

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BRC - 3

Indonesia's National Language

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522 Fifth Avenue  
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

In future letters, I will be continually referring to the Indonesian language, or Bahasa Indonesia as it is called. Because of the particularly important role it is playing in the development of the Indonesian state, you may want to know about Bahasa Indonesia's background and present situation.

Bahasa Indonesia is a favorite symbol of independence and unity in this young country. Yet despite the earnestness and optimism of those who fight to develop and spread this modified version of the Malay language, it remains only one of many languages spoken in the island republic. A linguist can count nearly 200 separate languages or distinct dialects from the western tip of Sumatra to the eastern border of Irian.<sup>1</sup> But like many statements on the immense diversity of these islands, this figure is more startling than informative. Actually, nearly 90 per cent of Indonesia's citizens speak either Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, or a close relative of Bahasa Indonesia.

The government's challenging task is to establish Bahasa Indonesia firmly as a language of administration, education, and technology among these major language groups.

This current campaign is, in a sense, a continuation of a historical trend, for Malay has been achieving the role of Lingua franca in the islands since at least the fifteenth century. The language, a member of the Ostronesian family, makes one of its historical appearances in seventh century inscriptions of the powerful Shrividjaja empire of East Sumatra. It is quite certain that before that date, it had been developing in the various Hindu-Buddhist realms of Sumatra and in the lower Malay peninsula. As a result of the advances of Islam into Southeast Asia, the form of writing changed from an Indian to the Arabic script around the fourteenth century. In the next century the language rode the same wave of trade and proselyting which carried the Islamic religion from North Sumatra and Malacca to the far islands of the archipeligo. In the busy island ports, it took root as a convenient and simple language of everyday commerce and conversation between the many racial groups.

A fuller development of the Malay language was cut short, however, by the European conquests of its native areas. One by one, the Malay speaking sultanates fell before Portuguese or Dutch arms. A language can hardly reach full development unless it speaks for an independent political administration, a culture, or an organized religion. Malay no longer filled any of these roles. When continuous and unified administration was restored to the Malay areas again after 1800, the languages of administration were English and Dutch, Malay culture was virtually stagnant, and the language of religion and theological study was largely Arabic.

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1. Irian (Western New Guinea) is still Dutch controlled. Borneo is now called Kalimantan, while Celebes is known as Sulawesi.

A tradition of refined literature and "high" Malay continued in court circles, especially in the British controlled sultanates on the peninsula, while the "low" or market Malay thrived throughout the islands. But its personality was split; in neither aspect was it developing toward the level of a modern language, capable of expressing abstractions, complexities of function, or interrelations. As might be expected, "high" Malay produced a multitude of honorific terms and refined variations in descriptive vocabulary, while the market language accumulated a wealth of words for individual items and acts. At the same time Islam was introducing a vocabulary of Arabic terms as an addition to the earlier influx of terms from Sanskrit and Hindu culture.

But the split language--poetic and elegant in its higher form and vigorously expressive in the market--remained in a kind of adolescence. Divorced from the responsibilities of governing and civilizing, the Malay language was gradually enriched, but corrupted, by Chinese, Javanese, Sundanese, Dutch and English. So even its unity was lost and many widely varying dialects sprang up.

With the development of an Indonesian nationalist movement in this century, the Malay language began a slow revival and growth.<sup>1</sup> For many reasons, Malay rather than Javanese was accepted as the language of the movement. It was now printed in the Roman alphabet with Dutch phonetic spelling, and showed a mounting influence from western sentence structure, presumably due to the Dutch education of nationalist leaders. A few newspapers appeared, several schools were opened with courses in Malay, and the common language became not only a tool, but a symbol, among the Indonesian nationalists. In 1928 a youth conference in Djakarta officially adopted the term Bahasa Indonesia for the Malay language of the islands. Five years later, a group of scholars produced the first number of Pudjangga Baru, a literary magazine in Bahasa Indonesia.

The language development under Dutch rule should not be exaggerated. By 1940, only a handful of Indonesians were truly literate in Bahasa Indonesia. All higher education was in Dutch, and the future national language was still an inadequate tool in the modern world of science and complex state administration. No comparison could be made with literary and cultural revolution in China after 1917, where a numerous and influential class of scholars led a nation-wide movement to reform the language. In Indonesia, only a limited development was led by a limited number of leaders from the educated elite.

The real language revolution began in 1942 when Japan occupied Indonesia and outlawed the Dutch language. Bahasa Indonesia was promoted in the press and literature and became compulsory in the educational system. A language commission was established with the temperamental poet and writer, S. T. Alisjabana, at its head. New terms were created and the regulation of grammar was begun. When independence was proclaimed on August 17, 1945, an improved but still incomplete Bahasa Indonesia was declared the national language.

The struggle for real release from Dutch control lasted from 1945 to the end of 1949. A series of unstable truces and punitive campaigns left Indonesia's small educated elite exhausted and divided internally. In May, 1950, the United States of Indonesia, a Dutch sponsored federation, was officially succeeded by the unitary Republic of Indonesia. To this day, the idea of federalism is Dutch tainted and suspect; correspondingly, symbols of national unity, such as Bahasa Indonesia, have become more significant than ever. But in the year 1950, millions of Indonesians still had no

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1. Some fine poetry and prose was produced in this period. Because of its simplicity and descriptive richness, the language lends itself readily to modern poetry.

command of their language and Dutch was still heard in government offices as officials carried on their complicated administrative tasks. In the past two years, the task of promoting and spreading the national language in new areas has been largely the responsibility of a vigorous press and the ambitiously designed educational system; the job of developing Bahasa Indonesia to meet modern demands is in the hands of the Language Institute, created under the Ministry of Education, Instruction, and Culture. The latter task is perhaps the more important, for Bahasa Indonesia can hardly take root and spread unless it is developed to meet the demands placed on a modern state language.

