (*makan dengan tangan*), and, to be more specific, the right hand. There should be no touching of the food with the left hand. It is inconceivable to them to *eat with the fingers* (*makan dengan jari*), as the idiom is in the English language, and this is the idiom that is taught in English language classes in Malaysia to children who all the time think that they eat with the hand. So when it comes to the translation of the phrase *eating with the fingers*, it has to be *makan dengan tangan* and not *makan dengan jari*.

With Western influence, the Malays have come to eat their rice not with the knife and fork, but with the spoon and fork. It is unthinkable for them to eat rice with the knife in the right hand and the fork in the left as the English usually do. If the Malays are given the knife and fork they become confused, and in this confusion they will automatically push the knife with the rice on it into their mouth at the risk of slicing off their tongue. The confusion seemingly starts with seeing the most unlikely utensils to dish out the grainy rice from the plate to the mouth, but a greater problem is one that is ingrained in their psycho-cultural being, and that is something to do with the notion of right (*kanan*) and left (*kiri*). An event as sacrosanct as eating, and eating rice at that, does not admit, according to the Malay culture, the pushing of the food into the mouth with the left hand. And the Malay child is brought up to understand that the right hand is meant to do good things; the opposite is the job of the left hand.

In English, the idioms *knife-and-fork* and *fork-and-spoon* (as in eating spaghetti) indicate that the first-mentioned element or isolate in each set is meant to be held in the right hand which does the manoeuvring of the food, and it is the left hand that pushes the food into the mouth. This means that both the right and the left hands are equal in function at meal times in a Western context. In the Malay culture in any type of action and not just at meal times, it is the right hand that reigns supreme. That is why the English idiom *eating with fork-and-spoon* is understood by the Malays *as eating with spoon-and-fork*.

The Malays have not been able to compromise on the notion of left over right, except in the police and military lines and their derivations, as in security services etc. In these contexts we hear people marching *left right* (*kiri kanan*), and not *right left* (*kanan kiri*). Otherwise, the Malays, if they stick to the teachings of their wise men and women, will start out with their right foot; because they have been taught that starting to go out with the left foot is akin to inviting danger ahead.

The pattern of having the main idea first and the periphery after it extends to the sentence. The traditional Malay style of talking depicts sentences of the theme-rheme or the topic-comment pattern. While such sentences can consist of Subject-Predicate or Predicate-Subject, which for the purpose of this paper I will call the matrix, they can also consist of Adverb – Matrix. In all these cases, the element that appears first is the theme or the topic.

At the same time, sentences in Malay can appear only in the predicate. Informal everyday conversations can go on and on for some few minutes without the logical subject or agent of action appearing anywhere. See the interaction below:-

A: Dah buka air-con?.
B: Dah.
A: Tak sejuk pun.
B: Tak tahulah macam mana.
A: Cuba panggil juruteknik.
B: Dah panggil. Tak jawab.

Translation

A: Have (you) switched on the air-con?.
B: Already.
A: (It's) not cold at all.
B: (I) don't know why (it should be like that).
A: Call a technician.
B: (I've) called. No response.

Sentences which keep on foregrounding the personal subject, especially one referring to the first person (i.e. the speaker) either in the form of a full noun (Malays usually use their own name or kinship term when referring to themselves) or pronoun

are interpreted as reflecting the egocentricism of the speaker. In very polite Malay, the first person pronoun representing *I* (*saya*) does not appear very often , and the exclusive *we (kami*) is avoided. This is also an explanation as to why Malays prefer to use personal names and kinship references instead of personal pronouns in interactions among friends and family members.

The practice discussed above is extended to the teaching profession, where the teachers refer to themselves as *Cikgu* (=teacher), a phenomenon which Edward Hall calls extensional transfer (ET). For the teacher to use *saya* means that he/she is being very impersonal and officious and this might prove daunting to the pupils. In general, Malay children come to use the word *saya* only when they go to school. But using the English *I* comes naturally to them when they speak English even from the kindergarten stage. (Asmah Haji Omar 2002).

Coming back to the sentence pattern, one can also say that Malay children practise using the Subject-Predicate type all the time with learning the language in the school. It is also in the school that they first learn to use the passive construction, although prior to schooling they had already been using sentences of the Predicate-Subject type as exemplified by *Cantik bunga 'tu.* (*Beautiful is the flower.*). However, Malay grammar books used in the schools consider this type of sentence as *songsang*, which actually means "upside down", or "out of the ordinary", a metaphor taken from breech birth. If this pattern has always been in the natural language of the Malays, how can it ever be out of the ordinary? Do the linguists who proselytise this idea mean to say that the Malays have always been speaking "upside down"?

