

## BAHASA INDONESIA: Between FAQs and Facts

*By: Johannes Tan*

Although Indonesia is the fourth most populous nation in the world, the official language spoken in this Southeast Asia country seems to be among the least known in the United States. Many Americans dream about a vacation in Bali or think it is really cool to say Java instead of coffee (even if it is Guatemalan or Ethiopian), but "What kind of script is used for Indonesian?", "What is the difference between Indonesian and Bahasa?", "Is Indonesian spoken in Indochina?" and "Is Indonesian the same as Malay?" are among the FAQs (frequently asked questions) that I frequently hear.

Indonesian is the official language of *Republik Indonesia* where over 300 distinct ethnic groups speak about 669 (not a misprint) languages and dialects, for example Sundanese, Javanese and Balinese. These languages are related, belonging to the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family, but they are as different from one another as are English, Swedish and German. It is impossible to find someone who can intelligently identify (let alone speak) all of the 669 known languages or dialects. That Indonesia recognizes only one official language is certainly not to be taken for granted by globalization strategists, especially when considering that India recognizes 14 (fourteen) official languages!

What is the difference between Indonesian and Bahasa? Well, this is the equivalent of asking: What is the difference between English and the Language? In Indonesian, "Bahasa" simply means "Language". Nothing more, nothing less. "Bahasa Inggris" is "the English language" and "Bahasa Spanyol" is "the Spanish language". The confusion may have been originated when a Western writer, considered an authority on Indonesia, incorrectly assumed that "Bahasa" is the name for the Indonesian language, whereas it is actually only the word for language, any language that is. As a result I have witnessed many incorrect applications generated by this misconception. Once I saw a cute "Periodic Table of the Languages" poster advertised in the April 1995 issue of the ATA Chronicle where, again, the official language of Indonesia is listed as "Bahasa". Again this is comparable like listing "Language" (instead of English) as the official language of the United States.

Unlike Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese and other dialects which use their own *aksara* (scripts), Indonesian uses the familiar Roman script (or the American keyboard) and is based on the Euro-continental orthography. Indonesian is only used in Indonesia, the country which comprises 17,508 islands (including Java, Bali and Sumatra) stretched between Asia and Australia and divides the Pacific and Indian Oceans at the equator. Indonesia should not be confused with Indochina, the Southeast Asian peninsula which consists of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, countries which respectively use their Vietnamese, Laotian and Khmer languages.

The modern Indonesian is derived from a literary dialect of Old Malay, which was the *lingua franca* of Southeast Asia. The Big Split happened at the beginning of this century

when Indonesia (then a Dutch colony) adopted the Van Ophuysen orthography in 1901, while Malaya (then a British colony) took a different path by adopting the Wilkinson orthography in 1904. In 1972, the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to standardize the "improved" spelling (*Ejaan Yang Disempurnakan*) which is now in effect in both countries. Even so, modern Indonesian and modern Malay or Malaysian (Bahasa Malaysia) are as different from one another as are Flemish and Dutch. To make life a little bit more complicated, the two languages are often just shortened to the same word (Bahasa). Therefore, it is always a good idea to ask a client or end-user, where will the translation be used: Indonesian if used in Indonesia, and Malay if used in Malaysia, Singapore or Brunei.

Since Indonesian was officially declared the official language, significant changes have affected this relatively young language within the last 40 years. Therefore, modern Indonesian is quite different from pidgin Malay used in the 1950-s and chronically still spoken by 'Indonesian-born Chinese' who mass-emigrated from Indonesia in the early 1960-s, or by 'Indonesian-born Dutch' who mass-emigrated at about the same time. Naturally, this pidgin Malay does not conform to current terminological conventions of modern Indonesian at all.

Until the early 1980s, for example, there were two words for airport: *lapangan terbang* or *pelud* (from *pelabuhan udara*). Although both words are not totally extinct, they are passé and have been replaced by *bandara* (from *bandar udara*). Occasionally, I am asked to edit documents which have been incorrectly translated into pidgin Malay or archaic Indonesian. In most cases, retranslating the whole document from scratch is far more practical than trying to edit it.

To ensure a high-quality translation in proper, modern Indonesian, as well as to conduct an accurate cross-cultural analysis, there are three factors to be considered, especially:

1. The Target Audience: To whom is the translated text specifically addressed. Indonesian is not as democratic and egalitarian as English. Thanks to strong influences from the elaborately hierarchical Javanese (there is High, Middle and Low Javanese - *Kromo*, *Madyo* and *Ngoko*) which together are informally spoken by almost two-thirds of the population, Indonesian uses different tones to address different audiences in different situations. The use of second person pronouns (you) in direct address is generally avoided in favor of more indirect references, unless writer/speaker and reader/listener are on intimate terms. A letter to a government officer asking for a business permit should have a completely different tone using different terminologies than that to a private party proposing a joint-venture.
2. The Medium Used: Strong characteristic differences have developed between written, formal, Indonesian (for the printed media) and colloquial, informal Indonesian (for voice-overs or narrations). These two language modes are not interchangeable. Using formal Indonesian for a script's voice-over will give the commercial an awkward, if not inappropriate, tone.

3. The Multi-cultural Environment: Unlike the homogenous societies of Japan, Korea or Thailand, Indonesia is a multi-ethnic society of more than 300 distinct ethnic groups, each with its own peculiarities and unique ethnic and religious perceptions. They all speak Indonesian, yes, but what is acceptable to one ethnic group may be offensive to another. How something is said may be as important as, if not more important than, what is said.

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