The Language Institute is housed on the campus of the University of Indonesia, in Djakarta's residential outskirts. Its important divisions are (1) the Terminology Commission, and (2) the sections for Bahasa Indonesia, Javanese, Sundanese, and Madurese.

The commission's job is to fill in Bahasa Indonesia's near void in technical terminology. Eighteen sections have been formed for all conceivable varieties of specialized knowledge, from geography to women's activities. In each section, well known scholars meet to discuss the creation of new terms in their fields. These are submitted to the commission itself, which consists of several officers plus the heads of the eighteen sections. In bi-weekly sessions, the commission makes a final decision, selecting new terms on the basis of a priority list of source languages.

1. Bahasa Indonesia
2. Well known terms from regional languages (i.e. Javanese)
3. Arabic
4. Sanskrit
5. Widely used international terms (often Latin)
6. Other languages.

If no term can be found in the first five categories, the selection under 6 most often comes from English or Dutch.

At first glance, the sight of a commission trying to legislate a language into being looks like something out of Gilbert and Sullivan. But the effort should not be taken lightly. According to the commission's secretary, Dr. Djumena, almost 60,000 new terms have been approved in the last two years. By planting lists of these new terms at key points--schools, newspapers, radio stations, government offices--the commission hopes to gain a maximum effect with little government expense. According to several local newspapermen, the lists are actually read and the terms are used. I saw additional proof firsthand, when my lists of terms were borrowed by the law student rooming next door.

While the Terminology Commission performs its creative task, the Institute's language sections attempt to encourage and regulate the natural growth of the living language. The section on Bahasa Indonesia has three important jobs: (1) the translation of western books into Indonesian, (2) publication of a periodical with analytical articles on grammar and usage, and (3) compilation of a standard dictionary. In compiling the dictionary, the staff is proceeding in a fantastically thorough manner. Their aim is to process everything written in Indonesian. The first stage in this staggering task is performed by students who read through all newspapers, books, periodicals, poems, advertisements, songs, etc., and make notes of new or infrequent usages. The notes are transferred to cards which then go into the files which cover almost an entire wall of the large second story office. When five authors have used a word ten times each, the word is considered "living." The office has already produced a concise dictionary of 40,000 words; Dr. Purwadarminta claims this is only the beginning. Eventually the files will produce a giant standard reference dictionary of Bahasa Indonesia, but this goal is probably years away. There is no doubting the staff's

seriousness. I commented, "You process everything, with no system of selection. What will you do in ten years when the volume of printed matter in Indonesian doubles or triples?" Dr. Purwadarminta answered, "Why, we'll expand our staff."

A bitter argument raged last year between Dr. Prijana, chief of the Language Institute, and Alisjabana, who is currently editor of a private linguistics journal. The occasion of the quarrel is less interesting than several issues raised by Alisjabana's charges:

(1) That the government is trying to monopolize control of the language's growth.

The charge is true for technical terminology. Prijana gives two answers: First, that anyone is free to suggest terms and that decisions are made by a representative committee. Second, that the government must prevent private organizations from capitalizing financially on the publication of terms so important for the people as a whole. The latter statement is worth remembering as an indication of the present government's ideology.

(2) Alisjabana's second charge is that the language is being subjected to a strong Javanese influence, evidently through Dr. Prijana who is Javanese.

This charge is also true, but it is also an indication the the government is allowing Indonesian to develop rather freely. Javanese is the first language of nearly half of Indonesia's population. It seems only natural that many new words appearing in press and prose should come from Javanese. In these non-technical spheres, the government follows rather than controls the language's development. When a new word passes the "five authors ten times" test, it is a part of Bahasa Indonesia.

The campaign to nationalize Bahasa Indonesia is only in its first stage. Its success of course will depend on the language Indonesians choose to speak in the future. My experience, which is limited to Djakarta so far, might provide a clue about current attitudes. Here in the dormitory of the national university in the national capital, Indonesian is by no means the first language. Javanese usually speak Javanese to each other. Dialects abound. Dutch is heard in discussions of all types. Often one sentence from an older student will contain Bahasa Indonesia, Dutch, and Javanese. This extraordinary language mixture is, however, largely the property of the seniors. The incoming class of freshmen speak better Indonesian than the seniors, and it is almost certain that the same will be true of the class entering in 1956.

Almost all university lectures are now given in Indonesian, though I have found that two of my Dutch professors lapse into their own language occasionally. I've heard of one professor who delivers his lectures in Indonesian but tells his jokes in Javanese; most of the students rour, but the Sumatrans sit in wondering silence. Last week, Dr. Supomo, the university president, spoke to the freshman class and re-emphasized the university's policy: as soon as possible all normal instruction will be in Indonesian, and English will be pushed vigorously as a second language.

The other day Pedoman and Abadi, two of Djakarta's leading newspapers, carried on heated editorial argument about the possible meanings of a simple one sentence commentary on the current parliamentary crisis. I would say that Bahasa Indonesia will have arrived at an encouraging stage of development when such linguistic disputes become impossible or improbable--and when students discuss such disputes in Indonesian rather than Javanese or Dutch. With several million children now studying Bahasa Indonesia in school, this day might not be too far away.

Yours sincerely,

*Boyd R. Compton*

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