The Predicate-Subject type is also prevalent in the indigenous languages of Sabah and Sarawak. In conversation and story-telling, this is the favourite pattern. But the influence of school language has seeped in as evident in contemporary narratives in the Iban language. And I find that I do not enjoy Iban narratives written in this style as I do those which are written in the natural way of the Iban speakers.

Language in Culture (LiC)

When we talk about culture in language, what we mean is the cultural content of language. On the other hand, language in culture means language-in-use in contexts

of situation, according to the rules of the culture of the speech community concerned.

Each culture has its own cultural standards when it comes to using language. These are standards of behaviour agreed upon by the community in order to keep people in place when interacting with each other. As mentioned previously in this paper, it is in the context of situation that the meaning of behaviour can be interpreted.

Context of situation, a construct developed by Bronislaw Malinowski and perpetuated by J.R.Firth, the latter being the father of the London or Firthian School of Linguistics, is:-

> an abstract set of semantically relevant categories, abstracted from multitudes of actual situations, to which unique particulars could be referred. (R.H.Robins 1971: 42)

The origin of the theory of context of situation was with Malinowski who developed it after drawing several conclusions from his fieldwork among the people of the Trobriand Islands in the Pacific. Among these conclusions, as summarised by Robins, were:-

> Language was a 'mode of activity', like other socially co-operative activities, and not a 'countersign of thought'. Utterances were produced and understood not as self - contained events, but strictly within a shared context of situation, all that was relevant in the personal, cultural, historical, and physical setting in which the utterances were spoken and heard. (R.H.Robins 1971: 35)

The context of situation can be clearly seen if we construct frames of interaction which Hall has named *situational frames*. Hall defines the situational frame as:-

> ... the smallest viable unit of a culture that can be analyzed, taught, transmitted, and handed down as a complete entity. Frames contain linguistic, kinesic, proxemic, temporal, social, material, personality, and other components. (Edward T. Hall 1989: 129).

Examples of situational frames are those of greeting, working in various situations, sitting down and having meals together, bargaining, opening a seminar, debating,

etc. Language teaching makes use of the situational frame all the time especially when teaching the spoken language. So do guide books for tourists.

Situational Frames in Culture

A person entering a new culture seeks to identify situational frames that are most useful to him or her. In a situational frame people see things in gestalts. So the language learnt in the classroom is only one piece of the gestalt. People involved in a situational frame have to decide all at once which language or variety of language to use, the style of discourse they have to adopt, and even the amount of language appropriate for the occasion. There may be among them one who is not supposed to, or who has to decide not to, speak at all.

A situational frame represents a real-world environment. Language in this context has to be suitable to the type of situation, hence discourse, involved: whether it is formal, informal, ceremonial, public or ritualistic, or whether it is discussion, negotiation, or speech extolling the virtues of someone etc. My using a longish sentence in buying a ticket to travel in the underground train in London, as quoted earlier, was not suitable to the situation when people were rushing to catch their trains, besides the fact that the style was rather stilted, being the language acquired in the classroom in a foreign setting.

Language used in a situational frame should also reflect the tenor of discourse, i.e. the way people involved address each other in playing their roles in an addressee relationship (Gregory and Carroll 1978: 48). And this relationship depends on the social structure of the society to which the interlocutors belong. In a social structure like that of the Malay society, where there are a number of ascribed and achieved statuses which according to the cultural rules of the society have to be made visible most of the time especially in formal and semi-formal situations, the language used has to take into account the degrees of formality that characterise the situation.

A particular addressee relationship may differ from some other in terms of salutations, honorifics, and tone of voice. When one party is higher in social status than the other, the amount of language used by each reflects the social status he holds: the higher the status the more the language, and vice versa. In such a

social situation, it is considered not polite for a person of a lower status or rank to speak more than the one higher than him. Less language from him together with a respectful tone of voice, respectful kinesics and acceptable proxemics, form an index of deference of one interlocutor for the other.

In a Malay traditional family, the children are not supposed to speak more than their elders, let alone show a difference in opinion. This is in the name of respect and deference. Perhaps herein lies the source of diffidence among Malays, a characteristic which modern-day leaders seem to decry, especially when Malay graduates fail to impress interviewers in interviews for jobs. This diffidence is compounded by their deficiency in English and the socio-cultural rules that go with the language.

The psycho-social state of the interlocutors in a social interaction also influences the style of language used in discourse, for example in terms of being direct or otherwise. Certain frames require indirectness for reasons explicable only by the situation within the frame. I have posited elsewhere (Asmah Haji Omar 1992) four types of indirectness that may be found in situational frames where Malays are involved. Three of these types are linguistic in nature. They are beating about the bush (B.A.B), using imagery, and contradicting, all being strategies of achieving a set goal. The fourth type of indirectness does not have a particular linguistic form; it makes use of a surrogate, i.e. when a mother-in-law would rather speak to her son-in-law through her daughter; or the father-in-law to the daughter-in-law through his wife. (Asmah Haji Omar 1992: Indirectness as a Rule of Speaking Among the Malays, pp.175 – 186).

Situational Frames in the Malay Marriage Custom

The conduct of the Malay marriage custom has to go through a series of events where one can witness a number of situational frames. As tradition would have it, certain situational frames require the indirect technique, where all the four types of indirectness mentioned above are employed.

The first event in the Malay marriage custom is the pre-engagement ceremony (known as the *merisik*) in the bride's house. The players in this frame are two or three representatives of the young man's parents (who are absent) , and

representatives of the young girl's parents (who would be in attendance as silent onlookers). The purpose of the meeting is to make known the intention of the young man's parents to take the girl as their daughter-in-law (not the intention of the young man to take the girl as his bride). Each side has a surrogate who is the main speaker. There's a lot of beating about the bush, using imagery, and contradicting each other, on both sides. The bride is not seen in person by the visiting party, while the young man stays at home waiting for news. In this frame the surrogates who do the talking for both sides are women.

The second event is the engagement ceremony (*pertunangan*). The party representing the future bridegroom's parents is bigger than in the *merisik* frame, and so is the receiving party at the girl's house. Again the only people who talk are the surrogates on both sides, one on each side, and this time they are both men. There may be a lot of bantering between them using indirect language, before the actual purpose is voiced out by the visiting surrogate.

All this while, the future bridegroom stays away from the house of his intended bride. His parents may not be present at all, but if they are, they, like the girls' parents, have to stay mute. They as well as the onlookers who are usually family members and close friends on both sides only speak after the surrogates have finalised their negotiation which involves a formal proposal from the man's side, acceptance (by the surrogate of girl's parents) of the young man as the prospective husband of the girl, setting of the wedding dates (both the religious ceremony as well as the feast), the value of the obligatory gift and other gifts from the bridegroom to the bride, and reciprocal gifts from the latter.

While the negotiation is going on, the bride stays in her room, and is not supposed to utter a word even when the engagement ring is placed on her finger by the prospective mother-in-law or the mother-in-law's surrogate. In certain parts of Malaysia, friends and relatives of both sides would take turns to feed her with spoonfuls of honey brought by the man's party. This is symbolic, as the sweetness of the honey is supposed to ensure that she has a sweet mouth (*manis mulut*) when she speaks with her mother-in-law later on. People can pass comments and tease her, but she is not supposed to say anything. But how can she, when she has to swallow spoonfuls of honey endlessly and to bow over every pair of hands that clasp hers, after every spoonful!

The event that follows is the religious ceremony (the *akad nikah*) which unites the two as man and wife. In this frame, the major players are the *kadhi* or the *imam* who conducts the ceremony, and the bridegroom who responds to the pronouncements made by the former and who himself pronounces the marriage vows. It is only when the two appointed witnesses, both males, say that all pronouncements made by the bridegroom are in order, that the ceremony is considered over. All the time the bride is in the background, silent. Her consent to the marriage is given before the actual ceremony through her *wali* (father, brother, father's father, father's brother), or is taken for granted since she had agreed to the ceremonies before this.

The wedding feast, if given in the compound of the house, still keeps to traditions. That is to say, it is an occasion when relatives and friends of the two families meet and enjoy themselves over food and without much ceremony. The situational frame here is one marked by congeniality and informality.

But when the feast takes place in a hotel, and a five-star hotel at that, or in a grand rented hall, the situational frame is of a different nature. The ceremony begins, is interspersed and ends with announcements and speeches. Indirectness does not seem to be the norm, even when introducing the bride and groom to the guests. The introduction speech is akin to citations read at award-giving ceremonies, giving the biodata, sometime not so brief, of each of the couple, and there is even a narration of how they met and fell in love. And the emcee will invariably say, without any recourse to indirectness, that the parents of the bridal couple hope to receive a grandchild soon. Some old folks sitting next to me in many such weddings say that they feel embarrassed listening to such speeches. On one occasion, a middle-aged lady was heard to say, "*Seram bulu roma*!" (*I'm having goose bumps*!).

The father of the bride or the bridegroom (depending on who hosts the feast) in his speech would thank the guests for their presence and gifts, and on top of that would thank his wife for the hard work she had put in to make the wedding feast a success, and would express the hope that she would do the same thing for the other children. This is all very civilised, but thanking one's own spouse in public especially in matters concerning "domestic affairs" which are his/her duty at that, was never heard of in traditional Malay culture. Malays by nature are

always mindful of the favour they receive from other people, but usually expressions of personal gratitude to one's own spouse are not given in front of an audience (except of course in a publication). This new facet of Malay culture develops with the civilising process.

Come to think of it, the expression of thanks, *terima kasih,* is relatively new in the Malay culture. Malays would express their gratitude by saying how big their heart is (*rasa besar hati*), and this is accompanied by certain kinesics such as a slight bow of the head, the clasping of both hands, and of course a pleasant facial expression. I would tend to think that *terima kasih* has nothing to do with the notion of "accepting with love", but that it expresses a notion that is most mundane, and that is "I accept what you give". What I am proposing here is an etymology different from what has been in currency so far. To me *kasih* when it was first taken to be an isolate of *terima kasih* was not the one bearing the meaning "love" or "affection". It was a variant of *kasi* which in pidgin Malay means "give". This variant is still heard in Jakarta Malay. This etymology seems plausible since the origin of the expression was the trading ports where negotiations took place. Traditionally for the Malays, feeling "big at heart" is more cultured than "I take what you give". Of course, present-day Malays are not able to see the difference.

Coming back to the situational frame of speeches in the Malay wedding, the father would also take advantage of his being in the frame to give advice particularly to his offspring on how to be a good husband or wife, and that the couple should treat the in-laws well, citing his own example for the offspring to emulate. Again, advice in Malay cultural setting, especially to one's offspring, is usually done in private, between parents and children. It is in such a situation that the elders are able to elaborate and give illustrations, with direct as well as indirect language. When an advice is given before an audience, with the microphone enhancing the voice, it is no longer an advice; it is chiding. Someone has suggested to me that this is another facet of pompousness among modern Malays.

Such directness in language-in-use as described above is new to the Malay culture. This innovation, as it were, came into being in the 1980's when Malays were able to afford wedding feasts in five-star hotels with all the trappings of grandeur. Socio-economic progress certainly brings about changes in people's

lifestyle and with it new cultural values. Inevitably, this gives rise to new styles of language-in-use.

Overview and Conclusion

My discussion on language in culture (LiC) and culture in language (CiL) provides ample evidence that a change in language affects culture and vice versa, and I've shown how language and culture as a set play their role in the civilising process.

In a civilising process, when a change is brought about by an influence from another culture, responses from the receiving culture may take more than one form. In the first place, it may receive the innovation in its totality, such as the taking of items like radio, television, and computer together with the linguistic symbols that represent them, with or without a change in pronouncing or writing the words which refer to those items. Another mode of response is to take the items in their set but to change the pattern in a permutative way, as in the case of the *curried eggs-and-rice* and *rice-and-egg curry*. Still another mode of response is to juggle around the isolates in the pattern of the set, as in *knife-and-fork* and *fork-and-spoon* or *spoon-and-fork*. The people involved will determine the mode that is most suitable to their culture.

An innovation within a particular culture may develop within the culture itself. This may arise from the need of the people concerned for a change from the traditions in order to be with the times. The "idea" to be with the times arises as a result of self-reflection after looking at other cultures. The directness phenomenon in Malay wedding feasts, although influenced by socio-economic progress, is a result of self-reflection among the Malays in the late 1970's of their economic non-progress compared to the Chinese. The Malays were told by their political and cultural leaders that they should be forward in their behaviour, do away with their excessive politeness and be *kurang ajar* (which can roughly be translated as rude or impertinent), and be aggressive. Indirect way of speaking is considered a negation of all this. So to be direct means one is brave and ready to face the world. Here one sees that gauging the degree of finesse or acceptability also undergoes a change with the times. One particular yardstick may not last forever.

The acceptance of directness among the Malays was synchronous with the inundation of advertisements over TV commercials which started to pick up in the 1970's, where models were drawing viewers' attention to their beautiful teeth, hair, eyes, skin etc. without a tinge of embarrassment. In the Malay Muslim culture this is unacceptable, because beauty of whatever part of your body is a gift from God. Flaunting one's beauty or wealth makes one *riak* (arrogant) which is a sin in Islam.

The media and the corporate culture are also responsible in cultivating the showy side of the Malays, as seen in the publication of full-page congratulations to someone for getting an award for something. Writing such a congratulation also requires certain socio-linguistic and pragmatic skills.

The new form of Malay wedding feast is an example of a change in culture and language characteristic of the late 1970's. It is not a partial copy of some other wedding feast. It develops from an idea which may have a stimulus from outside the culture as well as a need to change one's lifestyle and tradition to something that is congruent with one's standard of living and social position.

The discussion in this paper also shows that changes undergone by culture are those which seek to break barriers. Upholders of culture do this all the time although they claim that they are preserving their traditional culture. But this is how the culture of a community maintains its survival. And to sum it all, it can be said that CiL can be understood without a native speaker's fluency in the language, while LiC requires this type of fluency as well as a relatively deep understanding of the culture of the people who speak the language.

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